

Communication and Signification: Voice in the Cinema

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Kumar Shahani began his inaugural address to the seminar^[1] by expressing his distress at the noise levels on Kolkata streets, the incessant cacophony of automobile horns and public address systems that is a feature of Indian urban life anywhere. At this level of commixture and volume, sound loses both its aesthetic potential and its ability to convey meaning. An atmosphere of routine panic seems to prevail. In our time, the walkman and the iPod aided by noise-cancelling earphones have enabled some to insulate themselves against its harmful effects.

But what happens on the street is a social phenomenon, not merely a sign of individual taxi drivers' trigger-happy behaviour. However raucous and hellish it may sound in sum, street noise is composed of messages. These are messages addressed by citizens to each other in the course of daily life. When we lament the fact that these messages are conveyed by such stressful, dissonant means, we should take care not to blame it on a deficit of culture or taste in those who produce the noise. The demand for a personalized cultural antidote to noise-stress is no less among taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers: within their means, they too try to create a micro-ambience of music inside their vehicles to soften the effects of the social aggression that they both suffer and contribute to. As far as this matter of the everyday sound environment we live in is concerned, it would not be outrageous to conclude that it is the effect of a painful reality: the complete absence of a shared language/law. Human beings make their own laws in the absence of a law to which they have given their consent. It is the cacophony of a Hobbesian world, and as such, only a symptom.

But here we are discussing sound in the cinema. Here too, there is a relation to the law to be grasped. In cinema we do not treat sound alone, it is always a matter of the relations between the visual and the auditory: the cinema is often described as an audio-visual medium. In the sets of signifiers with which we make distinctions that are pertinent to this discussion, something has eluded our grasp, fallen through the net that they constitute. These are some of them: visual-aural, visual-verbal, oral-literate, graphic-phonetic. What has gone unnoticed is the historic translation of the law into a visual (i.e., graphic-literate) mode in the era of modernity which is also the era of cinema. Here we must subsume the graphic-literate under the visual, thus splitting the verbal into its components – oral and literate, or phonetic and graphic – and assigning them to the two faculties – the ear and the eye – respectively. Historically, the transfer of the functions of socio-political communication – the communication between a society and its component elements, the citizens – to the visual faculty has accompanied the advent of modern political forms. Without this transfer it is impossible to think of the image as bearing a readable message or for that matter anything other than a (more or less involuntarily) receivable impact. Our love for the treasures of our oral culture need not be affected by this acknowledgement that as individuals our ability to be counted (rather than merely included) as citizens and thus as integral components of the community called the nation-state calls for a retraining into the visual-verbal dissemination of laws. The subject whose relation to the law is mediated by the town-crier's proclamations (which are essentially oral, as the name itself indicates, even if written versions are also displayed in public places) is in a completely different position vis-à-vis the law from the one who is obliged to seek out written/visually communicated announcements of prohibitions and authorizations. *In short, the sovereign individual of modern political morphology is literate by definition.* The relegation of community-sustaining (i.e., law preserving) discourse to the visual (i.e., written) would seem to be a necessary precondition for the universalization of the citizen-form, eliminating as it does the naturalized distinction between the rulers and the

ruled that obtains where the law must be repeatedly proclaimed to a populace understood to be naturally disinclined to obey it. In contrast to the obedience demanded and enforced by laws in an oral-aural political order, the sovereign citizen honours by compliance a law that is of his/her own making and is available in signs. Fictive in Balibar's sense of the term, these foundational ideas have concrete social effects which reach far beyond this basic level. The centrality of the eye as instrument of lawful social being renders readable the non-verbal visual image as well. Semiotics, which has established the reality and possibility of signifying systems other than language, is unthinkable without this background of the recruitment of the eye to the practices of politics and governance. The idea of a sound-image, finally, is also a product of this overhauling of communicative-receptive faculties by reference to the visual. The perception of sound and the perception of sound *as an image* are two different things and in the latter, the logic and discipline of the visual has intervened.

