



RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli

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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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Jane M. Gaines

Wordlessness (to be Continued)¹

ABSTRACT: This is the first part of some thoughts toward how to open up again the question of the theoretical issues around the expressivity of the body, especially given the example of silent cinema. It is an old semiotic problem of what meanings words convey and what the body without words can be said to “express.” After deciding that “silence” is not the operative concept we want I return briefly to the no-word advocates like Béla Balász, and “pure cinema” theorists Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, and Louis Delluc, as well as to Christian Metz who was highly dismissive of what he called the “gibberish” of the silent screen. Peter Brooks comes in for some scrutiny for coming so close in his “Text of Muteness” chapter in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, but I find that he still sits on the fence, wanting to give the day to silent expression, but then signaling a preference for words. So I keep asking what is meant by the phrase “words cannot express,” wanting to know if this means that they fall short or that other signs must take up the slack, or that words will never substitute for gestures. Concluding with Lillian Gish’s essay on “Speech Without Words” and Asta Nielsen’s position that the American cinema had too many words, I call this an exercise in defining a problem although I do not consider this project anything more than “to be continued.”

It has been almost thirty years since Molly Haskell told us that silent film condemned female characters to speechlessness. In her breakthrough book on women in Hollywood films, *From Reverence to Rape*, she took a position in tune with the feminism of the time when she wrote that the strong heroine of the Woman’s Movement could not be found in the silent cinema:

There was little possibility of such a heroine emerging in silent film, where the very instrument of her emancipation—speech—was denied her. By definition, silent film is a medium in which women can be seen but not heard. The conversational nuances of an intelligent women can barely be conveyed in a one-sentence title; an emancipation proclamation cannot be delivered in pantomime. (175)

I cite Haskell here to gauge the distance we have come in the last three decades in our assessment of women in the silent era—both before and behind the camera. But Haskell’s position also reminds us of what has not changed and that is this—the academic bias against forms of expression that we could call “all body and no words.” In the comparison between silent enactment and spoken conversation in Haskell, bodily expression is by implication a low, inarticulate form, and the rich traditions of theatrical pantomime and stage melodrama would appear to have been forgotten. Important developments might suggest that there is

¹ In this first of two parts I only line up the most basic sources and begin to sketch out the parameters of an argument that may very well take another direction in the second part, making this another experiment in online publishing: a theoretical problem set up and to-be-engaged-with in a second part. So this is just to warn readers that the following is intentionally incomplete, only introductory, and ends abruptly.

new academic acceptance in the humanities, most notably in studies of theatrical melodrama, in the new media emphasis on embodiment, and elsewhere in what has been called the “affective turn.”² This vanguard, however, has not necessarily transformed the mainstream, considering that it has been eighteen years since Brian Massumi, reworking Gilles Deleuze, first wrote that “the skin is faster than the word” (*Parables for the Virtual* 25).³ Because this bias in favor of the spoken and written word based on the word’s presumed superior capacity for expressivity continues to work against the academic study of cinema—not to mention theories of the image—we can put off our confrontation with it no longer. And, if I may be so bold, this bias is everywhere, especially in the critical theory upon which film theory has been built, and therefore it should not be surprising that it can be found even within the very literature on melodrama that we have taken as foundational.

Wordless Mimesis

Where do we find in all of our critical literature the elaborated defense of *wordless mimesis*? And why urge this concept of *wordless mimesis* over either “silence” or “speechlessness”? First, to correct Haskell, because it isn’t that the silent screen took articulate speech from female characters, leaving them expressionless, because, as we now understand, the silent cinema had many more kinds of expressive systems at its disposal, from color to camera movement, to the full gestural continuum. As Mary Ann Doane once described the production of meaning in the silent film, directly countering Haskell, all of the expressivity is taken from the spoken word and given to the whole body: “The absent voice re-emerges in gestures and the contortions of the face—it is spread over the body of the actor” (33). We would not, however, stop there, but say that expressivity is spread over the whole of the *mise-en-scène*—not only spread over bodies but landscapes and, most certainly objects, as Germaine Dulac, reminds us—especially, thinking back to the Lumières, objects like the train arriving in the station, as we will see (391, 396). Yet even if we start to think about the silent cinema *mise-en-scène* as comprised of sound substitutes we start to go down the wrong track and begin to think of the so-called “non-verbal” as second order signs. Further, as we know, silent cinema was never exactly without sound, a condition irrefutably established by important historical work on silent film musical and sound accompaniment (see Abel and Altman; Altman).⁴ The

