

The Sound of Silents: Representations of Speech in Silent Film

Torey Liepa
New York University
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Long before American audiences watched and listened to the first ‘talkie’ films in 1927, movie spectators had grown to accept dialogue as a normal and common element of the cinema. Films had been ‘speaking,’ however silently, for over twenty years when Al Jolson, as Jackie Rabinowitz spoke his famous lines “Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain’t heard nothin’ yet!”

In fact, Jackie was only partially correct. Audiences had previously heard plenty of material at motion picture exhibitions, in the form of the ubiquitous accompanying piano or occasional lecturer. However, Jackie *was* correct in that audiences had not *heard* the voices of the characters speaking on the screen. What they had done, over and over again, sometimes to the point of distraction, is *read* the spoken lines of characters, in the form of dialogue intertitles, as well as the thoughts of characters, in the form of written inserts such as letters, telegrams, and journals. True, movies had not yet brought their voice into the realm of the audible; but certainly before 1927, the cinema had a “voice.” But we must go back even further to understand how it was that dialogue, or more accurately, character speech, came to the cinema.

Modern technological storytelling evinces a continual negotiation between pictorial, acoustic and written or textual representations. The cinema is situated nicely at the confluence of these streams. In 1888, seven years before the first public movie exhibition, Thomas Edison famously compared his future invention to his earlier one, claiming his kinetoscope would “do for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear.” It

is significant that Edison considered a device that recorded and reproduced the human voice as a model for a device that would reproduce moving images. This impulse would lead to much experimentation on the part of Edison and others to develop the medium as one that would not only reproduce an image of the *external* characteristics of humanity, but also record and reproduce human music and voices, human thoughts. From its beginnings, cinematic inventors dreamed of and tinkered with the technology for bringing sound to the screen. Since that time, combinations of pictures, sounds and words have formed the basic elements of cinematic storytelling, and different eras and styles of filmmaking are categorized in part by the emphasis they place on each element.

Of course, in its most elemental form, the cinema is typically considered to be a pictorial medium, groundbreaking for its reproduction of moving images. And in the earliest days of filmmaking, that is just what the cinema did. Early cinematic experiments isolated and privileged sight above all other senses, reproducing movement in controlled environments. From Edward Muybridge's studies of movement to Edison's black box film studio and peep-show kinetoscope, early films and filmmaking experiments were predominately silent, pictorial affairs, reconstructed in laboratory-like settings.

However, realizing the profit potential of the new medium, Edison, always the entrepreneur, and others soon brought the invention out of the laboratory and into the mass market. Through a series of competitive market practices and business arrangements, Edison was quick to incorporate the projection system that had first been developed in France by the Lumière Brothers, and in the U.S. by (Thomas) Armat and (C. Francis) Jenkins. From that point on, the projection of films to mass audiences grew quickly as a popular attraction.

Early cinema has been described as a ‘cinema of attractions,’ meaning that for the first ten or so years of the cinema, films that were exhibited were not intended to tell complex stories, but rather were more akin to fairground attractions, offering a “series of views” to audiences.¹ These films were typically exhibited during variety or vaudeville performances between the live acts. They would sometimes feature short vignettes, occasionally with a comic gag, and sometimes a short documentary-type film.

In many ways, however, film *was* ideally suited for telling stories. The sheer fact of motion in the medium introduced the element of time to the already compellingly realistic photographic images. The only thing lacking was the ‘telling.’ The medium had not yet developed a coherent language – a coherent *system* for telling tales. Turn of the century filmmakers such as Edwin S. Porter experimented with filmic storytelling techniques, helping to develop a system of editing which preserved continuity throughout diverse groups of shots.²

Continuity editing did much to establish the new medium as one capable of and adept at telling *some* stories – specifically, those that could be told solely through pictorial means. Certain images, many asserted, could appeal to a *universal* understanding, and needed not the acculturated, once removed device of language for conveying their meaning. As a primarily visual medium, the cinema appealed to many as a potentially *universal* medium.³ Not everyone could read the popular literature of the day, but *everyone* could understand a good chase scene, or a slapstick gag. Early films were purely

¹ Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith & the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 41.

² See Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)

³ For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991) 76-80.

pictorial. In fact, throughout the silent era, filmmakers at times continued to experiment with purely pictorial filmmaking, though as films grew longer and longer, this proved to be more of a limitation than an advantage.

More complex stories, it was determined, were difficult to tell within the industry-established norms of film length. Footage was scarce, and complex character motivation or explanations of changes in scene ate up valuable footage and were often difficult for audiences to understand. Presenting the types of stories that required these elements remained an elusive task.

