

Cinema's Autonomous Image in Michelangelo Antonioni and Francis Ford Coppola

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1. Can a Film Display Time?

Time is a basic material property of cinema. As Babette Mangolte suggests, time maps movement in the projector and on the screen. It inscribes flow through editing—images in time-code.¹ This uniquely cinematic temporality is the root of the common argument against cinema as historical truth. How can history be represented in a compression of *time*?² Bazin's celebration of the realist image was intimately connected to time's 'presence' within cinema. Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* build a theory of the presence of time within the moving image, which takes Bergson's several theses about time and movement and puts them against, and within, the image of cinema. In fact, I would argue that Deleuze's conceptual movement—which Elsaesser and Hagener call 'the single most important resource in film theory in the last two decades'³—is toward time as the object of cinematic experience:

The movement-image has not disappeared, but now exists only as the *first dimension* [my emphasis] of an image that

¹ Babette Mangolte, 'Afterward: A Matter of Time,' in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 262.

² For an overview of the discourse of cinema as perverse historical representation, see Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty,' *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988), 1193-1199. See also Robert Rosenstone, 'History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting onto Film,' *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988), 1173-1185.

³ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 157.

never stops growing in dimensions... While the movement-image and its sensory-motor signs were in a relationship only with an indirect image *of* time (dependent on montage), the pure optical and sound image, its opsigns and sonsigns, are directly connected to a time-image which has subordinated movement. It is this reversal which means that time is no longer the measure of movement but movement is the perspective of time: it constitutes a whole cinema of time.⁴

Time, suggests Deleuze, is the manifestation of the potentiality of cinema. The cinema of the time-image is thus a cinema of maturity, complexity and aesthetic sophistication. This is a cinema filled with philosophical possibilities. We must contemplate the image of time to comprehend (though this is not exclusively an intellectual, nor strictly affective process) the cinema of Kubrick, or Antonioni—a filmmaker Deleuze accords special status in the promulgation of the image of time.⁵ The crisis in the image of movement manifests as a restlessness, or tension, within the movement-image itself. There is still montage (how could cinema function without splitting time into discrete sections?), but now the flow of time across these sections is restless, or unsettled. In Antonioni, time materializes as a strange, unrecognizable thing, and we are shocked to discover our aversion to its effect. The image of time is initially unrecognizable; it registers as a change in the order of things, an intervention into narrative progression. But Deleuze, working through Antonioni, takes this much further. The image of time is not merely a breach of narrative—such a breach would construe narrative as the natural cinematic form. Instead, it is the rendition of an entirely separate register of the image. Gradually, in Antonioni, the spectator perceives the *material* presence of the image of time. We might say that such an image acquires autonomy from the narrative itinerary of cinema, exhibiting the image as an aesthetic object. One such moment is striking in Antonioni's cinema, demonstrating the crisis in action, and the subtle, incremental, separation of movement from time.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 22.

⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 23-24: 'Antonioni's art is like the intertwining of consequences, of temporal sequences and effects which flow from events out-of-field.'

In the penultimate narrative segment of *Blow Up* (1966), the photographer searches for the body he has apparently photographed. While he has previously seen the body once, only the night before, he now desires to photograph it—the photograph takes on the substance of reality and reality the ephemeral substance of an image. This inversion of a basic ontological relationship between reality and its image is a philosophical notion at the core of several of Antonioni's films.⁶ At 1:43:50,⁷ the photographer approaches the tree in the park, camera in hand. Antonioni shoots the entire sequence to the apparently diegetic sound of the wind in the trees—precisely whether this sound is diegetic or non-diegetic is unclear. Shots in depth and duration provide an odd sense of the immensity of the space; for Antonioni, the park is ontologically separate from the space of the city. As the photographer comes into shot, standing in the space in which he had previously seen the body (the body is now absent), the image cuts to a tighter shot on the photographer, and shifts slowly in through a perceptible zoom. His exhaustion, the outcome of the confrontation with his own insubstantiality, is palpable.

The intensity of the shot is captured in this gradual movement toward the photographer. The diegetic sound of the wind is brought up to immerse the photographer within the space. At this moment in the film, the park is a hermetically sealed space, an ontological insularity. It is thus fitting that Antonioni will render here a concrete image of time, requiring the spectator to contemplate time as an independent variable in cinema.⁸ In *Blow Up*, Antonioni will subtly disturb the mechanism of shot reverse-shot (that treasured tool of cinematic continuity) to 'intervene' in the narrative flow of time. At 1:44:20, the image cuts to an overhead shot of the photographer crouched on the ground [**figure 1**]. The sound of the trees increases in volume, as if in crescendo to this movement, and the photographer raises his head to the sky [**figure 2**]. What is he listening to? What has he heard? The image holds momentarily, then cuts to the standard point of view shot of the trees that are indeed swaying in the wind [**figure 3**]. This is a simple point of view shot relation, establishing

⁶ While *Blow Up* is obviously the most explicit meditation on the subject, the ontological threat to the object manifests in subtle and not so subtle ways in *L'Avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960), *La Notte* (1961), *Zabriske Point* (1970) and *The Passenger* (1975).