² See Buckley, special issue of *Modern Drama* on melodrama; for the theoretical foundations upon which some new media theory builds, as well as some of the first elaborated application of Gilles Deleuze to the question of affect see Massumi (ch. 1). I would argue that all of these developments have been slower to take hold than one might think and although they may be perceived as the vanguard in critical theory and women’s studies circles they have yet to change the humanities mainstream where it most counts—in departments of literature. As for the “affective turn,” the literature is growing as evidenced in overviews as well as collections: see Hemmings; Clough; Koivunen; Leys; Frank and Wilson.

³ The reference is to the fact that chapter titled “The Autonomy of Affect” first appeared as an article by the same name in *Cultural Critique* in 1995.

⁴ Abel and Altman, urging us to think beyond the cliché that “silent cinema’ was rarely silent,” establish that sound was not only “ubiquitous,” it was “diverse,” changing from year to year and from site to site (xii–xiii).

theoretical work on music as carrier of meaning has been important here as well, establishing sound as a full “enrichment” of the image (Chion 5).⁵ So we might better say that silent cinema was wordless without ever being soundless. With the exception of intertitles and actors’ silent mouthing of words, silent cinema’s on-screen motion photographic *wordless mimesis* of the world carried the burden of expression, standing to the spectator in place of the word portrait of novelistic realism. Of course, the concept of *mimesis* has been historically developed with reference to literary and theatrical forms, but historically it has never functioned as a centerpiece in film theory. Although both Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin could be seen as still impressed by the mimetic capacity that had thrilled early cinema observers, both effectively subsumed *mimesis* within their respective theorizations of “realism.” Ernst Bloch, of all of the theorists aligned with the Frankfurt School, was the only one to weigh in on the power of silent cinema in these terms, praising its “incomparable mimic power” and crediting it with having brought forward an “until then unknown treasure of the clearest gestures.” He wrote about the necessity of a “micrologically developed intonation...not of the word, but of the gesture.” What was his inspiration when in 1918 he began to conceive of the work that would become *The Principle of Hope*? On screen at that time in Germany one could see everywhere Bloch’s inspiration, Asta Nielsen, who “with a flicker of the eyelid, a raising of the shoulder, possessed the art of expressing more than a hundred mediocre poets put together . . .” (Bloch 405–407). In retrospect, one wonders if, in the 1970s—film theory had started here, just with the legacy of pantomime—it could have averted the long detour through the analogy with language, a theory that, while protesting that it was only a structure that was being borrowed, secretly esteemed the essence of spoken and written language—the word.

Not only was *mimesis* never really central to film theory, but 1970s film theory in particular eschewed the concept of *mimesis* altogether. Thus it is that until relatively recently *mimesis* has not been part of the critical vocabulary of film theory (see however, Gaudreault).⁶ Yet *mimesis* is still the only concept that circumvents the thorny concept of “realism” and allows us to compare the two incommensurable sign systems at issue. I say incommensurable thinking of Foucault’s observation that “It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted with the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what see; what we see never resides in what we say” (9).

Two Mimeticisms

Literary realism and cinematic realism might better be understood as two mimeticisms,

⁵ For another application see Bhaskar (163), who refers in her discussion of song in 1940s and 1950s Bombay film melodrama as the “language of the ineffable.”

⁶ Gaudreault is especially useful as he explains that for Plato *mimesis* was not opposed to *diegesis* as it was more recently in Gérard Genette whose distinction between imitation and narration (*diegesis*) set the terms for 1970 film theory (8). Also see the “Mimesis Now” conference held April 5–7, 2012, at the University of Rochester.



Asta Nielsen

ASTA: NIELSEN

K. 1311

Photochemie, Berlin.