However, by the early 1910s, many filmmakers had become aware of the rewards that could be reaped by telling these more ‘complex’ stories – the kind found in literature, the kind desired by middle-class audiences. Complex stories required a combination of telling *and* showing. Pure pictorialism was not sufficient. D.W. Griffith had contributed much to solidify the *showing* techniques through his pioneering use of continuity editing. The solution for *telling*, however, was largely found in the form of filmed placards with words printed upon them, devices now referred to as “intertitles.” In narrative films of feature length during the silent era, text, in the form of intertitles and written inserts, became a dominant means for telling stories.

Intertitles are typically categorized into two basic forms: expository and dialogue titles. Expository titles offered narrative information in varying degrees of centrality to the narrative, while dialogue titles represented the speech of silent film characters. A third salient type of writing in silent film took the form of diegetic inserts such as letters and newspapers. The latter two forms can be understood as representing the speech and thoughts of the characters, whereas the expository titles typically presented a form of

omniscient narration. Dialogue and expository intertitles as well as written inserts such as newspapers, letters and business cards were included in a diverse range of forms in order to propel narrative action and clarify ambiguous pictorial information.

These devices had been utilized to some extent before the 1910s. The 1902 film *Dorothy's Dream* by G.A. Smith is credited as containing the earliest use of intertitles, followed by Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the following year.⁴ These films utilized expository titles. Porter's 1904 film *The Ex-Convict* is credited with having the earliest example of a dialogue title, though from these early films until sometime between 1908 and 1911, films used mostly expository titles.⁵ From 1908-1910, films slowly began to integrate more and more dialogue intertitles into their stories. Throughout the teens, as more narratively integrated films, and eventually feature films began to be produced, movies began to include fewer and fewer expository intertitles and increasingly more dialogue titles.

Thus two major transitions took place in terms of the use of text as a basic cinematic storytelling device, between the turn of the century and the early 1910s – the first being the incorporation of written text into previously purely pictorial representations – the second being the displacement of an external textual narration with character-authored, or diegetic language.

It is clear that the introduction and institutionalization of intertitle usage was a result of a desire for telling more complex stories within given footage requirements. But what would lead to this transition from an external form of narration to one that is more

⁴ Musser, 243.

⁵ Kristen Thompson, "The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-1928," in David Bordwell et al., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 184.

integrated into the diegesis – from expository titles to dialogue titles? Some scholars argue that dialogue titles created a greater feeling for character psychology – one of the primary requirements of feature-length narrative filmmaking. Kristen Thompson maintains that well placed dialogue titles tended to “create a less self-conscious narration,” than the omniscient narration of an expository title.⁶ Eileen Bowser notes the increased use of dialogue titles, utilized in order to create a greater effect of *realism* as well as take over the previous role maintained by lecturers, voice actors behind the screen and various early mechanical attempts to reproduce sound along with the images of the film.⁷ Furthermore, by granting audiences access to characters’ linguistic consciousnesses, dialogue presented an additional site of conflict upon which the narratives of the silent films were able to turn. By allowing films to represent the human voice, dialogue titles introduced a deeper element of culture into its stories and brought audiences closer to the narrative.

Filmmakers experimented with different approaches to the formal use of intertitles en route to developing a kind of industrial norm by the mid-teens. It is arguably with the institution of the multiple-reel and feature length in American filmmaking that a particular production norm was developed in terms of the use of intertitles. By 1915, filmmakers had settled upon a standard approach to title placement, the relationship between dialogue intertitles and lip movement and the use of quotation marks.⁸ At this time, the dialogue intertitle was regularly placed at the moment when the character spoke the line, as opposed to the beginning of the scene. In doing so, it was believed, the film would better preserve the temporal flow of the story.

⁶ Thompson, 185.

⁷ Eileen Bowser, *History of the American Cinema, vol. 2: The Transformation of Cinema: 1907-1915* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990) 257.

⁸ Thompson, 184.

The content of dialogue titles, however, remained a more open question. The 1910s represented a time of particularly pronounced public engagement with motion pictures. The movement of filmmaking to Hollywood, the emergence of the star system and the development of a broad-based fan culture brought filmmakers and *filmmaking* into the forefront of the American public consciousness. The combination of a newly developing industrial structure and broad public following lent itself, at least in the early- to mid-teens, to a porous system that allowed those outside the industry to have some influence on filmmaking. One of the primary means by which the film industry was able to use the public to its advantage on the *production* side was by soliciting the public for story ideas and screenplays.

