

FILM AND THE DISEMBODIED VOICE

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Abstract

The use of voice over often divides both filmmakers and critics - its opponents objecting to the borrowing of a literary device. By examining a multitude of examples this paper seeks to demonstrate that it has often enhanced the effectiveness of film narrative both in the actual storytelling and the emotional impact, by applying a sensitivity in the writing and a careful casting of the voice and performance of the unseen actor or actors.

Keywords: Voice-over; narrative; film and literature; author versus auteur; image and sound.

FILM AND THE DIS-EMBODIED VOICE

David Lodge in his book, *Consciousness and the Novel*: (2002, Secker and Warburg) wrote:

Compared with prose fiction or narrative poetry or drama, film is most tied to representing the visible world, and least well adapted to representing consciousness, which is invisible—it is not capable of the precise descriptions and subtle discriminations of a character’s mental life that we find in the novel.

And he added:

...Although voice-over interior monologue can be and has been used in films, it goes against the grain of the medium, and cannot be used extensively and repeatedly without becoming obtrusive.

These statements will always find agreement amongst some filmmakers who claim borrowing from literature pollutes the form. The question is complicated by the fact that a good proportion of films are adapted from novels or short stories, which, in Lodge’s terms, are foolhardy attempts to represent this dimension of ‘consciousness’. This, presumably, would include the several adaptations to the screen of his own work.

Whilst we can identify many cases where writers have been disappointed with films made from their work, positive experiences do exist and they often incorporate voice-over. Here is the opening voice over in an adaptation where the novelist collaborated on the script with the director:

We welcome you to this motion picture, filmed entirely in India, In Bengal, where the story really happened. It is the story of my first love - about growing up on the shores of a wide river. First love must be the same any place, and it might have been in America, England, New Zealand, or Timbuktu, though they do not of course have rivers in

Timbuktu, but the flavour of my story would have been different in each, and the flavour of the people who lived by the river, would have been different.

This is from *The River* (1951) Jean Renoir’s adaptation of the book by Rumer Godden (Viking Press, 1946) about her adolescence in India. Renoir made the trip to Godden’s country cottage in England to have tea and seek her approval.

Rumer Godden wrote in a later preface to the book (Virago, 2015): *Jean Renoir, the great French film director, who made the exquisite film of ‘The River’ called the book a tribute to India and to childhood.* These are hardly the words of an author dissatisfied with an adaptation of their work. In fact Godden and Renoir worked on the script together at his home in Hollywood, and she journeyed back to India to advise on the shooting.

Subsequent to this opening section of the film, the voice over becomes a sensitive part of the narrative, echoing the portrayal of a girl’s growing awareness of herself and her surroundings. We might assume that it was spoken by the author herself, but the voice is that of June Hillman, who was persuaded by friends to audition for Renoir when he came to London to finish the film. As June Tripp she starred opposite Ivor Novello in Hitchcock’s silent film, *The Lodger - a story of the London Fog* (1927). So from being seen, but not heard, June went to being heard but not seen twenty-four years later. She believed that her high soprano voice didn’t have enough gravitas, so for the audition she pitched it artificially low. She then spent three days recording as a forced contralto, in the process damaging her vocal chords. Renoir had been told by friends that her voice was unsuitable, but he trusted his instincts, once none other than Greta Garbo had commented that she greatly admired the sound.

Voice over has its roots way before the coming of cinema. The soliloquy, monologue or aside was a vivid part of Shakespeare’s craft and has been well employed in film adaptations

– never more convincingly than in the version of *Richard III* (1995) directed by Richard Loncraine and starring Ian McKellen, Towards the end of his opening speech: '*Now is the winter of our discontent...*' McKellen spies the camera in a mirror and turns to address the audience directly.

An elaboration of this theatrical tradition was employed by Eugene O'Neill in his play: *Strange Interlude*. Premiered on Broadway in 1928 and adapted to the screen in 1932, this experimental work in nine acts, lasting a total of over five hours, included regular interruptions to the action, whilst one or other character spoke their inner thoughts to the audience. These 'thoughts' ranged from confession to self-deception, revealing a psychology beyond that apparent in the dialogue.