A handsigned publicity postcard of Asta Nielsen. Photochemie, Berlin.

one difficult, the other apparently easy.⁷ Christian Metz, thinking of cinema, gave the lie to this ease: “An easy art, the cinema is in constant danger of falling victim to its easiness. It is so easy to create an effect when one has available the natural expression of things, of beings, of the world! Too easy. The cinema is also a difficult art: for, Sisyphus-like, it is trapped under the burden of its facility” (77). Think here of the moving image as having not only the representational inadequacy or noncorrespondence difficulty, in that it works by rough metaphoric symbolics, but it has

the opposite problem—photographic excess. To be more precise, it is plagued by what Tom Gunning once called the “excess of mimesis over meaning” of the photographic image (17). Everything before the camera, as Metz once said, is “trapped in the frame.” Do we need to make a case that this “everything” is a problem? For one thing, as a consequence of this extra expressivity, in the analysis of cinema, more theoretical work is required, extra theoretical steps, really, because there are more kinds of signs—the iconic and the indexical at least, not to mention the combination of the two kinds of signs exemplified by the photographic, plus the motion photographic, not to forget, in the later sound cinema, the acoustic sign. What then is the antidote to the false obviousness of these signs, or, as Metz has it, the apparent “ease” of the cinematic expression?

Still, while grasping literary mimesis, as we know, requires language-learning and word knowledge, apprehending cinematic mimesis requires no such knowledge, or, as it has been said, requires no more than cultural knowledge, the knowledge of lived experience. This is the knowledge that elites have often considered *no knowledge at all*. And yet there is a notable exception to this. Critical theory has afforded wordless expression a small opening, seen, for example, in deconstruction’s appreciation of the pre-linguistic (Derrida).⁸ Yet, as we know, the pockets of resistance to deconstruction in the humanities disciplines runs deep. It remains to be seen whether the “affective turn,” as it is called, will open up a wider comparison of the carriers of affect, as I earlier said. This is because experiential knowing, the facility requiring feeling, intuiting, and reacting (without translation into words) is still held in such relatively low esteem among the literati. And in this regard, let us be more skeptical of the oxymoronic concept of “visual literacy” and even that other concept that has done so much to help the field of cinema studies toward respectability—textual “reading.” Think further of the numerous ways in which “reading” words that attempt to describe a scenario on a page is totally unlike the experience of watching pantomimic action or enactment on screen, not to mention viewing the scenic pan over landscape or seascape. Why is “viewing” thought to be a less serious pursuit than “reading”?

This question of the hierarchy of sign-systems in which the word is esteemed over the mimetic gesture is most dramatically illustrated in melodrama theory, as I promised to

⁷ See Scarry (5) for one of the few literary discussions of the paucity of expressive signs in literary representation, in which she says that “verbal art, especially narrative, is almost bereft of sensuous content.” The only visual features offered readers, she admits, are “monotonous small black marks on a white page.”

⁸ See especially Derrida’s discussion of Rousseau (203–209, 232–242).

show, and here my example of bias toward word culture and its more “literate” expressivity may surprise some as it comes from the “Text of Muteness” chapter in Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination* (56-80), so influential in the study of cinema. Some may wonder at the objection because this chapter has for so long stood as a crucial academic validation for silent film melodrama studies.⁹ Many scholars have taken Brooks’s chapter as a theoretical core, and it is indeed because of its seminal status and, as a consequence, repeated use, that I came to notice a crucial term that slipped into this chapter, a verb used again and again to explain what it is that, in Brooks’s terms, “mute” signs convey. Note that it is not the adjective “mute” to which I raise objections, although we should recall that in Brooks “muteness” appears as a speech deficit, even a disability in the way it reference inability to command articulate expression.¹⁰ It is not the central concept of “muteness” but rather instead a less important term, one that easily escapes notice. My interest is instead in Brooks’s use of the word “recourse,” a term he uses no less than eight times in a twenty-four page chapter. What is the problem with the word “recourse” which is in English a rather colorless, unassuming noun? The problem is indeed with its commonness. For Brooks has rather uncritically dropped in a common sense idea, the idea that when words “cannot be found” we *fall back* on “nonverbal” means of expression. Thus, for instance, we find in “The Text of Muteness” chapter the following: “*recourse* to non-verbal means” (56); “*recourse* to tableau” (61); “constant *recourse* to silent gesture” (62); “*recourse* to gesturality” and “*recourse* to muteness” (64); “*recourse* to the immediacy of expression” (66), and “The habitual *recourse* of Romantic drama and melodrama to the gestural trope of the inarticulate....” Finally, however, he offers what might seem to be a rehabilitation of gesture: “*Recourse* to mute gesture is a necessary strategy in any expressionistic aesthetics” (79). But the damage is done. If embodied signs are those that novelistic characters use as a fall back, they are second order, inferior signs. *Wordless mimesis* is the expression of last resort, the antithesis of erudite and cultivated speech. Now we should note that Brooks could have used “recourse” in the more established sense, that of the source of help or strength, a refuge of sorts. But instead of a helpmate, the expressive gesturality or, as it might be called, “bodily emotivity,” becomes a prop for the preferred word-language. Meaningful language is thus here opposed *not even to* an alternative “language” of a gestural code but to the inchoate and consequently incomprehensible. What stands revealed here is the real apprehension in the cultural attitude towards wordless expression—the fear that it would dissolve into an incoherent meaninglessness.