The public fascination with the cinema was not solely a *cultural* one based upon public acts of consumption. With the explosion of the film industry in the mid-teens, filmmaking promised the public the possibility of *economic* gain as well by participating in the production side of the industry. The rags to riches stories of immigrant producers and small-town starlets propelled many to seek their own fortunes in Hollywood. With the establishment of script-, or ‘photoplay’-writing as an important aspect of filmmaking, a new means of production seemed to emerge, and one which allowed producers to produce from the comfort of their own homes, and with nothing but an idea and a pen. Would-be writers diligently whipped up and sent off thousands of story ideas upon hearing publicized stories such as that of Thomas Dixon, the author of *The Clansman*, who received \$260,000 in first year royalties from the profits of *The Birth of a Nation*.⁹

⁹ Edward Azlant, “The Theory, History, and Practice of Screenwriting, 1897-1920” (Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1980)142.

As a result of this general pandemonium surrounding filmmaking, numerous scenario-writing correspondence schools sprung up on both coasts. Studios announced contests in which the best screenplays would win fortune and fame. Multitudes of people dreamed of getting rich by having their own ideas transformed into films. In effect, writing for the screen became what Edward Azlant has described as a “swollen public fantasy.” This engagement was manifested to such a degree that *Photoplay* magazine estimated that the film industry was receiving around 1,000 unsolicited manuscripts *per day* in 1914.¹⁰ Though it is unclear how many *complete* scripts written by amateur authors were directly transformed into films, it is certain that the material in these scripts provided ample inspiration for those within the film industry. June Mathis, the script editor at Metro explained away plagiarism charges by claiming that similar ideas derive from “an unconscious, ‘wireless’ network of inspiration that vibrated throughout the land.”¹¹

To support the amateur production of scripts and scenarios, and large body of screenwriting manuals were published to instruct the novice on proper technique. The sheer volume of screenwriting manuals that were published during this period reflects a particularly pronounced degree of public engagement with film production. The manuals provided instruction on all aspects of screenwriting, but continually return to the writing of intertitles as an important element of the screenplay. From the basic naming of these new devices to the more practical usage, to the broader theoretical and even philosophical questions that these devices introduced to the medium, these screenwriting manuals produced what resulted as an ongoing debate on this presence of writing in a predominantly pictorial medium.

¹⁰ Ibid., 138.

¹¹ Ibid., 190.

For roughly twelve years, from about 1910 until around 1922 these screenwriting, or “photoplay” manuals negotiated the proper and ideal intertitle protocol. During this time period over ninety books in English were published on the silent film scenario – a body of work that amounts to what Azlant has speculated to be, “the largest body of instruction in an aspect of film production within the materials of film history.”¹² The bulk of these manuals were issued in the mid-1910s – from 1913-1916, reflecting both the emergence of screenwriting as a viable and important aspect of filmmaking, as well as a public involvement in such screenwriting.

Overall, the most general advice concerning intertitle usage emphasized brevity, though each author maintained his or her own nuanced view. Among those who debated the proper usage of intertitles, two primary schools of thought emerged. Put simply, there were the “purists” who resented the presence of language among their beloved pictures, and the “integrationists” who realized the storytelling potential and necessity of intertitles, and argued for the creative integration of text into cinematic storytelling.

The ideology of the former group can be encapsulated in a statement by one Howard Dimick:

[The spectator] demands that you give a play by pictured action only, and resents your impudence in offering him text, and the insult to his intelligence it implies; but the insult is really directed against your own technique – or lack of it – in having to resort to any medium of interpretation other than the pictures themselves.¹³

Of course some opponents of title usage did grudgingly admit that a title here and there would be necessary to narrate particularly complex passages. Even writers such as Dimick, who maintain a strong ideological opposition to the use of text occasionally admit

¹² Ibid., 134.