⁷ Time code references are to *Blow Up* (DVD), Warner Home Video, 2004.

⁸ David Rodowick, 'An Elegy for Theory,' *October* 122 (Fall, 2007), 105.

the photographer's gaze. While the photographer's eye-line does not move across the line of the camera (the standard camera move contriving point of view), the spectator is aware of her subject-identification with the photographer through the turn of the head, the eyes focused upward, and the cut to the shot of the trees. It is precisely here, within the concrete continuities of shot reverse-shot mechanics, that Antonioni installs a subtle optical image that grants a 'perspective of time.'⁹ 'Perspective' is entirely appropriate; the image is a new perspective, configured temporally rather than spatially.



Figure 1

⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 22.



Figure 2



Figure 3

The (photographer's) point of view shot holds for several seconds. The spectator must anticipate the reverse shot—a return to the photographer—that will complete the itinerary of the shot reverse-shot. But this image of the photographer no longer exists. The camera that holds on the trees (holding also the photographer's point of view) gradually pans across the sky, and down, to reveal the figure of the photographer, now standing rather than crouched, now some distance from where he had once been [figures 4-5].



Figure 4



Figure 5

First, the spectator must account for this *movement*. How, and when, did it occur? Where did it originate? How was it *effected*? This is a question of a movement in space. But clearly, this movement was not 'recorded' by, or manifested in, some duration of time. In fact, that chain of progression, narrative flow, the very substance of movement, has been erased through a cut. What stands in for narration is a disturbance of movement, a manifestation of the inability of the protagonist to *act*, to

effect change on the body and its surroundings. The image finally cuts to a long shot of the entrance/exit to the park [figure 6].



Figure 6

Clearly here the photographer contemplates this spatial/temporal disturbance. And this disturbance is related directly to the conflation of time segments; the photographer is dislocated in space, but equally, in time. 'The direct time-image,' Deleuze writes, 'always gives us access to that Proustian dimension where people and things occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space.'¹⁰ Is it outlandish to suggest that the photographer, an inhabitant of a *cinematic image*, is bewildered by a movement dislocated from narrative, from the ordered flow of time?

The image of time not only makes sense in this sequence in *Blow Up*, but I would argue that it is critical to a consideration of a modernist cinema (initially European but increasingly visible in American production) that manifests a disturbance in narrative progression. Is there any shot more radical in the New American Cinema¹¹ than the projection

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 39.

¹¹ The New American Cinema conventionally refers to a period of aesthetic and industrial transformation within the American film industry. See David Thomson, 'The Decade When Movies Mattered,' in The Last Great American Picture Show:

of the death of Wyatt and Billy (*Easy Rider*, 1969) in a fleeting, almost subliminal image, tearing a classical temporality into so many freely associating parts? Wyatt contemplates the image of his own death, an event that will take place only in the final sequence of the film, in effect collapsing a classical deterministic relation between cause and effect, present and future [figures 7-8]. Similarly in *Blow Up*, Antonioni's cut is a lacuna, but the space 'between shots' is the segment of time that is now autonomous, that has its own form within the film, and that affects the protagonist and spectator not as action and movement toward, but precisely away from, spatial and temporal resolution. This movement toward insubstantiality will find its natural completion through the erasure of the photographer from the cinematic diegesis in the final shot of the film.



Figure 7



Figure 8

There is a more complex rendition of time in *The Passenger* (1975). Again Antonioni works against the shot as narrative segment. At 19:43,¹² the image opens on a spinning fan (symbolic of the simultaneity of stasis and movement), holds momentarily, then shifts downward to reveal David Locke (Jack Nicholson) sitting at a table. We hear a knock at the door, followed by Locke's 'come in'; these sounds occur off-screen. A cut then reveals that we are listening to a tape recording [figure 9].

¹² Time code references are to *The Passenger* (DVD), Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.



Figure 9

Here Antonioni employs a similar device to that of the shot reverse-shot break in *Blow Up*, though the independent variable of time is more explicitly indicated in this sequence. The voices continue on the recording as Locke gets up and moves off camera. The camera moves left across the room and out onto the balcony, where it again picks up Locke [figures 10-13].