Now this worry about incoherence has a corollary which while it appears to give the day to the pantomimic (still the fall back mode of expression), may only be giving *wordless mimesis* a back-handed compliment as it were. The reader will recognize this corollary immediately because it has such broad circulation in the wider population as well as in the critical literature of melodrama. Think of the many times we ourselves may have conceded to the idea that

⁹ The introduction of Brooks can be traced from Gledhill’s Introduction (5–39).

¹⁰ See for an interesting theorization of cinema as deficient or as having disabilities Abigail Salerno’s dissertation, “The Blind Heroine.”

“words cannot express.” If words “cannot,” it may not, however, be because there are some conditions, some states of heart and mind that will always elude words. Words may be thought to fail because the right ones could not be found or that they were tried and they failed to adequately convey meaning. Then, as we might suspect, “words cannot express” may be just another way of dismissing feelings. Therefore, “words cannot express” is not necessarily an endorsement of an alternative mode of expression, of wordless mimesis as potentially fuller and more nuanced.

“Words Cannot Express”

To be fair, the inability of words to express what we mean can be explored in more than one direction. In film theory alone, this idea has been deployed in at least two ways, if not more, so here we might separate the “pure cinema” no-word advocates like film critics Bela Balász, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, and Louis Delluc from ambivalent literary critics exemplified here by Peter Brooks.¹¹ The “pure cinema” theorists could be found to disdain the word. Yet all of these critics require much closer scrutiny because it may be that in each can be found traces of the phantom word, rather like the phantom limb. Metz strikes at both systems, not quite willing to elevate the wordless yet blaming the verbal structure for the very inarticulateness of wordless expression in silent cinema, saying, for instance, that “old verbal structures, although officially absent from film, were nonetheless a haunting presence” (Metz 50). So, too, the “pure cinema” theorists are revealed as conflicted and ambivalent. Jean Epstein, for instance, writes in explicating Sessue Hayakawa’s *The Honor of His House* (1918), “What sadness can be found in rain!” and sees Hayakawa’s stiff back as like a face, with shoulders that “refuse, reject, renounce.” But then Epstein goes on to say that, “The words are lacking. The words have not been found,” as though to say that words “could” but have although they have not, as yet, risen to the task (243). Perhaps *photogénie* in its very undefinability is sitting on the fence between word and wordless gesture (see Wall-Romana 53-54). It could be that Germaine Dulac, of all the “pure cinema” advocates, in her dedication to abstraction, had divorced herself the most thoroughly from the word. Certainly she chastens artists who considered “the art of written thoughts and feelings” to be “adequate forms” of expression before, as she says, they were surprised by a cinema for which they were perceptually quite unprepared (Dulac 390). And it even seems that Dulac advocates the wordless mimesis of, above all, the first screen train entering the station, especially as it exemplifies the way “pure movement” created emotion (391). Then, there is this interesting passage in which she suggests that there is a social class-based receptivity or non-

