The Filmed Word: Between Determinative Power, Ambiguity, and Pictorial Modus

The fact that the cinematographic is generally conceived as language has less to do with its inventors than with those activists who time and again seek to combine the moving image with written or phonetic presentation formats. Pioneers of narrative film, such as David Wark Griffith, were highly interested in the autonomous visual form of cinema. For even if Griffith expressly clung to the integration of verbal intertitles while optimising his scenes, his artistic interest was in fact primarily directed towards specific camera and editing methods: switching between settings captured close-up and from a distance, or the parallel montage of diffluent storylines. On the other hand, Griffith, who had originally harboured the ambition to become an author, shared a particular concern of the film industry, which was at the time just becoming established in the first decade of the twentieth century. He wanted to move the screening of films away from the demotic milieu of variety shows and fairs, and into the spheres of cultural-bourgeois cinema. In this respect, the director considered it essential to pursue an orientation to the dramaturgy of classic fiction, though it was quite obvious that the comprehensive plot of a novel could hardly be staged in full using camera technology, and that the narrative film should therefore take a pragmatic approach by alluding to a portion of the plot through written subtitles: “Instead of showing a man walking all the way home we found that the action was speeded up and the story made more compact by saying that the man went home.”[1] According to Griffith, such an economical approach to the narrative was not only meant to preserve the refinement and value of the scenically rendered elements, but also to ensure that the filmic narrative maintained the appropriate pace.

The avant-garde film artists of the 1920s expressed almost equal appreciation for recourse taken to the written word. Although they vehemently opposed any kind of literary style in film-making, this in no way precluded the integration of words and sentences. The surrealist, film critic, and actor Robert Desnos considered letters to be just as suited to filmic projection as the human face.[2] The director Jean Epstein considered it “absolutely depressing”[3] to watch a film without (sub)titles, for he considered them to be like punctuation from a perceptual perspective. Epstein encountered the contemporary demand for films without panels with much scepticism, comparing it to reading a Mallarmé poem without inter-

punctuation. In contrast to Griffith's practice, where the intertitles served to sparingly support a coherently narrated universe (diegesis), artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Fernand Léger inserted idiosyncratic statements into the flow of theatrical or figured scenes. Here, the written word, for its part, became a moving image, for instance when it scrolled horizontally across the screen as illuminated characters as part of a nocturnal Parisian scene in Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926), or when poetically enigmatic plays on words, typeset in spiral form, rotate in front of the camera like in *Anémic Cinéma* (1924/26) by Marcel Duchamp. Here, both the visual design and the cryptically caricaturing semantics of the writing are subverted by an imagination addressed through abstract, graphic Rotoreliefs. Nonetheless, the films differ in terms of their alternating use of writing and moving graphics, their respectively specific functions of speaking or showing. The circularly moving word games like "L'enfant qui tète est un souffleur de chair chaude et n'aime pas le chou-fleur de serre-chaude" (The nursing infant is a lover of hot flesh and doesn't like hot-house cauliflowers) speak to a clearly different—deciphering—point of view than that of the Rotoreliefs, which challenge the mode of visual perception.

In the post-war avant-gardes, on the other hand, film-makers pursued a highly visible distinction between perceptual modi; this especially applied to those who, next to their cinematographic work, were as equally engaging in the craft of linguistic poetry. In *Le corbeau et le renard* (The Raven and the Fox, 1967/72), for example, the Belgian artist, poet, and film-maker Marcel Broodthaers combined the meaning and objectness of words in such a varied way that their readability and visibility subtly meshed. The written word sometimes appeared sharply focused as handwritten labelling or as a filmed printed work, other times advertently unfocused or fragmented. Intertitles which feature nothing more than the French article "Le" made reference—in a grammatically incongruous way—to the respective objects shown subsequently: a boot, Fr. la botte, and a bottle, Fr. la bouteille. On the other hand, the "Le" fittingly although virtually, references the film's main protagonists—the raven (le corbeau) and the fox (le renard)—which, however, are not visible in the film. Inscribed rolls of paper, dialogue balloons, and bottle labels show the words by simultaneously constituting them. Conversely, words are found to be concealed, distorted, or contextualised by objects like glasses, flowers, or a hammer. From afar, this reminds of metaphorical associations—"words like flowers" (Hölderlin) – as well as of the metonymic function between linguistic utterances and a telephone apparatus. Common to all words and things is the respective status of their state of presentation, their reciprocal positioning, and their misappropriation deviating from conventional use.

Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*

An affinity to linguistic and conceptual poetry is also found in the filmic work of the American artist Hollis Frampton. Influenced by fellow students and artists like the sculptor Carl André and the painter and object artist Frank Stella, as well as the enigmatic personality of the poet Ezra Pound, Frampton worked as an author, photographer, and also as a film-maker. He continually sought to place the motifs from his surroundings in new contextual structures. Tension especially arose when he combined reflection of filmic or mediatic apparativity with personal experiences or site-specificity. A striking example of this is the film *Zorns Lemma*, released in 1970.

In terms of writing, Frampton subtly takes recourse to the structure of the alphabet in the film. With the screen initially dark, a female voice from the off recites a verse from the "Alphabet Poem" using intonation familiar from school lessons, the part that was meant to help English and American children learn their letters in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Each verse emphasises a certain letter: the first focuses on the letter A, "In Adam's Fall we sinned all", the second on the letter B, "Thy life to mend, God's Book attend", and so forth. Following the recitation of the poem is the main segment of *Zorns Lemma* with approx. ninety sequences, each featuring twenty-four alphabetically arranged picture settings. The number twenty-four results from the alphabet customarily having twenty-six characters, of which the I and the J, as well as the U and the V are consolidated here to assert a common position. According to the film critic Scott MacDonald, this structure (here abbreviated to twenty-four letters) is meant to reference the standardised film speed of twenty-four images per second, which is indicative of a basic pairing of two different material structures, before *Zorns Lemma* starts integrating further material structures. While in the beginning only the simple bodies of the letters—A, B, C, etc.—are visible in the fixed settings, wobbling slightly in succession,

the film soon starts showing full words. These are words as shown along the streets of Manhattan on buildings, on advertising signs, above stores, in shop windows, filmed from varying perspectives—words featuring shifting letter typographies, different colours and graphic designs, each running for about a second. Every initial letter signifies anew the progression of the alphabet. After numerous such word-image sequences, the film once again changes its semantic approach, with a scene showing a specific event or a specific plot now taking the place of a previously shown letter (e.g., in place of X), first in one place and soon followed—in irregular order—by more and more positions. For example, replacing the X is the scene of a fire every time, replacing the F is a tree, et cetera … until, ultimately, all of the letters have been substituted by specific scenes, which are, however, not narratively connected, be it the moving image of a basic natural phenomenon or scenic activities like changing a tyre or painting an interior.

Similar to Broodthaers, Frampton juxtaposes linguistically or, more precisely said, alphabetically structured reading material with the mode of observation. Emphasised here is the linear alignment of both the written and visual material. The beholders/readers are challenged to actively count and identify, which associates activities like reading, counting, observing, and scrutinising or reading, counting, and listening, or observing, listening, and seeking. Such activities reference the status of subjects within society, or the status of players who are distinguished by their capacity for multidimensional perception and expressiveness—multidimensional in a spatial sense, but also in a temporal or a social sense. Such multidimensional perception—experience, memory, and reciprocal agency—generates knowledge. Both knowledge about the world and knowledge about oneself in this world.

