Sound and Image, in ideal terms, should have equal position in the film. But somehow, sound always plays the subservient role to the image. In fact, the introduction of sound in the cinema for the purists was the end of movies and the beginning of the talkies. The purists thought that sound would be the ‘deathblow’ to the art of movies. No less revolutionary a director than Eisenstein himself viewed synchronous sound with suspicion and advocated a non-synchronous contrapuntal sound. But despite opposition, the sound pictures became the norm in 1927, after the tremendous success of The Jazz Singer. In this paper, I will discuss the work of French director Robert Bresson, whose films privilege the mode of sound over the image. Bresson’s films challenge the traditional hierarchical relationship of sight and sound, where the former’s superiority is considered indispensable. The prominence of sound is the principle strategy of subverting the imperial domain of sight, the visual, but the aural implications also provide Bresson the opportunity to lend a new dimension to the cinematographic art. The liberation of sound is the liberation of cinema from its bondage to sight.

Bresson, Sound, Image, Music, Voiceover, Inner Monologue, Diegetic, Non-Diegetic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Films are essentially made of two major ingredients—image and sound—both independent of each other. Thus, is it ever possible for these two entities to deliver exactly the same impressions? Sound and Image, in ideal terms, should have equal status in the film. But somehow, sound always plays the subservient role to the image. In fact, the introduction of sound in the cinema for the purists was the end of movies and the beginning of the talkies. The purists thought that sound would be the ‘deathblow’ to the art of movies. No less revolutionary a director than Eisenstein himself viewed synchronous sound with suspicion and advocated a non-synchronous contrapuntal sound. But despite opposition—which is so well pictured in Billy Wilder’s masterpiece, Sunset Boulevard (1950), which dealt with the theme of a silent movie star diva who finds herself left out from movie business—the sound pictures became the norm in 1927, after the tremendous success of The Jazz Singer.

In this paper, I will discuss the work of French director Robert Bresson, whose films privilege the mode of sound over the image. Bresson’s films challenge the traditional hierarchical relationship of sight and sound, where the former’s superiority is considered indispensable. The prominence of sound is the principle strategy of subverting the imperial domain of sight, the visual, but the aural implications also provide Bresson the opportunity to lend a new dimension to the cinematographic art. The liberation of sound is the liberation of cinema from its bondage to sight. Walter Murch, in his ‘Foreword’ to Michel Chion’s book Audio-Vision, points out that our relationship to sound is more primal and visceral than to sight. A child in the embryonic stage lacks vision but perceives sound more directly and intimately in the dark womb:

"We begin to hear before we are born, four and a half months after conception. From then on, we develop in a continuous and luxurious bath of sounds: the song of our mother’s voice, the swash of her breathing, the trumpeting of her intestines, the timpani of her heart. Throughout the second four-and-a-half months, Sound rules as solitary Queen of our senses: the close and liquid world of uterine darkness makes Sight and Smell impossible, Taste monochromatic, and Touch a dim and generalized hint of what is to come. (Murch, 1994, VIII)"

But with birth the relationship between sound and image goes through an inversion with the
dominance of sight over sound becoming the norm, which is also true of the movies since its inception.

2. A MAN ESCAPED

Bresson ‘compels,’ according to film scholars David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, the audience to listen to his film, especially in A Man Escaped (Un condamné à mort s’est échappé, 1956) (2008, 293). Listening is not necessarily opposed to the ocular vision, but it is an ‘added value,’ a term that I am borrowing from Michel Chion’s Audio-Vision. What could be added to a film that exceeds the scope and nature of the mise en scène, the boundary of the cinematic horizon? The added value resides in the gap, in the vacuum or abyss between the sound and the image. When the German officer strikes Fontaine on his head with his pistol, we don’t see the actual image of the pistol hitting Fontaine’s skull. Bresson dissolves the shot precisely before the contact between metal and skull takes place, allowing the added value to emerge from the gap. The sound has a source but the source is no longer attainable by sight, only the auditory perceptual dimension can be registered in this instance. Sound as an added value shifts the emphasis from the visual matrix to an unseen, hidden space, into a space of, what Chion calls, Acoustmètre, a mythology of hidden, faceless voice that haunts us in a film like Fritz Lang’s The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (1933). Then there is also an Anacoustmètre, the sinister and monstrous coupling of the filmed voice and body of Norman Bates in Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960) (Chion, 1994, 127).