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

These dual movements—that of the camera and Locke—occur in a single shot, yet the ‘present’ that was constituted by Locke seated at a table listening to a tape recording now encompasses the past. The figure of Locke on the balcony enacts the recorded (past) conversation *in the present*. This is not a flashback. Rather, for Antonioni, the image of the past within the present creates an independent image of time. Antonioni’s image here is particularly ingenious because it moves between image and sound, with the layer of diegetic sound played through the tape recording. As past and present collide forming one whole, so non-diegetic and diegetic film collide. Who speaks in this conversation? Who utters these words? And *when* are these words spoken? For Antonioni, these are not merely breaks in narrative, such as the conventional ellipses, or what Allison Ross describes as ‘narrative discontinuity,’¹³ but, far more radically, *non-narrative* film images.

The fracture of the classical shot reverse-shot in *Blow Up* forms part of the philosophical fabric of Antonioni’s cinema. It provides a visual expression of the photographer’s growing insubstantiality while establishing a conceptual link to the final shot in which diegetic space and time are rendered immaterial. The photographer’s vanishing leaves only a

¹³ Allison Ross, ‘Michelangelo Antonioni: The Aestheticization of Time and Experience in *The Passenger*,’ in *Cinematic Thinking: Philosophical Approaches to the New Cinema*, ed. James Phillips (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2008), 48.

trace of his body (which is no longer part of that space), dislocated from a subordinate itinerary of time. In *The Passenger*, Antonioni's collapse of the present into an independent image of time projects a radical philosophy of time and subjective experience. I thus concur with Ross that such narrative disturbances work within the broader thematic of Locke's search for an identity,¹⁴ and indeed, within the broader thematic of the individual's quest for wholeness in Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960), *La Notte* (*The Night*, 1961), *Blow Up* (1966), *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and *The Passenger* (1975). Antonioni presents an aggressively modern cinema¹⁵ in which the image is possessed of a radical thematic, epistemological and ontological ambiguity.¹⁶

2. Can a Film Display Sound?

Is the notion of cinema as the art of the image just an illusion? Of course: how ultimately, can it be anything else?¹⁷

Francis Ford Coppola's landmark exploration of sound (the sound of the world, and the sound of the cinematic diegesis) in *The Conversation* (1974) remains unsettling for the contemporary spectator. As was so much of the New American Cinema, or indeed the European art cinema, *The Conversation* is a film about the inability to perceive, the inability to record and capture perception, the elemental lack in the experience of the world. Keathley calls this a cinema of 'trauma,'¹⁸ and one might read *The Conversation* alongside other films of trauma—Altman's *Nashville* (1975) and Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) come to mind. Coppola's cinema turned this scepticism of the 1970s, which drew its inspiration

¹⁴ Ross, 48.

¹⁵ For an analysis of the distinction between post-classical cinema and cinema's various classicisms, see Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992), 192-194.

¹⁶ For an influential analysis of the tendency toward ambiguity in European art cinema, see David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,' *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (1979), 56-64.

¹⁷ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁸ Christian Keathley, 'Trapped in the Affection Image: Hollywood's Post-Traumatic Cycle (1970-1976),' in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood in the 1970s*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 293-308.

from various modernist sources¹⁹ (the most obvious being Antonioni's *Blow Up*), back onto cinema's image and its attendant sound. If classical cinema's sound gave a fuller account of the visual image and was thus subordinated to the experience of the visuality,²⁰ cinema's modernity in *The Conversation* revealed the image as a pure sound bite, a spoken line or ambient noise that filtered over and above the itinerary of a narrative progression or visual cue.

In 1974, Coppola's film actualized what had been merely perceived, or felt, by the spectator. Altman had played with synchronicity and convergent tracks (*Mash* [1970]; *The Long Goodbye* [1973]); Scorsese had turned the pop song into an expressive aesthetic register unlike anything seen in the classical studio era.²¹ However, Coppola's radical contribution to what was a developing modernist aesthetic in American mainstream cinema was to turn the image into a *sound object*—to enable the visual image to engage with the equally autonomously functioning register of sound. I wish to illustrate two simultaneously functioning registers in which Coppola's sound image gains autonomy from a visual narrative itinerary: in the capacity of the image to function as reproduced utterance, or *re-iteration*; and in the capacity of non-diegetic sound (a piano score on the soundtrack) to converge with, and indeed, mediate, the diegetic sound of a saxophone in the film.