Having a Say and a Vision

In fact, linguistic experts and those with expertise in visual/pictorial matters struggle to attain supremacy in their respective practice. Considering the generation of (analytical) knowledge, theorists such as Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze ascribe primacy to "Bestimmungs*kraft*" (determinative power) of the speakable/predictable over the "Bestimm*barkeit*" (determinability) of the visible, of what is radiated by light. Deleuze shares Foucault's stance that

the speakable engages in a mode of active determination, and that of the visible in a mode of passivity.[4] Titling his historico-philosophical study on human sciences *Les mots et les choses,* Foucault also wanted to express an ironic note on that semantic hierarchy. But as aptly confirmed by his desire to title the English translation of the same book *The Order of Things* instead of "The Words and the Things", this change still reinforces Foucault's position to priorise the words or, more precisely, the expressions—which, through discourse, become actualised, refined, and are always newly functionalising—to lend order to the (visible) things.[5]

For artists and film-makers working in the visual arts, as opposed to individuals working in scientific contexts, the visible and showable form the centre of their work. Both art history and film history strongly involve fluctuating strategies that reflect on phenomena that elude reality. There is a whole host of such strategies, including the multifarious creative drive of artists to lend form to these phenomena, methods of making the invisible visible, of preserving the visible, and of demonstrating the structures and functions of visibility, and also strategies for correlating the visual with other sensory forms, for instance linguistic or readable ones. This shift in strategy imbues the asymmetrical juxtaposition of "actively" speakable and "passively" visible with new vehemence, not least in view of the traditionally hierarchically conceived distribution of active artists, directors, film directors, and authors on the one hand, and spoon-fed viewers, readers, and participators on the other. Or, to put it more succinctly, between those who supposedly have a say and those who have a vision/gaze.

Coupling of Speaking and Showing

On this issue, the film *Remedial Reading Comprehension* by George Landow from 1970 proves illuminating.[6] Here, the artist, who was involved with structural film at the time, sheds light on the perceptual approach taken by reading with regard to several special cinematographic functions. For Landow, it was not only the written word that attained an ironically informative and media-reflexive character when, repeatedly, lettered graphics superimposed upon self-portraits of the film director explain to the viewer: "This is a film about you . . . not about its maker." Furthermore, the film prompts the viewers to read more quickly when a stroboscopically mounted

picture of text shifts its only phrases (“relation of teacher”, “to pupil is an emo”, “an emotional one and”, “one and most com-”, etc.) from blurriness into focus in quick succession, as if reading from left to right and from top to bottom. Whilst such a technoid performance of a quick reading test is linked to such ironically enlightened media reflexivity, to scenes featuring the waiting public filmed from the canvas perspective, and to the portrait of a sleeping woman, *Remedial Reading Comprehension* delivers a multilayered, sometimes excessive, sometimes prurient parody on the genre of educational film. A parody that thwarts any kind of functional order existing between the sensuousness of speech and vision. Seemingly transient and fragmentary, the individual words and textual phrases not only probe the margins of readability, while nonetheless revealing their meaning; the acceleration of the focus directed from left to right and from top to bottom has the effect of deconcentrating the interpretive gaze as such, be it in the sense of dispersal or stagnancy, or be it through an attempt to bypass the mode of decipherment to arrive at that of association or to jump from the verbal production of meaning to contemplation of the filmic form.

While Landow loosely integrates such perceptual shifting into the fabric of educational film parody and media reflexivity, John Smith condenses the commitment between verbal semiotic carriers and visual surfaces to a stringent form. In this respect, his film *Associations* (1975) also builds on a didactic structure. The film starts with a description of the so-called “free association game” delivered by Smith himself, which provides a continual soundtrack throughout. Elucidated here is the game where the individual players are required to make spontaneous associations with the stimulant words called out to them. Smith’s film becomes interesting when, after a short dark phase, image sequences light up one by one. This entices the viewer to try to discern a rule for such flashes—namely, the fact that each integrated image, whether showing people or objects, evokes a term that sounds similar to the simultaneously audible spoken word (or one of its syllables). Another attraction lies in trying to determine the type of respective adherence to the rules, that is, the possible reinterpretation of the heard wording or syllables based on the picture shown at the same time. For example, the word “category” is heard and a ‘cat’ is shown, or the word “association” is heard and the word “Asian” alluded to by showing a portrait of ‘three Asian women’.