Paying attention to sound in A Man Escaped is literally a matter of life and death. The film tells the true story of Commandant André Devigny, who escaped from Mountluc Castle Prison in Lyons in 1943. Bresson himself had spent eighteen months in a German prison camp as a resistance fighter. Fontaine’s prison escape depends on paying minute attention to everyday sounds. Bresson plays on many aspects of prison reality by conveying it mostly through the mechanism of sound, since Fontaine’s vision is strictly limited to his solitary confinement. We hear the guards’ voices, the locks clicking loudly, the doors opening, the key rattling with a metallic sound, the guards’ steps reverberating on the stone floor, the sound of whistles, but they are rarely visualised. Some acts, like the killing of the prisoners by machine gun, are never visualised but only transmitted by the sounds—the gunfire that leaves the prison woman frozen in her tracks. The primary source of information is always conveyed through sound first. For instance, when the old man Blanchet falls in the prison courtyard, it is the sound of his falling to the ground that the audience hears first, followed by the visual. Similarly, when Fontaine breaks the spoon that he is using to pry open the boards of his prison door, we hear the sound of breaking first then see the closeup of the broken spoon. The sound of the tapping on the wall and the silence thereafter envelops the screen as the only presence. Fontaine’s leaning body and his ear glued to the wall become emblematic of the primacy of sound.

The ‘punishing silence’ of Fontaine’s solitary confinement is constantly filled with the internal diegetic monologue that accompanies Fontaine and engages the audience with his plans. It produces a ‘cognitive map’ of the entire prison ground. External sounds, a complex mixture of street noises, children’s playful screams and laughter, train whistles, etc., are pure signs of liberty and freedom that contrast with the stifling silence of the prison cell. Bresson repeats these sound motifs in each instance of Fontaine’s appearance at the window of his cell. The outside sound transcends the boundary of the prison cell by representing reality itself.

3. THE PRIMACY OF SOUND

The voice is the clue that negates the presence of the image. Although the interior speech constitutes an internal figuration of sound architecture, the sound almost invariably emanates from an external source. Sound is, for Bresson, God’s grace that comes from outside to assist Fontaine in his design for escape. Sound assists Fontaine throughout the film. Each sound attracts a distinct identity and creates an auditory environment that is uniquely Bressonian. No other filmmaker—apart from Francis Ford Coppola, with the help of Walter Murch, in The Conversation (1974)—has reached the level of sophistication and profundity in carving a space for sound. The sound is not reduced to its visual stand-in but is autonomous, and this depends on its superior knowledge of what is not apparent in the visual. For instance, in the shot of
Fontaine’s convulsing body in the cell after he has been told by the authorities that he will be shot by a firing squad, we take it for granted that he is crying. But the retrospective voiceover informs us that ‘I broke into nervous laughter that relieved me.’ Thus, the voice is not subservient to the mastery of the visual, it does not obey the law of the visuals. Instead, the voice functions as a ‘metalinguistic phenomenon,’ according to Serge Daney, the French critic and editor of Cahiers du Cinema. The interlocutor of Fontaine’s voiceover is not who is present in the image but the spectator herself. She is the addressee. The voice laid over from outside is directed to the viewer, who is also outside the film. Two external agencies are directly connected outside the diegetic sphere of the cinema.

It would be quite an assertion to speak of Bresson as, what the French call, un visuel (a visual person). His films are remarkably, to borrow a word from Chion, ‘vococentric’ or ‘verbocentric,’ dominated by human voices above all other sounds (Chion, 1994, 5). The voices are the indices of literary substitutions grafted on the cinematic images, for instance in the opening scene of Diary of a Country Priest (Journal d'un curé de campagne, 1951). We see the text of the priest of Ambricourt on a piece of paper followed by his voice. In Bresson, the sound is always a step ahead of the visuals, as when the knights’ jousts in Lancelot du Lac (1974). It is the sound that first informs us of the results of the knights’ competition in King Arthur’s court. The scene also very subtly subverts the universal rule of cause and effect by showing the effect first followed by the cause. We see the audience reaction first followed by the action.