To sum up: the verbal-literal is visual, while the verbal-oral is aural, the eye and the ear are the receptive organs of these two pairs respectively. In dealing with Indian popular culture, this division is of great importance, for we are not only dealing with a substantial population that is illiterate, but more fundamentally, we are dealing with a society (including the technically literate) in which the power of the spoken word is absolute. The disciplining of the eye for purposes of social communication, the binding of vision to functions of reading has been going on at a very slow pace in India. Here the very nature of social power is in question. Visual communication addresses a subject who must feel empowered to read and interpret and be able to rely on a stability of meaning that is guaranteed by social authority. This requires a participation in community reconstituted by modern law as well as a culture of individualism which enjoins us to be readers, subjects of law. The voice, on the other hand, has borne messages, commands, instructions for a long time, and it is in this aural dimension that even the literate, to a large extent, are able to recognize the law. The voice conveys despotic law, and

commands obedience, whereas the visual sign is a component of a law that demands compliance. The difference between obedience and compliance hinges on the necessity, in the latter, of an act of reading, however minimal.

Learning to think about the voice (and other sounds) as part of the image is a practical task of considerable difficulty.^[2] The voice does not reside in the image, unless we make the effort to push it back into the frame. The voices that we hear when we watch a film seem to come from somewhere other than the screen – the voice-over, voices off, and the noises and voices that nowadays come from all over the hall, thanks to new technology. Voice, like sound in general seems to have a dual existence in (relation to) the visual image: atmosphere and image. Both *in* and *around* the image. Of course the visual image too can “contain” evidence of surrounding spaces, intimations of the out-of-frame, spaces drawn into the visible without themselves being visible. The glances out of frame enable this implosion. Sound is also, in one of its functions, a contributor to this signification of an expanded spatial field. While the glance out of frame only arouses an expectation of spatial extension, sounds are literally those spaces speaking to what is visible, alerting it to their own existence, creating a wider field of objects. Sounds come from the excluded field, while glances alert us to its existence.

Voice, music, and ambient sound (which includes both music and voice): this is a possible classification of sound in the cinema. It is this dual status of the voice (I do not consider music here) in cinema that I will try to explore in the context of popular Indian cinema. Under what conditions do voices function as ambient sound, i.e., as part of the image itself or the wider connotated field of which it is a (re)presentation? When do they function as elements of a field of signification? It would seem, of course, that they always do so. The question thus seems a little puzzling, because how can a voice, as bearer of spoken language, not signify?

It signifies, of course, but this is not the only thing it does, and in order to do this, some requirements must be met. When speech is embedded in text, is

an element of the text's weave, then it signifies along with the other elements. But speech can also function as a presentative, rather than a represented, element. Here we must learn to distinguish signification as that which is exhausted in the communication that speech and its hearing effects, from the readability of the material body of speech – voice – as a bearer of meaning.

Voice, speech, language. The distinction between speech and language is now widely accepted as fundamental after Saussure. A further analysis is possible, and psychoanalysis has been the site of this effort, to distinguish speech from voice. Speech is the median point between voice and language, where their union produces social meaning.^[3] Speech is irredeemably split between these two, even as it binds them to a common purpose. Perhaps we could say that in speech, the social function of communication, residing in language, combines with voice as the desire to say. Parole, speech, is desiring communication, where in the defiles of the signifier meaning is suspended by a thin thread, liable to be lost.

To the listener, speech is the bearer of an enigmatic message, whose meaning is not exhausted by reference to the resources of language. In the cinema, it is not the speech of the characters alone that has this function, but the silent speech of the film itself. Our desire is caught up in making sense of this narrative utterance, and to this end the actual voiced speech of the characters is equally instrumentalized, it has no privileged status. But at the same time by its very nature the auditory function cannot easily effect the framing operation that can turn voice into image with the same facility as sight. This is crucial: voices in the cinema communicate doubly, to characters within the fiction, but also to us listening beyond the frame. But they always have this other feature: they are also signifiers of communication, they must signify the effectuation of an act of exchange of words, of meanings. Insofar as the speech of the film has priority over all other voices, they must function as signifiers of communication in addition to communicating something. It is useful to consider instances of character speech where a lie is told, of which

we are aware. Here a false communication is signified as well as performed within the fiction. If however we are unaware that the speech in question is a lie, such signification is suspended in order to facilitate the performance of a deception such that we are directly implicated in the narrative as dupes comparable to those in the fiction.