The lesson of Coppola's film is not that the protagonist's vision is affected by the condition of modernity; the visual image in modernist cinema had been suitably detached from the object, which we see clearly

¹⁹ Here I refer to Coppola's cinema as 'modernist' for its depiction of a fragmented subjectivity, spatial and temporal indeterminism, and a cinematic rendering of stream of consciousness—recognisably modernist concerns that would continue to drive cinematic narrative and style until well into the 1970s. Indeed, this modernist image is perhaps most radical in the opening sequence of Coppola's Conradian *Apocalypse Now* (1979), essentially an incantation of death and madness cut over *The Doors*' 'The End'.

²⁰ For an analysis of this prejudice, see William Johnson, 'Sound and Image: A Further Hearing,' *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1989), 24-35.

²¹ Consider the jump-cut sequence early in *Mean Streets* (1973), clearly a quotation of Godard's precocious New Wave aesthetics, yet animated by an American pop song, The Ronettes's 'Be My Baby' (Phillies Records, 1963). For a useful discussion of the effect of popular music in Scorsese's early cinema, see Ben Nyce, *Scorsese Up Close: A Study of the Films* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 12-13.

in the vanishing body in *Blow Up*. In Coppola, modernity becomes an aural phenomenon, and modernist cinema that infects the American cinema from the French New Wave, or Antonioni's expressive minimalism, is configured as a sound image that freely inhabits, and moves between, diegetic and non-diegetic cinematic space. Classical cinema manifests a soundscape that complements (and augments) the visual-scape. Sound and soundtrack are merely accompaniments in the majority of classical films.²² Even Hitchcock's collaboration with Bernard Hermann produces visual accompaniments; Hermann's score for *Vertigo* (1958) augments the escalation of Scottie's neurosis, inscribed most forcefully through the visual flourish of the 'Vertigo shot'; Mother's jarring knife slashes and Hitchcock's radically expressive montage in the shower scene of *Psycho* (1960) overwhelm any affective claim on the spectator made by Hermann's strings. Hermann's sounds throughout Hitchcock, and even in his last great score for *Taxi Driver* (1976), give further expression to the virtuosity of the image.

But Coppola's distinctly modernist aesthetic, and his contravention of the classical diegetic/non-diegetic split, brings sound to the forefront of the mind of the spectator. The spectator must listen to the audio track of the conversation, picking up its words and sentences, the cadence of the speech between the speakers, the rhythm built through sound that actively integrates with, and configures, the visual image. Sound is played, and replayed, heard and reheard, until it attains an ontological form quite separate from the narrative progression of the story. The remarkable mechanical zoom which opens the film functions only through the equally complex, and densely layered, soundtrack in which sound is disoriented, asynchronous, and muddled, both organic and mechanical. When Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is asked, 'how'd you get it [a recording]?' he is deliberately evasive, wishing to protect his secret and possess the sound in its fixed form. Coppola requires the spectator to actively listen, 'to know that 'the sound of x' allows us to proceed without further interference to explore what the sound is like *in and of itself* [my emphasis].'²³ Coppola's film asks, simply, *what is this sound?* What is the ontological fabric of this conversation? Where is it heard? Through which mechanism is it produced? How does the conversation

²² See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, 'Fundamental Aesthetics of Sound in the Cinema,' in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 181-199.

²³ Chion, 33.

manifest its strange and unsettling presence? This is to ask more than what a sound *signifies*, but to ask what presents within the image beyond meaning, beyond narrative signification.

The Conversation opens on an oft-discussed mechanical zoom, a shot of some duration and complexity. The wide shot begins from a rooftop and gradually moves in to find form through an assortment of characters, the last of which is Harry Caul, the film's protagonist. Each image is destabilized through a confluence of sounds: dialogue, diegetic sounds emanating from Union Square at lunchtime, a jazz saxophone and vocal (presumably of a street performer), a barking dog that briefly enters the frame—and, almost imperceptibly, the interweaving of a conversation between a man and a woman on their lunch break. The initial vocal of the conversation, spoken by the woman, repeats the song lyric of the jazz vocal of the street performer. The conversation rises in volume and establishes coherent rhythm over the random sounds of the square. At 4:48,²⁴ the spoken 'what about me?' brings the conversation to the forefront of the image and reduces the background sound to random, indistinct and ambient noise.