Selection and suppression of sound by microphone is an indiscriminate practice in the moviemaking business. Although it was Eisenstein who was first to proclaim emphatically, in italics, in Film Form: ‘The true material of sound film is, of course, monologue’ (Eisenstein, 1949, 106). He points out that the inner monologue as a literary form was used as early as 1887 by Edouard Dujardin in Les lauriers sont coupés, but the art was not realized to its full potential until the publication of James Joyce’s Ulysses in 1922 (104). This proclamation, to a greater degree, has been perfected in Bresson’s A Man Escaped. The film contains a form of inward monologue that remains sharply in contrast to the visual, therefore providing a consistent non-simultaneity between the image and the sound. The voiceover in this film, however, comes from a different temporal plane. It is diegetic and takes place not, as many have mischaracterised, in the future but in the present, while the images belong to the past, creating an anachronic synchresis of simultaneity and non-simultaneity. The voice remembers—as we know about all true memory, as distinguished from history—in the present, but the images represent what is being remembered. Bresson stages the past in the present, both mnemonically and acousmatically. He already tells us what happened in the title of the film itself—that the prisoner escaped—but the action of the events is represented in the space of ‘now.’

4. THE ENIGMA OF VOICEOVER

How do we then interpret the enigma of the voiceover? In documentaries, the voiceover of the narrator is sometimes equated with the voice of God, as an omniscient voice. A voice that sees and knows all. But the intimate and immediate voiceover of a character in a fiction film is normally described as a mental entity, close to the genre of soliloquy in Shakespearean and other Elizabethan plays. Although the ontological status of the voiceover is confined to the source of the thought of a character that is heard inside his/her own mind, at the same time, it is audible to the audience only. The other characters cannot hear this mental aural recitation. The internal monologue that occupies a great deal of Bresson’s films in its various discursive modes thrusts the speech-thought in its ‘diegetic immediacy.’ It renders the thought direct as opposed to the indirect voiceover one encounters in a traditional flashback from Citizen Kane (1941) to Film Noir.

We hear what the character thinks not what the character thought. Instead of a discourse the voiceover represents the discursive operations of subjectivity before it is interiorised. The textual origin from which the voice emanates into the cinematographic register, that is, into the writing in light, has a visibility and immediacy that overwhelms the sensory perception of the viewer’s attention. She becomes hostage to this voice because of its hospitality, the invitation to enter the domain of the voice as a welcome guest. Here I am playing on the etymological connection between the Latin words hospes and hostis, as both the host and the hostage in relation to hospitality, as argued by Derrida in Of Hospitality. It welcomes all and bars none, which is the fundamental and absolute law of hospitality.

The hospitality of the voice is even more solicitous due to the ‘lack’ of its confinement to a corporeal body. We do not perceive the source of the voice; it seems to emanate from the text itself as a dominant fugue. Strictly speaking, this voice is not an Acoustmêtre, but it shares some of its traits. Chion claims that Bresson is obsessed with ‘containing’ voices in his films. His actors, or models (as he calls them), speak, but the tone of the voice, its neutrality and strangeness, appears to have a direct connection with listening rather than with talking or speaking. They talk in the mode of
listening.ii The ‘flat monotone’ of the voices of the models have the quality of self-address, of an internal monologue, even when they address others. Bresson prefers monologue over the dialogue (Bresson, 1997, 84). His actors His actors speak ‘as if to themselves’ (Chion, 1999, 83).iii The conversations in the washroom in A Man Escaped amongst the French prisoners remain closer to characters ‘speaking lines’ than an actual conversation. André Bazin, too, points out that there is virtually no difference in terms of style and tone between the passages spoken on-screen or offscreen (Bazin, 1967, 133).