Voice is the body of speech, inscribed with the rules of language. Voice signifies often in addition to language, in excess of its medium function. In a film, do we 'see characters speak'? Or hear them? Here is a scene from an early Telugu film *Malapilla* (Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, 1938), where an untouchable girl is engaged in an amorous exchange with a young, learned Brahmin youth. As she is speaking, with her back turned to him, he begins to move away and another young man from the untouchable village who has hopes of marrying her, arrives on the scene and takes his place. For a few seconds she is unaware of this change and continues to speak in the same vein as before. Upon discovering that she has been speaking not to the Brahmin youth but to the man from her own community, her voice changes character, as if she too were now adopting her true identity. In her exchange with the Brahmin youth, she speaks in a voice that bears all the marks of her aspiration – *Malapilla* is a reformist film – to rise to his level, whereas in her exchange with the untouchable youth, she is as if her own pre-reform self. What is crucial here is that the speech of the film does not intervene between the listener-spectator and the speaking characters, which means that the spectator of the time was in no position to read the change in tone as a meaningful element of the image. Instead s/he is directly subjected to this difference as to a command. This is only a somewhat glaring instance of a problem of voice in the cinema that I am trying to focalize. At stake here is cinema's ability, through the intervention of its own inaudible speech, to render the voice as image for a spectator who would then read the voice, read speech – which means nothing more than to *listen* to it – as a bearer of meanings other than those authorized by language.^[4]

Suspending here, in a very preliminary form, this theoretical inquiry into the voice as image, I will now speak about a Tamil film which I think has something interesting to say on this question. The film is Bharatiraja's *En Uyir Thozhan* (1989).⁵ The film stages the unfolding effects of two seductions, both achieved through the voice, speaking the oratorical Tamil that is associated with both Tamil cinema and politics. Dharma, the protagonist of the narrative, is an earnest, committed ordinary member of a political party who commands the loyalty of all the people in the slum, Kuilkuppam, where he lives. One day he brings home a girl, Chittu, who was lost in the city. In a flashback, we get the story of her seduction and ruin: she falls for an actor in a touring drama company and runs away with him. He takes all her jewels and disappears, leaving her stranded. Dharma, her benefactor in the city, is the victim of the other seduction: he is completely devoted to his party leader and even attempts to immolate himself in the party's cause. As the story unfolds, Ponvannan, the drama actor, returns as a film star and soon enters politics. Now Dharma who has meanwhile married Chittu, finds himself obliged to campaign for the man who once cheated his wife. She watches helplessly as Dharma continues to be deceived by the voice of the leader into acting against his own interests. In order to boost the party's prospects in the election, the leaders have Dharma killed and put the blame on the opposition. In a climax typical of Bharatirajaa's didactic style, the leaders are attacked and killed by a mob of slum-dwellers as they arrive at the beach-side memorial to Dharma to pay their respects.

Bharatiraja employs a popular idiom and this is a popular film (although not very successful at the box office). Within the limits on narrative speech imposed by this choice of idiom, however, the film offers a critique of the culture of the voice, of oratorical speech, that dominates Tamil society, and in one ingenious moment, offers us the possibility of framing the voice as image. Bharatiraja uses silence to put into relief the voices that command effortlessly. Thus the scene of the couple's outing when, instead of going to the cinema as planned, they end up at a public meeting where the leader is