¹³ Howard T. Dimick, *Photoplay Making: A Handbook Devoted to the Application of Dramatic Principles to the Writing of Plays for Picture Production* (Ridgewood, N.J.: The Editor Company, 1915) 17.

minor usage of text for practical purposes. Representing this standpoint, William Lewis Gordon writes,

Were it possible to do so, the perfect photoplay would be one without any leaders [intertitles], the scene action telling the entire story without resort to words. However, when this is attempted the lucidity of the story is too liable to suffer, where the occasional leader of a few words will bridge over a certain combination of events, giving the story a clearness quickly grasped by the audience, and perhaps avoid the introduction of several minor scenes otherwise necessary to make the story intelligible...¹⁴

However, it was those who promoted the creative integration of intertitle usage who would eventually win the debate, and throughout the 1910s, the collective opinion regarding intertitles gradually shifted to the point of view espoused by these critics. These defenders of text included amongst their ranks such prominent intellectuals as Epes Winthrop Sargent, Louella Parsons, the original movie gossip columnist, and filmmakers such as Lois Weber and Anita Loos. More than any other theoretician of the screen, it was Loos who epitomized the movement towards the title-integrated film. Loos' writing did much to promote the popularity of cleverly written titles that would act in tandem with the pictorial images. Loos, co-writing with John Emerson, describes her opinion of title usage:

Some photodramatists frown upon the use of many sub-titles or of any printed matter on the screen. We have been particularly successful in using as many sub-titles as we wish. In this way, clever dialogue is carried over to the audience. There are some things which cannot be expressed in pantomime. For this reason we advise you to use explanatory sub-titles, with as clever and forceful wording as possible, whenever the action necessitates explanation.¹⁵

By 1920, the time of Loos and Emerson's writing, title usage had become firmly established as a standard filmmaking practice. Loos' scripts had been instrumental in

¹⁴ William Lewis Gordon, *How to Write Moving Picture Plays* (Cincinnati: Atlas Publishing Company, 1913) 5.

¹⁵ John Emerson and Anita Loos, *How to Write Photoplays*. (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1920) 37.

developing a style of ‘literary’ expository intertitle, which offered complex, witty, or otherwise clever prose to accompany the pictorial images.¹⁶

However, while Loos’ literary style set an ideal standard for the writing of expository intertitles, the development of the dialogue title was a different story. By the mid-teens, dialogue was considered by most screenplay manual authors to be generally preferable to exposition, as it was ‘less intrusive.’¹⁷ In fact, dialogue added a completely new dimension to the medium and the debate surrounding its use required its own discursive framing. Whereas previously spectators were forced to guess at the lines exchanged between characters, now those characters words were ‘flashed’ upon the screen.

Though many warned of the overuse of intertitles in general, a common thread that connects much of the advice was that the language of dialogue titles should reflect the *everyday* conditions and environment of the writer. In both choice of subject and development of character – an element of cinematic narrative that could draw heavily from character language – a strong emphasis was put on the desire for the vernacular. These amateur writers who were fascinated with the possibility of joining the cosmopolitan ranks of the rich and famous in Hollywood were being courted precisely for their distance from that culture – their ability to channel the popular, the everyday, and the “real” into the machinery of Hollywood.

William Gordon Lewis emphasizes that the writer must “deal with plain, simple people and things in everyday environment and activities – they must be human. The things they do must be the things that are done every day by people everywhere.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Thompson, 187.

¹⁷ For example, Epes Winthrop Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay* (New York: Moving Picture World, 1916) 164.

¹⁸ William Lewis Gordon, *How to Write Photoplays* (Cincinnati: The Writers Digest, 1921) 30.

Sargent adds that dialogue intertitles “should be [written in] everyday speech or they will sound absurd. People of today do not speak in blank verse.”¹⁹ This type of vernacular sensibility was typical for these earliest American screenwriters. Filmmakers realized that as film became a medium capable of telling more and more complex stories, the characters in those stories must reflect the lives of the Americans that were filling the theater seats. Allowing characters to speak, and to speak like those reading the words, was one of the most effective ways that this could be accomplished.

And so the question was raised, how *did* American audiences speak in the 1910s? What *was* the sound of everyday speech? One answer that screenwriters put forth, and one that was frequently reflected in the dialogue intertitles of American films of this decade, was that the sound of everyday speech, the American voice, was a profoundly vernacular one. During the early years of the cinema the United States had undergone one of its largest cultural facelifts, with multitudes of new immigrants reshaping the look, and sound of American culture. The combination of these new citizens and native born working-class citizens, formed a large percentage of early film spectators, and thus when film began to speak, it strove to speak to, and *like* those who formed its audience.²⁰

Director of the Palmer Institute of Authorship, Frederick Palmer reminded his correspondence scriptwriting students that,

¹⁹ Sargent, 171.

²⁰ The question of the makeup of early film audiences is one that has been rigorously debated. See, for example Robert C. Allen, “Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan: Beyond the Nickelodeon,” *Cinema Journal* 18:2 (Spring 1979) 2-15, and Robert Sklar, “Oh! Althusser!: Historiography and the Rise of Cinema Studies,” in Robert Sklar and Charles Musser, eds., *Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) 12-35.