The lack of ‘auditory verisimilitude’ is one of the landmarks of a la Bressonian voix (Chion, 1999, 84). The lack of resonance and the absence of reverberations distinctly characterise the Bressonian speech model. Speech is made for listening; its purpose is not to create resonance or reverberation amongst the interlocutors. Almost always, the models deliver the lines in a monotone without affectation or emotion, as if Bresson has bleached out the sound of its color, its various paraphernalia, and reduced it to its minimal state. The utterance resembles the letters on the white page, devoid of animation and affectations, the cadence of live speech. Neither dead nor alive, the speech’s neutrality reaches a sublime inhuman quality of automation.iv

Bresson captures the inward movement of stillness in sound. What we apprehend in his voiceover, while the body is held in absolute stillness, is the internal velocity of sound propelling the soul or the spirit toward a final resolution that can only culminate in life or death. Fontaine’s voice has only two dimensions to realise itself upon: freedom or death. Both are equally desirable as they are equally paradoxical. He thus resolves the antinomy of life and death. The_categorical imperative of the moral choice, that is, should he kill the young prisoner Jost who could be a disguised informer sent to spy upon him, does not interfere with the decision that his internal voice has already registered. What moves the soul is not the body but the thought expressed via voiceover narration. We hear thinking in its materialised manifestation through sound exiled in the depth of the soul.

The intense attention paid to all forms of sound and noises in the film makes watching A Man Escaped truly an aural phenomenon. Diegetic speech is by design rather limited—a few barking orders in German where the volume is dramatically heightened to convey the cruelty and inhumanity of the language in contrast to the soft accented French delivered with a normal diction and cadence by the prisoners and the Vichy collaborators. The contrast between French and German speech is virtually underscored throughout the film as a marked distinction between human and demonic speech. Although Fontaine’s face remains both motionless and emotionless, his tense body embodies the alertness of an animal predisposed to the slightest sound that might betray the presence of danger. As a trapped animal, Fontaine, in his dogged effort to pry open the prison door with a chiseled spoon, is attentive to the slightest sound of the guard’s footsteps approaching or receding. There has never been a film that concentrates on sound as overwhelmingly as does A Man Escaped. Bresson has most effectively translated the meaning of sound film by composing the film almost entirely through the vibrations of sound. Each act has its own corresponding sound, its own characteristics, like the rattling of the keys on the staircase, its own identification, for instance Orsini’s coughing or the intermittent railway whistles during the last moments of Fontaine’s and Jost’s escape. The sound comes from outside not only to inform the narrative but to assist, to help Fontaine and Jost escape. It becomes an ally, a comrade in arms, defeating the ocular foe.

The voiceover, in Bresson, is inevitably limited to the protagonist, whose thoughts and feelings are directly communicated to the spectator. In A Man Escaped, voiceover solely belongs to Fontaine. In Diary of a Country Priest, the sole orator of the voiceover is the sickly priest of Ambricourt, played by Claude Leydu. In Pickpocket, it is Michel, played by the Uruguayan Martin LaSalle, whose voiceover that tells the story. The voice is neither simply an audio triage nor a Freudian unconscious speaking, so to speak. The voice is not a part of the imaginary world. It exists within a space of interiority that is heard only by the audience. Its function is to create a direct communication with the audience, a link that favors reception over formal function within the narrative. In a contrast to the private mode in which the traditional voiceover functions, whether simultaneous or non-simultaneous, where the audience is only indirectly implicated, the Bressonian voiceover instantly shares with the audience in the public sphere. Nothing in the latter is subjected to the screenings of memory that guide us to the intractable labyrinths of the narrative structure.

The narrative moves only through this secret channel, the communion, serving as a precious bond between the protagonist and the spectator. In its immediacy, the temporality of the voiceover transcends the spatial limitation of the visual ordering, the structural unity of the film’s discourse through editing, by providing a linearity that binds the story to a complex unity. The voice starts to speak in a spiritual and supplicant tone (in Diary of a Country Priest), neither authoritative nor defiant, bringing to light a holy communion of the plaintive voice and the absolute silence of God. The voice thus performs a crucial function of communion, communication, between the authorial but not the
authoritative voice in its supplication with the ethos surrounding it. The subject's voice lacks both the subjectivity and the mastery of the off-screen voice or space, and it is also not directed to anyone in particular. There is no intended recipient to this solitary voice except its correspondence to its own literary form. Bazin calls the speech whether it is off-screen or on-screen 'an uninterrupted condition of the soul, an outward revelation of an interior destiny' (Bazin, 1967, 133). He writes:

The separating of sound and of the image to which it relates cannot be understood without a searching examination of the aesthetics of realism in sound. It is just as mistaken to see it as an illustration of a text, as a commentary on an image. Their parallelism maintains that division which is present to our senses (139).