speaking. Dharma gets so absorbed in the speech that Chittu, in despair, moves away and goes home. After the meeting, as people begin to leave, Dharma runs around looking for her and a strange eerie silence falls upon the now almost empty ground as we see him walking looking desolate. For a moment he seems engulfed by a deathly silence. There is a surfeit of images of loudspeakers and microphones throughout the film, as in the song in the flashback. Disembodied voices captivate audiences, stopping them in their tracks. Dharma's credulity is contrasted with the disillusioned clarity of vision that Chittu and the character who calls himself 'citizen' embody. Through their eyes, especially through Chittu's, we witness the incorrigible Dharma returning repeatedly to heed the call of the leader. The voice captivates him, blinds him to the reality that is in front of him. He cannot read the text of the spoken message, he can only receive it, he is helpless against the imperative that penetrates his body and instigates it to action. At a crucial moment, after Chittu has revealed to him the true identity of Ponvannan (the film-star politician, who was Chittu's seducer), Dharma seems briefly disoriented. But he is summoned again by the leader. In this scene we are first presented with the confabulations of the leader and his group, discussing the prospects of the party, the need to placate Dharma, etc. Then Dharma is summoned. The shot has the leader sitting inside the house, an open door leading into the corridor where Dharma stands. The delivery of the speech is carefully designed to evoke the rhetorical appeal of public speeches, focusing on Dharma's importance for the party, weaving his personal grievances and doubts into an argument for loyalty to the party. The camera slowly tracks back and Dharma is to one side, listening intently. It is a moment of possibilities: the backtracking camera seems to be moving in the line of the voice, and Dharma, stationed to one side of it seems to be off-line as it were. Will he escape its seduction this time? The camera stops. We look at Dharma, who falls to the ground in a gesture of submission and the camera moves to his side, as if its deflecting strategy had failed, as if the voice had escaped the camera's lure and reached its true target. This is followed by an image of floating loudspeakers.

En Uyir Thozhan presents a historical allegory of sorts, tracing the connection between the popular theatre, the cinema and politics as a continuous accumulation of the power of the voice in modern India. The two protagonists whose destinies are determined by the culture of the voice, in coming together seem to fuse the history of the culture industry with that of the political machine, reminding us of the history we know all too well. The disembodied voices that reach us through loudspeakers and the dubbed voices of characters in the films are both evidence of the voice's transcendence of the frame of the law, which is also the frame of the screen image. Voice determines the visual image to a degree incommensurate with the demands of formal democracy. The figures on screen are marionettes; they have no choice but to let the voice lead them. See how they break into dance when prompted by song, or how the power of rhetoric paralyzes them, including the one who ostensibly speaks. An aural ecology that, combined with a visual gigantism, subjects us to a power that remains unseen is the target of Bharatiraja's critique. This ambience makes enthusiasts of us all, unless we opt for the alternative of paranoia.

This gap in popular cinema between the speaking voice and the image can be mapped onto an opposition between idealism and materialism. The precedence of voice is a symptom of the idealist basis of cultural identity. The realm of meanings, of Logos, commands the body to lend itself to an idealist enactment.

Of late, however, we see traces of change, a movement towards a more intimate bond between voice and body in the cinematic image. In the older narrative form, the virgin maid was usually the only one whose voice seemed to be continuous with her body: here certain films of Saira Banu, such as *Junglee* (Subodh Mukherji, 1961) and *Shagird* (Samir Ganguly, 1967) come to mind. Such a representation was itself premised on the idea that in time she would learn to incorporate a split, to speak another's language. Once she moved into the world of responsible adulthood, she spoke the public language that was authorized by the social power: the community. Keeping

this in mind as an instance of an older aesthetic, starting in the 1990s, we find in eg., the films of Mani Rathnam, the advent of another kind of feminine voice, a voice that speaks under the breath, speaks to a male as if in a space insulated from the master's ear. Here the fact that the feminine voice is subject to patriarchal repression is fore-grounded by the act of speaking in hushed tones. A new voice quality enters the cinema in Mani Rathnam's films as women, speaking under the breath, reveal their feelings. These are voices that are conscious of their subjection to the superego called Tradition, and they bespeak a desire to be free from it, to escape the blind subjection to it that was the lot of the women in the popular cinema until then. These new women are hiding from this superego, using the companionate male as cover. Everything depends on the complicity of this new male, his ability to split himself off from the absolutism of the father's power, to become her accomplice. It is the voice of a desiring woman, reminding us of its absence from popular cinema up to that point.