In this great country with its vast mixture of races, all thrown into the melting pot of American tradition, there is a wonderful amount of raw material for drama. But you must transform this material – with characters and scenes – into an illusion so real that it will stir in others the emotions latent in life itself. And you must animate this reality also with something of beauty which shall justify your photodrama's existence.²¹

In the United States, these dialogue intertitles were one of the primary devices by which filmmakers were able to represent one of the fundamental themes of narrative film of the 1910s: ethnic, regional and class difference. The use of vernacular language in these dialogue titles at times underscores that difference, and at other times is the fundamental structuring agent of that difference. Speech was a privileged site upon which elements of ethnic and other differences were focused, sometimes in the form of an attraction, but at other times as a key to the development of the narrative.

However, it was also during the 1910s that the American cinema came to be more broadly accepted as legitimate by middle class audiences. Filmmakers at once realized the profit to be made by catering to these middle-class audiences by presenting complex, psychologically-motivated stories in the comfort of newly built picture palaces. At the same time, the industry wanted to maintain their popular base, not alienating the older working class audiences with middle-class chamber drama. Cinematic dialogue developed amongst this tension between production aimed at the middle class and production aimed at the working class – between middle class psychological sentimentality and vernacular realism. At times character speech attempted to bring the legitimacy of theatrical speechmaking into the cinema, and at others it lent characters voices that reflected or emphasized sites of difference and conflict, both to humorous and dramatic effect.

²¹ Frederick Palmer, *Palmer Plan Handbook, Volume One*, Second Revised Edition (Hollywood: Palmer Photoplay Corporation, 1922) 42.

In the same year as D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was released, Reginald Barker's 1915 film *The Italian* presented audiences with another kind of American story. This film can serve as an example of this tension present within the writing of character dialogue. The basic story of the film, the story of an Italian immigrant's struggle in America, is bracketed at the beginning and end of the film with short scenes of a man reading the internal story. Thus, the main story is presented as a story within a story. Furthermore, the external story of the man reading the book is situated within the confines of a thoroughly bourgeois drawing room, establishing a certain cultural distance from the internal filmed material. In this regard, the film might be said to appeal to a middle class sensibility by representing the act of spectatorship as a form of passive voyeurism. This dichotomy of a cultural clash is one that is reinforced throughout the film. The relationship, or tension between middle and working class, between native and immigrant is one that is at the root of the film's discourse.

Perhaps the most striking example of this distinction, however, is the fact that the main character of the story, Beppo Donnetti, is given two distinct styles of speech at different points in the film. At the beginning, in Italy, Beppo speaks in a florid, verbose manner. Later, as an American immigrant, Beppo speaks with a colloquial, stereotypical Italian accent. While dialogue serves to underscore the character's essential humanity, changes in his dialect affect precisely how that humanity comes across. Beppo's middle-class dialect ascribes something of a timeless, emotional sensibility to the character, while his working-class dialect places Beppo firmly within his cultural context as an hyphenated, immigrant Italian-American.

Though this film cannot be said to exemplify all uses of dialogue in the 1910s, it does serve to demonstrate the nuances with which the early voices of the cinema were imbued, and the way that character dialogue was addressed to those who were reading it. Beppo's transition from an articulate Italian national to a linguistically *marked* immigrant is indicative of the way that the development of character language in the cinema mediated cultural difference and cultural upheaval that was occurring at the same time. These changes in the storytelling devices of the early cinema can be seen to reflect broader changes in audience composition and the composition of the culture as a whole.

Tropes of birth, infancy, growth, maturation and even death are commonly employed when discussing the history of cinema as an independent aesthetic form and medium. Though such tropes carry their own ideological implications, the metaphor of a living being remains a powerful way in which the cinema can be and is discussed. Following the logic of this trope, when one tries to determine how it came about that the cinema established a kind of identity, several competing possibilities reveal themselves. One compelling way of defining this moment of maturation is as the moment at which the medium learns to use language. While the development of continuity editing and the development of sound technology certainly mark two of the most basic contributions to this grammar, the emergence of dialogue in the *silent* era of American film history can be seen as a flashpoint in the cultural-industrial history of the screen, and a crucial moment in this development. When cinema literally first began to speak, in many ways its basic nature changed. Silent character speech deepened the cinema's storytelling capabilities, contributing a key narrative device that has extended well beyond the 'silent' era.