In other words, sound acquires an independent feature. Its presence is neither to attest to nor to confirm the text or the image. Bresson's sound connects images that can be, according to Deleuze, considered to be in a Reimannian space, because the connections of the parts are not predetermined and can take place in many ways (1989, 129). Thus, the off-screen sound of the rattling of the key on the staircase bannister, in A Man Escaped, connects to the totally disconnected space of Fontaine's prison cell.

5. DETERRITORIALISED SOUND

Bresson's sound not only connects the disparate images but more profoundly it forms a fissure between the interstices of images. For instance, the one thing that truly distinguishes the talkies from the silent cinema is the frequent usage of offscreen sound, the voice-off, the out-of-field discourse of the modern cinema. In the simplest terms, montage of the silent cinema produced radical separation, an unavoidable schism, between two images based on the Eisensteinian principle of collision, contradiction, and contrast. But when we speak of the interstice between two images or frames, we are speaking of an intervening space that exists between the images, made possible by the sound. According to Deleuze, Bresson was the 'pioneer' of creating and filling the interstice between images with sound. He writes:

But if we ask in what conditions (sic) cinema draws out the consequences of the talkie, and so becomes truly talking, everything is inverted: this is when sound itself becomes the object of a specific framing which imposes an interstice with the visual framing. The notion of voice-off tends to disappear in favor of a difference between what is seen and what is heard, and this difference is constitutive of the image. There is no more out-of-field. The outside of the image is replaced by the interstice between the two frames in the image. (180-181).

The interstice is the abyss, the void, between two frames that the talkies joined in the absence of both continuity and discontinuity as an 'irrational' cut that did not belong to either of the images. It constitutes, in a formal sense, a false continuity. Bresson's sound comes from a non-cinematic space, from a space of invisibility, thus it materialises in its pure acoustic format devoid of the auxiliary visual accompaniment. Is this a conceptual space or simply a celestial void from which the sound emerges without the customary visual aid? The indeterminacy of sound is also the characteristic of its primacy. But, nonetheless, it is 'elusive' (Chion, 1999, 1).

In Bresson if the sound is exaggerated and faithfully reproduced, it is so only at the expense of the 'impoverished image' (Bazin, 127). The opening scene of the Diary of a Country Priest, where the textual image is gradually superimposed, substituted, replaced or supplemented, by the voice (this sort of technique persists most notably in Pickpocket as well), is clearly an effort by Bresson to contain the image within the deterritorialised grasp of the voice, to deprive the text of, what Derrida calls, a selfpresence, the logos, which only a voice can attest to. The text, écriture, loses its emphatic presence, and so does the visual. The dominance of speech over writing is unmistakable. The ever-present and haunting shadow of the sound overwhelms and envelops the image by removing its status as fundamental to the art of cinematography. Bresson's statement that 'a locomotive is better visualised by its whistle than by an entire railroad station' is famously illustrated in Dairy of a Country Priest (Bresson, 1997, 81). The aural elements of sound are not simply drowned into the depth of the image, au contraire, they are fairly well detected by the perceptual senses of the audience.

6. NON-DIEGETIC MUSIC

Instead of literally playing second fiddle to the image, the sound in Bresson breaks the barrier by crossing over the image with a defiant note. As Balthazar lays dying in the field, we hear the non-diegetic piano sonata Andantino by Schubert gradually replaced by the clinking sound of the bells of a flock of sheep gathered around him in a heavenly funeral. The invisible music is replaced by the visible sound of the bells. The lack of humanity and the presence of the animals give Balthazar a religious funeral only witnessed by God.
The nondiegetic music plays a very specific purpose in Bresson's film. It is not used to accompany, support, or reinforce an image. It functions as a spiritual refrain in a world of evil. Both the Nazi prison guards and the selfish and cruel owners of Balthazar are, for Bresson, the pure incarnation of evil on this earth. Thus, the music of Mozart and Schubert highlights the predestination of grace, Bresson's belief in God's absolute indifference to mortal sin and forgiveness. The repeated uses of Mozart’s Mass in C Minor in A Man Escaped and Schubert's piano sonata in Au Hasard Balthazar are not incidental. They signify a core element of Bresson's theological belief in Le jansénisme.