Groucho Marx lampooned the device in *Animal Crackers* (1930), when he interrupted a scene with two 'society' ladies saying: *If I were Eugene O'Neill I could tell you what I really think of you two. You know you are very fortunate the Theatre Guild isn't putting this on – and so is the Guild.* He then steps forward and says '*pardon me while I have a strange interlude.*' and utters a series of thoughts, leaving the two actresses sharing the scene striking statuesque poses in the background.

The adaptation of *Strange Interlude* to film allowed the monologues to be heard as voice over, after an initial speech to camera by one of the cast. But, sadly, because O'Neill had not re-written the action to allow for these interruptions the 'freezing' of the characters made the effect artificial.

A central character as narrator is the prevalent use of voice over. An extreme case is that of the Joe Gillis, the character played by William Holden in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). He is clearly dead from the outset, so is a voice from beyond the grave. The use of voice over starts in the third person over his body floating in a swimming pool and switches to first person when we flash back to the beginning of the story. The dead man who is talking to us was a screenwriter, as he tells us immediately:

No body important really- just a movie writer with a couple of B movie pictures to his credit. The poor dope. He always wanted a pool, well, in the end, he got himself a pool, only the price turned out to be a little high...

Voice over is a very effective way of inserting the attitude of the writer, and, perhaps we owe more to Charles Brackett, Wilder's collaborator on the screenplay, for the tone here. However if the director is also the writer of the original screenplay it is their signature on the film. For instance, *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954) was written and directed by Joseph L Mankiewicz, and makes extensive use of voice over. The film is about a night club dancer from Spain, played by Ava Gardner, who is persuaded to accept an offer to leave her homeland for a career in Hollywood films. The man who persuades her to become a film actor, and then directs her films, is played by Humphrey Bogart, who features as one of two narrators. Notably, diegetic sound is muted during the voice overs, despite the fact that the scenes are clearly filmed with realistic dialogue.

The second voice over is that of the publicity agent played by Edmund O'Brien, who comments during scenes that occur when the Bogart character is absent. In his case there is a discrepancy between the cool commentary and the sweaty nervousness of O'Brien's performance. This inconsistency clearly didn't bother Mankiewicz or the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences since O'Brien won the Oscar for best supporting actor.

Voice over is also a feature of two of Mankiewicz's earlier films: *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) which is narrated marvelously by Celeste Holm as the character Addie Ross, who has written the letter and has run off with one of the husbands of the three wives. Holm wasn't even credited, but binds the film together, like a manipulative observer, as she watches the action and comments caustically on the pathetic manoeuvring of both the husbands and the wives. Despite never being seen in the film Holm dominates the piece as if controlling puppets.

Celeste Holm also narrates Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950), but in this case shares the function with George Sanders. Although the film stars Bette Davis and Ann Baxter, the characters played by Holm and especially Sanders, add sauce by inserting their perspectives in this excoriating examination of theatrical infighting.

As we have already seen with *The River* the influence of the original novelist can be more emphatic if they write the screenplay that is based on their own book. Graham Greene believed that you can't write a screenplay without writing a story first. His original novella, which he wrote in preparation for the screenplay of *The Third Man* (1949, Viking Press), opens with:

I never knew Vienna between the wars and I am too young to remember the old Vienna with its Strauss music and its bogus easy charm, to me it's simply a city of undignified ruins... etc.

Greene carefully made this more conversational as voice over in the film (Carol Reed, 1949):

I never knew the old Vienna before the war with its Strauss music its glamour and its easy charm – Constantinople suited me better.. Vienna doesn't really look any worse than a lot of other European cities – bombed about a bit...

he then switches to introduce the character Holly Martins:

– oh, I was going to tell you, wait, I was going to tell you about Holly Martins, an American – came all the way here to visit a friend of his – the name was Lime, Harry Lime...