One could cite other instances of such evolution beyond the controlling power of the spoken word. There are attempts to create gaps between words where the image can show through as a silent invitation to an interpretation, as well as attempts to subject the voice itself to a framing that will render it material. But the idealist anchoring of the image to the spoken word is still the dominant aesthetic option in the industry today.

The spectator who listens is a spectator who attends to the desiring communication, to the speaker's want-to-say. Cinema has not been very encouraging to such a stance, it prefers to let speech come through clear and loud. In Mani Rathnam's films sometimes the women whisper, you have to strain to hear what they are saying; it is a new experience. Otherwise (as in *Shagird*), whispering is signified rather than presented as such. It is thus only recently and in as yet incoherent ways that a new economy of voices, a new valuation of voices seems to be beginning to be conceived or tried out. That this development has some relation to our changing social order can be intuited, but we need ways of investigating the relation.

The history of human subjection to the command of the voice is much longer than our training in the use of the eye as a faculty of sociality. The disciplining of the eye and the enlistment of its faculty to the aid of modern society is a much more recent phenomenon and this literacy of the eye, so to speak, is hardly universal; and learning to read is only a beginning in that direction. Cinema seems at first sight to be very much a product of this latter disciplining initiative, but at least here in India the cinema is situated in between these two historical orders, and seems to participate simultaneously in the preservation of the old order as well as a hankering after the new. Indian popular cinema derives its unique identity from this dual inscription.

References:

[1](#) The seminar on 'Sound Cultures in Indian Cinema' organized by the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University in November, 2006, where this paper was first presented.

[2](#) Much work has been done on the voice in cinema (and sound in general) in the West. The work of Michel Chion (*The Voice in Cinema*, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999) and Mary Ann Doane ('The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space' in L. Braudy and M. Cohen eds. *Film Theory and Criticism*. 6th Edition, NY: OUP, 2004) have had the most influence on my own thinking. See also Metz, 'Aural objects' in Braudy and Cohen, op.cit.

[3](#) Another triad, language/discourse/speech has also been proposed to illuminate another dimension of the topic. See Dominiek Hoens, 'Toward a New Perversion: Psychoanalysis' in Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg, eds. *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006

[4](#) Jacques Ranciere, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004, posits a three-stage movement from an ethical to a representative to an aesthetic regime of arts, of which the latter transition has some relevance to the argument I have tried to develop here. The representative regime is marked by a "representative primacy of action over characters or of narration over description, the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter, and the very primacy of the art of speaking, of speech in actuality" all of which combine and "figure into an analogy with a fully hierarchical vision of the community" (p. 22). In other words, here the arts enter into complicity with social order, the genres themselves bear a social significance, being associated with high or low ranks (eg, comedy for the lower classes). The primacy of speech referred to here is analogous with that mode of speech we have discerned in *Malapilla* where it directly signals social rank. The aesthetic regime that follows (although Ranciere does not treat them as replacing each other so much as a series of emergences that co-exist in any given situation) is marked by a delinking of the arts from such representative obligations, where "artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is

inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself..." (22-23). "The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres." (23). Realism, by this definition, belongs in the aesthetic regime, "novelistic realism is first of all the reversal of the hierarchies of representation (the primacy of the narrative over the descriptive or the hierarchy of subject matter) and the adoption of a fragmented or proximate mode of focalization, which imposes raw presence to the detriment of the rational sequences of the story." (24). In the novel, all characters are subject to the same 'democratic' treatment, without assigning specific styles or dialects to them according to rank, without any attempt to mirror their station in life in the style of their representation. Briefly, my suggestion is that the layer of signification I propose here is akin to this leveling effected by Rancier's aesthetic regime.

5 I am indebted to Venkatesh Chakravarty who brought this film to my notice over a decade ago.