Coppola's conversation occurs initially in the present-time of the film; one might say that in this elaborate zoom shot, the sound of the conversation, the dialogue between the man and woman that culminates in 'He'd kill us if he got the chance,' is ontologically *present*. The spectator engages with the conversation as an event unfolding in time, a sequence comprising several minutes of fragmented dialogue. While the sequence begins as a disorienting image (sound and vision in arbitrary relation), as the zoom shifts closer to the central action of the shot, Coppola brings the sound and visual image of the conversation into closer contact. The conversation gradually becomes distinct, and is isolated from background noise as the spoken words of the two figures are brought up on the soundtrack. Word-sounds are cut over moving lips and matching facial cues. Coppola frames discrete shots of the man and woman (or two-shots) through a shallow focus, emphasizing the centrality of the two figures to the spatial composition. The camera that begins in an impossibly long slow zoom approximating the gaze of a telescopic site (an indeterminate panoptic gaze), increasingly cuts into the action below, visually and aurally situating the two figures, their sounds

²⁴ Time-code references are to *The Conversation* (Widescreen DVD Collection), Paramount Home Video, 2000.

now cut to matching visual images. At the conclusion of the sequence, Caul believes he has acquired a 'nice fat recording,' industry jargon for the capture of the event. For Caul, the conversation is crystalized as an occurrence in time, captured through the technology of sound-surveillance, reproduced on magnetic tape. At 8:57, the sound of a piano enters the frame, a conventional non-diegetic soundtrack in the form of a pleasant, if somewhat melancholy, waltz.

The conversation of the man and woman becomes an autonomous image *only in reproduction*. Performed for the spectator in the present, first captured in a disorienting zoom, and then, incrementally, in the conventions of single and two-shots, the conversation is re-iterated through the technology of sound production. At 16:26, now in his workshop, Caul begins to replay the conversation (his 'fat recording'). This new sound emanates not from the spoken words of the conversation, but from the tape, from the reproduction in Caul's workshop. At 16:12, prior to the emanation of sound from the machine, Coppola cuts to a medium shot, framing Caul, Stan (John Cazale), and the reels of tape that now contain the sound image [figure 14]. The camera pans slowly, deliberately, to a set of large speakers on the wall. The image then cuts to an extreme close-up of Caul's fingers on the switches, knobs and dials—the transmission technology of the recorded conversation [figure 15].



Figure 14



Figure 15

The conversation—an event captured in vision and sound—is past; the recorded version—a *re-iteration*—shifts into the present of the film, effacing the previous utterance. D'escriván is thus correct to suggest that, at the conclusion of the first iteration of the conversation in actual time, the puzzle is solved, 'yet when [Caul] replays a segment...the possibilities for meaning seem infinite.'²⁵ In reproduction, the sound of the conversation is divested of its visual (present) itinerary in Union Square.

This sequence surely recalls the mechanics of reproduction in Antonioni's present and past sound images in *The Passenger* previously discussed; astonishingly the two films were released less than a year apart. When Coppola cuts to the visual of the conversation, cutting from inside Caul's workshop, what does the spectator *perceive*? An image accompanied by sound, or the presence of sound accompanied by a projected image? In the re-iteration of the conversation, what are we watching? What are we listening to? Words lost in the first iteration are now enhanced through Caul's technology. Technology creates a new presence of sound in the workshop, distinct from the iteration of the conversation in Union Square. In a striking moment in this first re-iteration of the conversation, the visual of Union Square opens up. The words of the conversation are replayed, reheard by the spectator, yet each

²⁵ Julio d'Escriván, 'Sound Art (?) on/in Film,' *Organised Sound* 14, no. 1 (2009), 70.

utterance is now disembodied, spoken through the technology of reproduction. Walter Murch, the sound designer on the film, accentuates the mechanical registers of the voice, increasing echo and reverb. These mechanical affectations reconstruct the mellifluous, organic timbre of the voices (particularly the woman's) into a technologized (and reproducible) sound. When the spectator listens to the conversation in its second iteration, spun through the circuit of a recording system, the *visual* image is an accompaniment. Here the autonomous image of sound organises a perceptual and affective engagement.

How can the spectator locate the subjectivity of a sound image (as the spectator conventionally searches for the subjectivity of a visual image)? When Coppola cuts to the visual in Union Square at 16:45, the image is asynchronous—the sound no longer matches the visual image, as it would in a classical cinematic soundscape. Shot and reverse-shot, the strongest indicator of point of view in cinema, is established between the object (the woman and man) and the sound engineer, Caul. Coppola cuts between present and past, though the flashback is not a faithful rendition of the past, but its semblance, a simulation of that which took place and is lost in reproduction. This is Coppola's subtle rendition of the paranoid subjectivity of American modernity.²⁶ At 16:43, the image cuts to a frame of the woman and man walking in Union Square. The image deliberately approximates a point of view—the first component of a shot reverse-shot mechanism. Yet the cut that will present the reverse-shot, the perceiving subject, is not to Caul in the present of the conversation (its actual iteration initiated by the zoom) but to Caul *in his workshop*. Shot reverse-shot traverses present and past, its mechanical relation built on a recording. This is precisely the device employed by Antonioni in *The Passenger* (employing a tape-recorded conversation) to say something very similar about the existential (and ontological) spillage of past into present.