There is no doubt that voice over adds a special dimension to this film, but the decision was contentious at the time and resulted in a European version spoken by the director Carol Reed and a version for the USA spoken by Joseph Cotton,

who plays Holly Martins in the film. It could just as well have been the deep sonorous tones of Orson Welles himself, giving us an eerie feeling of connecting directly with his elusive character Harry Lime. You may remember the effect of Welles' voice in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), yet another adaptation, based on *If I Die before I Wake* by Raymond Sherwood King, published in 1938. It begins thus:

When I start out to make a fool of myself there's very little can stop me. If I'd known where it would end I'd have never let anything start – if I'd been in my right mind that is, but once I'd seen her – once I'd seen her, I was not in my right mind for quite some time.

These words are spoken as we track in on Rita Hayworth in an open carriage, and their combination with her beauty has us hooked. The irony of this film is that despite the fact that Welles wrote, directed and starred in it, the final version was a travesty of his conception, after much was reshot, and an hour was edited out of his first cut, but it remained his film, not least because of the signature he gave it through his voice over.

A film that belongs to its female star, partly because of her voice over is *Brief Encounter* (1945). The star was Celia Johnson. The director, David Lean and the writer, Noel Coward, contrived between them to make it her film, despite the presence alongside her of Trevor Howard. In fact her only competitors were the trains that sometimes impose their dramatic presence as they roar through the station where the two protagonists struggle with their encounter.

The original play, *Still Life*, on which the film was based, had a very different narrative balance. It was one of a group of short pieces written for the stage by Coward. He starred alongside Gertrude Lawrence, when it was premiered in London's West End in 1936. Coward may have attended the first London production of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* at the Lyric theatre in 1931. If so, he learnt the lesson of how to integrate the

voice over into the dramatization for the film that had been lacking when O'Neill's play was transferred to the screen.

The craft applied in adjusting the script, in the shooting, and especially in the editing gives the voice over an integral role in the way the film conveys the inner feelings of wife and mother, Laura, in the midst of a love affair. Before the voice over is introduced, the editing of picture and sound takes us into her head by playing another character's dialogue over her face. She starts by voicing her feelings about her acquaintance, Dolly who is wittering on out of shot:

I wish I could trust you, I wish you were a nice kind friend, instead of just a gossiping acquaintance that I've known for years, casually and never actually cared for...I wish...I wish...

Gradually she begins to talk about the affair and her feelings for Alec. From then on the voice over is a partner with image and sound, including the use of Rachmaninov's 2nd piano concerto, until she confesses to herself but also to us, the audience, that she had tried to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train, as she stands on the platform:

I meant to do it Fred, I really meant to do it.....and she tells us how she wasn't brave enough and stepped back at the last moment. As the express rushes past her we cut to her in close up at home, sewing, then to husband Fred watching her. Eventually he crosses over to her and says Thank you for coming back to me.

More than anything it is a voice over reflecting the morality of the times – placing the film, squarely at the end of the 2nd World War and its protagonists amongst the solid middle class in England. The words and Celia Johnson's delivery are so authentic – as though she is talking to an audience of her character's class and time.

In a letter at the time Celia Johnson wrote:

I've had another session at the studio doing all the commentary. It took ages and was not helped by the fact that I am at the moment riddled with catarrh, so that a lot of the time I sounded like an adenoidal child.

She had commented self-deprecatingly, when considering the part:

It will be pretty unadulterated Johnson and when I'm not being sad, or anguished or renouncing, I am narrating about it. So if they don't have my beautiful face to look at, they will always have my mellifluous voice to listen to: lucky people. (quoted in Celia Johnson: A biography by Kate Fleming: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991)

Another great female performer spoke the following words over the opening of a distinguished adaptation:

Maycomb was a tired old town, even in 1932 when I first knew it. Somehow it was hotter then. Men's stiff collars wilted by 9 am in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their 3 o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum. A day was 24 hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with - although Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself. That summer I was six years old.