It is in such a way that *Associations* utilises the synaesthetic tension between linguistic-phonetic and representational-visual modes of expression in order to closely interlace the modi of reading and seeing. One would be remiss to grasp the visual-representational aspect as an illustration of the words spoken. Repeatedly invoked as ciphers for specific phonetic images, the depicted objects and people moreover attain the status of an arbitrary codification, one that is otherwise only evident in connection with lettering or lexical signs. In addition, beyond any content-related analogies to the spoken words, the material shown harbours an irreducible potential for associative connotations.

As Deleuze asserts in allusion to Foucault, such an irreducible space of interpretation is solely aligned to the visible, not to the speakable. While, as noted above, this is apparent in the ability to determine the visible, the latter in particular is conversely imbued with the virtue of remaining fundamentally indeterminate and thus repeatedly determinable by new elements. Citing Stephanie Barber’s *Tatum’s Ghost* (2011), which features the re-editing of an episode of the US crime series *Unsolved Mystery*, allows us to discuss the extent to which the speakable attains gradual indeterminacy in the framework of a film. In this crime thriller episode selected for repurposing here, which features a ghost-seeing married couple, Barber likewise utilises the synaesthetic tension of vision and hearing, though invariably in connection with word-based articulation. To this end, the artist uses collage to overlay, onto the image scenes that she has clipped, commentary interactively posted by online viewers about the episode. The interplay thus engendered between the narrative spoken from the off and the retrospectively added viewer comments give rise to a dispersive semantic space. Spoken and written planes run—in parallel to the visual scenes—heterogeneously side by side. Individual correlations between the words (e.g., between the name of the film’s protagonist, Tate, and of the dog mentioned in the commentary, Tatum), between pauses in speech and sections of writing, or between the respective narrative perspectives engage only very briefly—just as briefly as the moments of suspicion with which the crime show addresses the viewers, on the one hand, and the viewer comments posted within the Internet community, on the other. Moreover, the retrospectively added texts run swiftly across the also moving visual scenes as dense, broad

scrolling titles, which lends pictoriality to the written words and makes it difficult to focus on and decipher them (in parallel to the spoken words). Both planes reciprocally impact each other, just as each plane is respectively influenced by the dynamic interplay of the staging. Not only do the visuals shown here lend themselves to verbal interpretation; the visually staged writing or the film's voiceover likewise offsets their respective determinative power in favour of poetic indetermination.

In this way, film directors or artists activate the cinematographic, incorporating letters and the spoken or written word in multifarious ways. The techniques and dramaturgies developed in the process certainly provide a blueprint for the general history of cinema, including: the custom of showing credits before and after the film; the announcement of the film as a monographic work; the introduction of those involved in its making; the implementation of graphic fonts to further economical narrative style; the use of sound film for lip-synchronised dialogue; and dialectical word interventions in the continuity of the moving image. On the other hand, such a cinematographic turn/use has, in turn, contributed to the activation of the linguistic realm inasmuch as it has obviously loosened the function of determinative power as principally conceded to the word. In precisely that moment in film where the word appears as an element next to other optical, dynamic, spatial- or temporal-based modes of expression—with its dual nature of writing and sound thus being trenchantly asserted—that cinema allows the speakable, in consideration of its potentialities, to also function as indeterminate, as image or space of ambivalence.

1 David Wark Griffith, "Commentary", in Harry M. Geduld, *Focus on D. W. Griffith* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 65.

2 See P. Adam Sitney, "Image and Title in Avant-Garde Cinema", *October*, 11 (1979), p. 102.

3 See Jean Epstein, "Pour une avant-garde nouvelle", in *Écrits sur le cinéma*, vol. 1 (Paris: Seghers, 1974), p. 148.

4 Gilles Deleuze, "Topology: 'Thinking Otherwise'", in *Foucault* (London and New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 39–101.

5 See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 88ff.

6 George Landow (1944–2011) later changed his name to Owen Land, see this publication, p. 53.