The itinerary of shot reverse-shot in the 'present' iteration of the conversation works through actual figures (Caul's team) situated in Union Square; the itinerary of shot reverse-shot in the re-iteration of the conversation in Caul's workshop works between the object (the man and woman projected in flashback) and the technologized subject of reproduction, the sound recording. At 17:32, the visual of the first re-iteration of the conversation holds the man and woman in a two-shot in

²⁶ Keathley, 295-298.

shallow focus; their words are now clear over the background noise (Caul's mixing of the soundtrack and its visual representation are necessarily coterminous). Yet at precisely this moment, the characters in two-shot move out of the frame, and *Caul* is revealed in the background on a park bench [figure 16].



Figure 16

The image finds clarity in a sharp rack focus, and Caul is centralized. Who perceives Caul this way? In technologized reproduction, who authorizes these compositional inscriptions? While Caul sits before his state of the art recording system, for Coppola, the technologies of surveillance and recording give life to a new subjectivity of the image in sound, located within the panoptic mechanism of technological reproduction. This is to suggest that if D'escriván is correct in identifying narrative resolution in the first iteration of the conversation through the visual image, resolution at the point of the *re-iteration* of the conversation in Caul's workshop displays a subjectivity located within the panoptic gaze of technology itself.

3. 'He'd kill us if he got the chance.'

A great deal of work has been done on the unique auditory qualities of *The Conversation*,²⁷ and much of this work concludes with a reading of an utterance—'he'd kill us if he had the chance'—initially obscured on Caul's soundtrack, revealed at the first act turning point on Caul's recording, and reheard (by Caul and the spectator) in the film's *dénouement*. I wish to contribute to this body of analysis, framing the material presence of the image of sound in a slightly different way.

At 33:17, Caul initiates the second re-iteration of the conversation; a single spoken line remains obscured on the recording. On first playback, the line is an audible mix of speech fragment, mechanical interference and ambient noise. The voices are pronouncedly mechanical, further disembodied from the original source; the unique tonal and textural qualities of the mechanized voice are again contrasted with the initial (present) iteration of the conversation in Union Square. At 39:24, after Caul boosts the sound through an external source, the purpose of the conversation, and the surveillance, becomes clear. The spectator hears: 'he'd kill us if he got the chance.' The intonation is such that the emphasis falls on 'kill,' with a lesser emphasis on 'us'; the audio track emanates from the tape with this emphasis. Coppola deliberately cuts images of the recording equipment—knobs and dials, as well as the exposed material of Caul's concocted booster—with the visual image from the conversation as it is played in the film's opening sequence. The attachment of image to the technology of recording is deliberate, suggesting that the spoken line emanates from its reproduced source. This utterance is in a very real sense absent from the initial iteration in the present-time of Union Square. As the sequence approaches the revelation of the line at 39:24, Coppola tightens the shots on the technology of the sound image, a movement culminating in a close-up of the booster, with its casing stripped away, revealing wires and boards [figure 17].

²⁷ See, for example, Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 89-93; Dennis Turner, 'The Subject of *The Conversation*,' *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 4 (1985), 4-22; Jay Beck, 'Citing the Sound: *The Conversation*, *Blow Out*, and the Mythological Ontology of the Soundtrack in the 70s Film,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29, no. 4 (2002), 156-163.



Figure 17

The revelation of the spoken line is a critical plot point that catapults the narrative into its next movement (Act Two development). The recorded line functions as a plot turning point that prefigures a conventional narrative resolution. At 1:45:50, in the film's *dénouement*, the line is reiterated again: a *third* iteration. Now 'he'd *kill* us if he had the chance' becomes 'he'd kill *us* if he had the chance.' The sound revelation in a spoken line of dialogue presents as narrative resolution. Caul's mystery is solved: the man and woman have conspired to murder the director (Robert Duvall).

This all seems quite conventional. The orthodox reading of this strange re-iteration (most explicit in Silverman)²⁸ emphasizes the function of the utterance as narrative resolution, as the solution to a basic conflict involving an extra-marital affair and a jealous husband. The shift in emphasis from 'kill' to 'us' makes sense in the context of Caul's increasingly paranoid mind. This is how *Caul* hears the line. In its first revelation, Caul mishears the emphasis, the intonation, and thus, the spectator receives a subjective rendition of the line. Caul is looking for a 'nice fat recording' rather than the meaning of the words, and thus misses the emphasis and the correct attribution of guilt. The spectator listens through Caul's ears, not unlike the way in which the spectator sees through the subjective eyes of the protagonist in Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) or Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966).