This is the Deep South in America of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (first published in 1960 by J P Lippincott and filmed in 1962). The voice over effectively masks expositional images on the elaborate but still artificial studio set. At the same time it adds to the initial sensory impression of the film, which, like all cinema, struggles to add the smells and tastes to the images and sounds it deals in.

The quote *nothing to fear but fear itself* is from Franklin D Roosevelt's inaugural address as US President in 1932. It is not

in the final draft of the screenplay by Horton Foote, but it is in Harper Lee's novel. The voice is that of Kim Stanley – considered by many of her peers to be the best actress of her generation – she had only occasional roles in films, of which perhaps the most interesting was *The Goddess* (1958), in which she played a troubled movie star.

As the voice of Scout, or Jean Louise, she is so compelling we are sucked into the narrative as if hypnotised. Its rhythm and cadence is intensely musical. Horton Foote, was a friend of Kim Stanley and persuaded the director, Robert Mulligan, to use her. Writers can 'hear' their words just as much as they can 'see' the actions of their characters, so it is not surprising if a particular actor occurs to them as perfect for a role – especially an unseen one.

So it is with Sissy Spacek, who, co-incidentally, has voiced the complete text of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on CD (Caedmon, 2014). Many years earlier she was an inspired choice for Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973), in which her speaking of the voice over was a crucial contribution. Her character Holly, introduces us to her story:

*My mother died of pneumonia when I was just a kid.
My father had kept their wedding cake in the freezer for
ten whole years.
After the funeral he gave it to the yardman...
He tried to act cheerful, but he could never be consoled
by the little stranger
he found in his house.
Then, one day, hoping to begin a new life away from the
scene of all his memories,
he moved us from Texas to Fort. Dupree, South Dakota.
Little did I realize that what began in the alleys and back-
ways of this quiet town,
would end in the Badlands of Montana.*

Malick said he was inspired by Francois Truffaut's use of voice over in *L'Enfant Sauvage* (*The Wild Child*, 1970) where it

is used as quotes from the diary of the doctor Truffaut plays in the film. Truffaut found the story in Lucien Malson's 1964 historical survey of children recovered from the wild, *Les enfants sauvages: mythe et réalité*. (Paris, Union Generale d'Editions, 1964) It contained Jean Itard's memoir and report on his tutelage of Victor, the "Wild Boy of Aveyron", a feral child who was captured in 1800 near a small forest village in southern France. In the film, after the opening scenes that result in the boys capture, Truffaut, as Dr Itard, is seen reading aloud to himself from a newspaper, the report of this 'wild child'.

He then takes a pair of scissors and cuts out the article – just as Truffaut was wont to do whenever he came across anything that might provide the starting point for a film. He then places the newsprint in a file and in voice over, as the image freezes, contemplates the idea of gaining access to this feral being. We are therefore present simultaneously at the birth of a film and the subject therein being cemented through voice over by the protagonist and director.

Returning to Malick, he has a habit of incorporating the device. Notably in *Days of Heaven* (1978) which took two years to edit and is reliant on the voice over to knit the narrative together. Twenty years later *The Thin Red Line* (1998, based on the book by James Jones, 1962, Scribner) had an even more convoluted editing process, losing many of the performances and much of the dialogue in favour of voice-over. The result is a fascinating patchwork – for some unfinished and unsatisfying - for others a masterpiece of imagery, words and music.

Robert Bresson's approach was far simpler. He was asked in an interview, when he was preparing to make *The Diary of a Country Priest*, (1951) from Bernanos *Journal d'un cure de campagne*, (1936 Librairie Plon).about the means of expression available to the filmmaker beyond the visible. He replied:

*I think many things are visible in a face or in a posture
for those who know how to look. But we have other
means of expression too; we have speech, and we have*

voice-over narration, which is common in many films now. (Interview by Pierre Desgraupes, for Radio-Television Francaise, June 9th 1950).