7. CONCLUSION

The relative autonomy that leads in some cases to absolute autonomy of sound and vision, each operating on its own, creates a duality of perspective, the dichotomy of inner and outer, the vision outward bound, the ear inner bound. Bresson directs our eyes away from the image into the internal sphere of the sound that enters from the outside into the inside, unlike the image that launches our eyes toward the outer sphere. Neither image nor sound, Bresson contends, should reciprocate on equal level; if they do, they tend to neutralise each other, like colors in a painting. What can be heard is better than what the eye can see. We must follow sound both ontologically and epistemologically to reach the metaphysical depth of Bresson’s art. In the end, we hear Balthazar’s agonised braying over and over again in commiseration with Mouchette repeatedly throwing herself down the riverbank in an attempted suicide. The sound persists and returns even after death, as echoes do after the sound has vanished.

John Russell Taylor calls Bresson the ‘quietest’ of directors (Taylor, 1964, 115). But when it comes to sound, he is perhaps the most loquacious. In response to a comment at a press conference, after the screening of his last film, L'Argent, that his films appear to be an extension of silent cinema, Bresson replied that for him ‘The human voice is one of the most beautiful noises. The more film I make, the more I think we could almost do with just sound and no image.’ In response to another comment regarding the sound design of his films, his answer was quite enigmatic. He said that when he is editing a film, he does not even watch the images but concentrates on sound, on how to modify or rectify it if it is deficient. He concluded that for him ‘the world of sound is richer and deeper’ than the image. So, it is clear that in Bresson’s modus operandi of filmmaking sound is the essential reality of his art of cinematography. By ‘cinematography’ Bresson means the cinematic art rather than the work of a cameraman. There are two machines, both wonderful. There is the camera that reproduces the world in a deceptive way. Bresson, quoting Rodin, says that a photograph is a lie. But then there is ‘the tape recorder that reproduces sound perfectly.’ The art of cinematography is a constant mediation and adjustment between these two forms of reproduction: What we see is false but what we hear is the truth. Bresson’s critique of the image virtually echoes the Platonic objection to mimesis.

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i Michel Chion defines synchresis in *Audio-Vision* as a phenomenon of synchronism and synthesis of sound with image through manipulation to produce an effect of believability. For example, the viewer believes the sound of a hammer driving a nail through the palm of a hand in Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) emerging from the visual itself (1994, 4).

ii The Bressonian model speaks like we listen: by taking in, as he goes, what he has just said—so that he seems to be closing his mouth and ending his speech even as he is producing it, without leaving it ‘the possibility of resonating for his interlocutor or the audience’ (Chion, 1999, 83).

iii The actual quote from Bresson is ‘To your models: Speak as if you are speaking to yourself’ (1997, 84).

iv Bresson is well-known for rejecting theatricality and psychology in his films. Bresson’s actors speak with a monotonous diction. It retains the human voice but estranges it from the actors, who he calls ‘models.’ The estrangement of the human voice from the speaker casts the voice in a dimension that lacks the emotional context.

v Most of Bresson’s films are literary adaptations: *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), from Diderot; *Une Femme Douce* (1969), from a short story by Dostoyevsky called ‘A Gentle Creature’; *Pickpocket* (1959), from *Crime and Punishment; Au Hasard Balthazar* (1945), supposedly inspired by *The Idiot; L’Argent* (1983), from Tolstoy’s ‘The Forged Coupon’; *A Man Escaped*, from a memoir by André Devigny; *Diary of a Country Priest*, from Georges Bernanos’ novel; etc.

vi In movies, sound bridges are often used to bleed either way to smooth the awkwardness of the preceding image with the following image or vice versa.

vii A religious and political philosophy of the Dutch theologian Cornelius Otto Jansen that originated in the 17th and 18th centuries in France against the papacy and the royal Catholicism of Cardinal de Richelieu and Louis XIV. The basic tenets of this religious ideology are ‘the notions of original sin, human depravity, the necessity of divine grace and predestination’ (inspired by the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jansenism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jansenism) (Accessed on August 15, 2019).