²⁸ Silverman, 90.

The revised utterance, with a revised emphasis, is a redubbing on the soundtrack (in industry jargon, Additional Dialogue Recording [ADR]): the sound plays over the visual image, but the lips of the man frame the initial utterance with its emphasis on 'kill' [figure 18].



Figure 18

On the DVD commentary, Coppola suggests that the redubbing over the initial utterance was Murch's idea, and took place while cutting the film for picture and sound, well after Coppola had completed the shoot.²⁹ Thus it is Murch, the sound editor, who isolates sound from image, producing a sound image separate from the narrative itinerary of the film. On one level, of course, Murch's revised line permits the reading that Caul misheard the utterance on the tape. Yet Murch altered the line not to present an ontological truth, not to reveal the objectivity of the line as spoken, but to 'indicate to the filmgoer that the phrase now takes on a new emphasis for Harry. He hears the line *in his mind* [my emphasis] as it must have been all along.'³⁰ But what Caul hears in his mind effaces the initial utterance (spoken in the opening sequence of the film): 'he'd *kill* us if he had the chance.' That initial utterance is now lost to both Harry and the spectator; all that exists on the soundtrack are spoken lines in re-iteration. What materializes in the final iteration is no more substantial, or

²⁹ Francis Ford Coppola, 'Commentary,' in *The Conversation* (Widescreen DVD Collection), Paramount Home Video, 2000.

³⁰ Cited in James M. Welsh, Gene D. Phillips and Rodney F. Hill, *The Francis Ford Coppola Encyclopedia* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 46.

objectively rendered, than Caul's technologized utterance. The presence of both versions of the line within the film's diegesis, one created during production, the other during post-production, inscribes an autonomous image of sound, a line that signifies its intent, or more accurately, manifests its *presence*, in technological re-iteration. What coheres in Caul's mind as 'the conversation' is thus the output of a recording, an utterance derived not from a present time and place, but an audio-visual assemblage in perpetual reproduction.

4. The Autonomous Image of Sound

In the final scene of *The Conversation*, two classically separate soundtracks, one diegetic (a jazz saxophone piece played by Caul), one non-diegetic (a piano piece), converge. The two soundtracks present separately in the film; Caul improvises to a jazz record in his apartment, while the piano score accompanies much of the dramatic movement of the film. Coppola employs the two soundtracks as discrete signifiatory (and symbolic) units. Caul finds an emotional outlet in the improvisational qualities of jazz; his accompaniment to a jazz record presents an opportunity to create, to break free of the metaphorical shackles of his life. Conversely, the melancholy piano track presents as a threat to Caul, its minor key unsettling, a sound metaphor for the ubiquity of the surveillance society. Caul's jazz saxophone and the non-diegetic piano piece are symbolically opposed and musically inharmonious.³¹

At 1:47:54, Caul begins to search for a listening device in his apartment; this action (comprising several minutes of screen time) is accompanied by the non-diegetic piano track. Caul's desperation is matched by the increasing intensity of the piano, its phrases more pronounced, its tone and texture jarring. Unable to locate the device, Caul retreats again to the sanctuary of jazz. The piano maintains on the soundtrack throughout the action. The visual image cuts to fleeting shots of the conversation in Union Square, now, in its fourth re-iteration, soundless, the ephemeral image from which all sound has been lost. At 1:51:40, the diegetic sound of the saxophone enters the frame as the piano

³¹ For an overview of compositional structure and harmony, see Nicholas Cook, *Analysis Through Composition: Principles of the Classical Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

continues to play its non-diegetic theme. The camera pans left to reveal Caul seated on a stool, oblivious to the ruination of his life [figure 19].



Figure 19

He is immersed in improvisation, as he was in Act One of the film (13:20), yet now, astonishingly, the backing jazz record is absent. In the final sequence of the film, Caul effectively improvises to the non-diegetic (and thus 'absent') sound of the piano. At this point, the spectator must ask: what animates this improvisatory movement if the piano is a *non-diegetic score*? What is Caul listening to? The fullness of Coppola's metaphor materializes in sound: what begins as a somewhat jarring improvisational performance (inharmonious saxophone and piano) is gradually synthesized into a harmonious duet between the diegetic saxophone and the non-diegetic piano, concluding in a scale run on the piano that perfectly harmonizes with the expressive saxophone in Caul's hands. What presence within the diegesis of the film authorizes this synthesis, this artificial synchronicity?