Bresson integrated the use of voice over for this film by showing the young priest writing the entries in his diary spoken in the voice over. As the opening credits finish, the image clears and we see a hand opening a school exercise book (exactly as described by Bernanos) and removing the blotting paper to reveal the first entry in the 'diary', which we simultaneously hear in voice over:

je ne crois rien faire de mal en notant ici, au jour de jour, avec franchise absolue, les tres humble, les insignifiante secrets d'une vie d'ailleurs sans mystere.
(*I don't think I'm doing anything wrong in writing down daily, with absolute frankness, the simplest and most insignificant secrets of a life actually lacking any trace of mystery*)

We cut to a close-up of the road sign of Ambricourt, the small community of which our protagonist is the priest, then, dissolve to a close up of the young man himself, already revealed as sickly as he wipes sweat from his face. Next we cut to a wide shot showing him with his bicycle beyond impressive wrought iron gates. Then a close two shot of a young woman embracing an older man who, on becoming aware they are being watched, turn and walk away. Cut to the priest beyond the gates turning and walking off, then a shot of the couple in the distance as they retreat across an impressive country estate. The economy of this montage is effective because of the narrative 'cement' provided by the voice over.

What we are immediately privy to in this opening to Bresson's film is both the young priest's isolation and the indications that there are indeed secrets and mysteries in this small community – not subjects for a discreet diary and yet part of Bernanos text. The medium of film is thus available for a multi-layered treatment not so easily achieved on the page.

Bresson used voice over for his two subsequent films, (*A Man Escaped*, 1956 and *Pickpocket*, 1959) and then abandoned it, as he continued to define an aesthetic that avoided what he came to consider to be levels of artifice and contrivance.

Another director who made extensive use of voice over was Eric Rohmer, whose films tend to divide audiences. Gene Hackman in Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (1975) is asked if he wants to join his wife to see a Rohmer film – his reply is: *I don't think so – I saw a Rohmer film once – it was like watching paint dry*. The original line in the script by Alan Scott referred to a Bresson film but in the shooting it was decided too few people would know who he was talking about. That Rohmer might be that much more familiar is a moot point.

For Rohmer voice over is a major device for taking the audience into the minds of his male protagonists. It requires a retuning of the actors' performance and a particular kind of discretion in the editing. Rohmer refined his approach during the making of his *Six Moral Tales* or *Contes Moraux*

The voice is totally without emphasis or emotion. Yet it is difficult to listen without assuming we should attach importance to this 'confession'. The images are deliberately neutral – almost documentary-like and hardly riveting – but they are not random. However it is only by listening whilst watching that the film is lifted above the accusation of being '*like watching paint dry*'.

Rohmer himself wrote:

When I began to film my Moral Tales I very naively thought that I could show things – sentiments, intention, ideas – in a new light, things that until then had only received attention in literature. In the first three I made ample use of commentaries. Was that cheating? Yes, if it contained the main part of my subject matter, relegating the images to the role of illustrations. No, if from the confrontation of this commentary with the

characters conversation and behaviour a kind of truth was discovered, a truth entirely different from the text or the behaviour – and that would be the film's truth.

Admittedly Rohmer's narratives are unremittingly bourgeois in their preoccupations, which restrict the subjects to an agenda unfamiliar to those whose lives are less comfortable, but he captures the milieu perfectly.

Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959) is quite another agenda. About eighteen minutes into the film there is a cut on the continuity of action, when Emmanuelle Riva traverses the barrier on the flat roof as she re-enters her hotel room in Hiroshima. It is the simplest of actions but it signals the first connection with a conventional fiction film. Riva then contemplates the sleeping body of her Japanese lover and is reminded of the corpse of her German lover, back in Nevers during the 2nd World War. There follows the exposition of the mundane facts of their brief encounter, for which, until now, there has been no clue.