¹¹ On the animosity toward words on the part of early film theorists see Christian Metz, for instance, who singles out the “pure cinema” critics Bela Balász, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, and Louis Delluc for their exemplary “contempt for the word” (49).

receptivity to non-representational signs of emotion: “The intellectual elite, like the masses, obviously lacked some psychological capacity indispensable for any correct assessment that would have enabled them to consider movement from another angle: namely, that a shifting of lines can arouse one’s feelings” (Dulac 390). Finally, we wonder if Balász’s language of microphysiognomy, instituted in lieu of words but in what we might call “word’s terms,” is not an appreciation of wordless mimesis. Or does microphysiognomy lay the foundation for the very analogy between cinema and language which the field so stubbornly forced for so many decades?¹² Consider that before his explication of two especially moving scenes featuring silent actors Asta Nielsen and (again, of course), Hayakawa, Balász explains of early film close-ups that “more can sometimes be read in a face than is written on it” (*Bela Balász: Early Film Theory* 103). Perhaps we can finally say that the cinema-as-language analogy, in borrowing the established prestige of the word, postponed the critical acceptance of *wordless mimesis*.

Inarticulate Expression

What, then, has neither ontological standing nor literary pretension? What comes out of the actor’s mouth, issuing from deep in the body? The sigh, the gasp, the moan, and the shriek. Here is the wordlessness that the language analogy cannot necessarily rescue. Thus Metz, dedicated as he is to the language analogy cannot find a way to accommodate silent film expressivity: “Thus there came into being a kind of silent gibberish, simultaneously overexcited and petrified, an exuberant gabbling whose every gesture, every bit of mimicry, stood with scrupulous and clumsy literalness for a linguistic unit, almost always a sentence whose absence, which would not otherwise have been catastrophic, became abundantly obvious when the gesticulated imitation so clearly emphasized it” (Metz 50).

Our last hope is Lillian Gish who, in an unpublished essay, “Speech Without Words,” places great value in the actor’s contribution to emotional articulation.¹³ Looking back, Gish writes that “The main concern of actors in the silent films was simply how to be articulate without words.” Apparently Gish did not believe that she was striving to be articulate with gestural signs that she thought of as themselves “inarticulate.” However, it is also clear from Gish that she did not mean to portray silent acting as at all wordlessness since she tells us that the silent actor depended upon words, certainly in the technique of “mouthing” (see Raynauld 70). As she describes the silent mouthing upon which silent actors relied as a technique, it was a constant stream, and during rehearsals actors “talked constantly, saying anything that

¹² “In the sound film the part played by this ‘microphysiognomy’ has greatly diminished because it is now apparently possible to express in words much of what facial expression apparently showed. But it is never the same—many profound emotional experiences can never be expressed in words at all” (Balász, *Theory of the Film* 65).

¹³ I want to credit my former student Annie Berke with discovering the typescript of this essay in the Gish Papers recently deposited at the Center for the Performing Arts of the New York Public Library.



A photo portrait of Lillian Gish. Photographer: Hartsook, c. 1915.
(Public Domain. Wikimedia Commons).

fitted the action.” Since director D.W. Griffith’s secretary took down the actors’ words, their improvised dialogue was often used both as a guide for the editor in assembling the film and as the basis of the intertitles written later. Thus it could be said that written intertitles could translate words in the form of vocalization, like the silent mouthing of words, could come to the rescue of the inarticulate cry. Since silent mouthing is here shown to be predicated on words what Gish describes is not exactly total wordlessness but something more like another case of word “ghosting.”

But Asta Nielsen, it should be recalled, objected that there were too many words in the American silent photoplay. Her position was that the practice of filling the screen with words did not leave enough to either the skilled actress or to the active audience (Engeberg 18). How appropriate, then, that Heide Schlüpmann, Nielsen’s most insightful analyst, writes in the afterward to the English translation of *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early German Cinema* that what is now required after the feminist strategies for analyzing “the gaze” in cinema is instead “an attention to all those instances in films that reveal the involuntary and graspable by means of light, color, movement. Early narrative film, with its rarely logically coherent narrative, determined more by lucky chance than by systematic planning, has made this especially evident” (220).

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