Coppola thus concludes his landmark film with a simple, yet ingenious, metaphor. The duet between piano and saxophone reveals the sound image to be more than the signification of the cinematic diegesis. Sound explodes beyond the visually-oriented narrative frame. Coppola's soundscape demands a contemplation of cinema sound beyond the givenness of meaning, and Coppola demands that sound be engaged as an object, as the essential material of cinema, no less than a visual image that inscribes its presence through compositional form. Coppola's unique

contribution to the ontology of the image is to cast the image *out of sound*. In concluding, I return to the question with which this analysis began: in the several iterations of a line of spoken dialogue reconstructed through mechanical reproduction, or a soundtrack that moves cavalierly across diegetic and non-diegetic space, what does the spectator *hear*? From what source (the authentically original or mechanically reproduced) does cinema's image emanate?³²

5. Can Cinema be Attentive to an Image?

Peter Biskind recounts the story of Paul Williams pitching a genre script to late-1960s Hollywood studio executives: “No, no, no, no,” they tell him. “We want to make movies that aren’t about anything. Like that *Blow-Up* picture.”³³ Cinema’s affective qualities are commonly conceived as elements of narrative action—stories that inscribe progression, archetypal characters that attain fulfilment, mythological structures that speak to diverse nations and cultures. This is a mode of classical studio production that, Deleuze argues, has ‘produced the universal triumph of American cinema.’³⁴ While this assessment of the American studio cinema is grossly oversimplified, it is nonetheless true that a great deal of studio genre cinema encodes narratives of action, clearly delineated paths of character development, and the emphatic resolution of narrative conflict. But the studio executives Biskind quotes fundamentally misunderstand the radical ethos of Antonioni in *Blow Up*

³² Richard King, an Oscar-winning sound designer and sound editor working freelance within the studio system, describes sound design as ‘constantly innovating.’ For King, the sound is frequently created separately from the image, and rarely recorded during production as a complete sound object. While attuned to the image, in some sense ‘sticking to it,’ sound functions also autonomously from the diegesis of cinematic space. It is thus an experiential effect affiliated yet not exclusively derived from the image of cinema. King provided the example of attempting to create the sound of the removal of a face-mask for *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), calibrated to an experience of the image rather than an inherent reality within the diegetic space. This is a soundscape that cannot ‘sound like life’ and for which a world has been ‘completely created.’ Interview with Richard King conducted Feb 10, 2012 at Warner Bros. Studios, Los Angeles.

³³ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex ‘n Drugs ‘n Rock ‘n Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 22.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 141.

and *The Passenger*, and Coppola in *The Conversation*. The departure from studio classicism is not a matter of narrative content. *Blow Up* and *The Passenger* are resolutely 'about something.' I'd argue that *The Conversation* is a conventional Three-Act mystery conforming to Thompson's principles of classical storytelling.³⁵ Rather, I have attempted to reveal a particular relationship of the image to narrative that I accord with the evolution of a distinctly modernist ethos in the European art cinema and the New American Cinema. In the simple fracture of a classical shot reverse-shot movement, or an unbroken (sequence) shot that synthesizes past and present, the image of cinema acquires a radical autonomy from its narrative casing. The classical imperative toward progression suffers a crisis (Deleuze); the elemental relationship between image and referent is unsettled. In *Blow Up*, the autonomous image materializes the existential burden of the self; the material form is consumed by the insubstantiality of its content. This is the simple though elegant metaphor of the 'blow up' sequence: the once classically perceived object (a body) is pixelated into abstraction [figures 20-23]. In *The Passenger*, the autonomous image materializes time as an existential burden. The sequence shot turns time into a *felt* thing. Coppola's autonomous image of sound materializes a mode of perception increasingly visible in the dystopian narratives of the New American Cinema: the pure panoptic image of technologized reproduction. Where is the listening device in Caul's apartment in the final sequence of that film? The image of perfect surveillance in *The Conversation* is an astonishing intervention into the perception image of a classical American cinema in the mid-1970s.

³⁵ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10.



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23

Fittingly, in the final bravura sequence shot of *The Passenger*, Antonioni's body is killed (or exhausted into submission) off-screen. When the autonomous gaze of the camera returns from its long itinerary, Locke is dead [figures 24-26].



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26

But this is as much a physical death as it is the death of a mode of *being*, the death of a classical perception. Is it foolish to suggest that it is *that space* beyond the window, subjected to the autonomous movement of Antonioni's camera, that transfigures the body, that renders it now in a new form, invisible to the gaze of his wife, the hotel concierge, the police, and the spectator?

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