For the film starts out in an impressionistic documentary fashion combining footage of Hiroshima after the bomb with images of the abstract entwined bodies of our two lovers. Resnais arrived at this approach to his subject through a tortuous process after first spending months in Hiroshima, and when totally blocked turning to Marguerite Duras, already famous for her particular form of stream of consciousness writing. As a result of conversations between them, she came up with a complex verbal montage of spoken thoughts, which combined with Resnais' images produced a devastating reflection on the legacy of the bomb and indeed the war itself.

The whole is held together by the voiced thoughts of the lovers - especially the woman played by Riva. Resnais had seen Riva in a play and was convinced that she was perfect for the role he was envisaging, especially for the quality of her voice. Duras agreed with him and perhaps this inspired the cadences of the elaborate voice over she composed. Perhaps

no other use of voice over has ever felt so absolutely part of the warp and weft of the fabric of a film. In fact it is not 'over' at all - it is the inner voice of the film. Riva's voice continued to be the lynch pin of important French films. She was marvellous in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Leon Morin Pretre* (1961) and in Georges Franju's *Therese Desqueroix* (1962).

We should not be surprised that Resnais, with Duras compliance, came up with this form. After all his previous film, *Nuit et Brouillard* (Night and Fog, 1956), which was a collaboration with the writer Jean Cayrol was a similar combination of disturbing imagery – this time from the death camps of the Holocaust, and an evocative voice over read by Michel Bouquet. Chris Marker was also a significant contributor to the rhythm of the piece and this was further enhanced by the score of Hans Eisler. So *Hiroshima mon Amour* is Resnais' transition from this documentary to a form of fiction for the first time.

Speaking of Chris Marker we cannot write on the subject of voice over without including his radical use of the device. Marker experimented with the form in *Letter from Siberia* (1957) and *Cuba Si!* (1961). In May 1962, just weeks after the end of the Algerian War, Marker began working with Pierre L'homme on a project closer to home. *Le joli mai*, released in 1963, is a portrait of France made up of on-the-street interviews with the directors' fellow citizens. The wide range of views on politics and personal concerns is peppered with mischievous inserts, music by Michel Legrand, and narration read by Yves Montand in the French version and Simone Signoret in the English version.

During breaks from shooting, Marker took the photographs that he would shape into *La Jetee* (1962), a 150 minute essay-film, the story of a man with a vivid memory of a moment from his childhood, a memory so powerful that a mysterious circle of whispering scientists believes that it may be the key "to call past and future to the rescue of the present." The "present" in *La Jetee* is a, perhaps, not-so-distant future in which the Third World War has decimated Paris. Save for one brief, breath-taking shot, the twenty-seven-minute film proceeds

as a series of black-and-white still images, complemented by limited narration and sound effects.

Marker's work reached its apogee, though for some it was his nadir, with *Sans Soleil* (1983) a film that uses clips from a variety of films with some original footage and a narration by a woman (Alexandra Stewart in the English version) reading extracts from letters from a fictitious cameraman, in an exploration of the nature of memory and the perception of personal and public history. In essence, Marker's work added the creative use of the montage of narration to the use of voice over.

Jean-Luc Godard put his own spin on voice-over in *Alphaville: a strange adventure of Lemmy Caution*. (1965) This futuristic variation on film noir begins with a strangely robotic voice intoning:

Sometimes reality can be too complex to be conveyed by the spoken word. Legend remoulds it into a form that can be spread all across the world.

The voice over then becomes a derivation from the Hollywood stereotypical private eye genre. However Godard had already used voice over in *Le petit Soldat*, actually his second film, made in 1960, although its release was delayed until 1963 – having been banned from distribution because it related to the Algerian war in a way that was interpreted by the authorities as anti-France.

Two elements make this film's use of voice over unique: firstly the film was shot mute and entirely post synchronised – thus the sound track was built from scratch allowing Godard to run whole sections of voice over without any background sound. Secondly the narrator and protagonist: Bruno Forestier, played by Michel Subor, is a conflicted character whose thoughts are voiced as complex and contradictory reflections on the war and the rights and wrongs from both sides.

Although Bruno dominates the voice over it is Veronica, the female character played by Anna Karina, who speaks the most disturbing lines for the authorities when she says:

I could see the French are wrong. The others have an ideal, but not the French. Against the Germans the French had an ideal. Not against the Algerians. They'll lose.

From one perspective this is pure propaganda – from Godard's it's a simple statement of fact – either way it is an unusually direct use of voice over for a fiction film.

In the transfer of literary text to the screen there is a temptation to lift whole sections from the page. Francois Truffaut did it in *Jules et Jim* (1962). I discovered, when researching in his archive that he actually cut up a copy of the book, pasting extracts into the pages of his screenplay. The flavour of the film is crucially affected by this approach, profiting from the frank and energetic style of the writing in Henri-Pierre Roche's original text (Gallimard, 1953). Michel Subor voiced the narration and it is as if he is in a hurry to get the exposition over so that we can settle down to the crux of the two men and a girl plot. But the energetic delivery of the voice over is matched by Truffaut's economically magical visual flow. Roche's second and last novel, *Les Deux Anglaises et le continent* (Gallimard, 1956) was filmed by Truffaut in 1971 and continues his use of voice over. Here both the protagonist, Claude, played by Jean-Pierre Leaud, and Truffaut himself provide the voices and it follows suit by being delivered at break neck speed – perhaps a little rash for a more contemplative narrative.

Sometimes a screenplay is written with voice over included, and after the film is shot the idea of narration is questioned. Such was the case with *Apocalypse Now!* (1979). When Walter Murch joined post-production on the film he had read the script a year before and was aware that the writer had included narration. When he had assessed the state of the editing he realised that the film would be difficult to complete effectively without the narration. At his own initiative he recorded himself reading the text from the original script, and laid it over the first thirty minutes before revealing he had done so to Francis Ford Coppola, who was immediately convinced, and eventually the voice over was recorded, after seven or eight iterations had been written, by Martin Sheen, as the character

whose narration it was. In actual fact it is that narration that conveys an emotional authenticity to the film.

Walter Murch mentions that his previous assignment had been Fred Zinnemann's film *Julia*, (1979) starring Jane Fonda as Hellman and Vanessa Redgrave as 'Julia', which also contains voice over. So Walter was attuned to the use of the device. However *Julia* is interesting for an entirely different reason. Although it is credited on screen as based on a story by Lillian Hellman with a screenplay by Alvin Sargent, Hellman always insisted that the story, originally published in her collection, *Pentimento: a book of portraits* (Little, Brown and Company, 1973), was based on her own experiences. This is the opening voice over, based entirely on Hellman's preface to the book of portraits of which *Julia* is a part:

Old paint on canvas, as it ages...sometimes becomes transparent.

When that happens, it is possible in some pictures...to see the original lines.

A tree will show through a woman's dress. A child makes way for a dog.

A boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento...

because the painter repented...changed his mind.

I'm old now, and I wanna remember...what was there for me once...and what is there for me now.

Then we are set up for the drama of her relationship with 'Julia':

[Lilly's Voice] I think I have always known about my memory.

I know when the truth is distorted by some drama or fantasy.

But I trust absolutely what I remember about...Julia.

Unfortunately, subsequent to the film, it emerged that 'Julia' might have been a figment of Hellman's imagination or possibly based on a real person whose biography she pilfered for her 'story'. This is a questionable aspect of voice over that

crosses over from journalism. We are constantly asked to believe the words of reporters used over the filming of events and have no way of confirming the truth. Deep fake or false news is now a widespread phenomenon and voice over is the stock-in-trade of this deeply disturbing development. Many serious documentary makers eschew voice over arguing that the filmed material should speak for itself out of respect for the people portrayed.

We have no such problem with suspending our dis-belief in the fiction of Martin Scorsese - perhaps the most persistent user of voice over. You know the milieu of each film just from this element: For instance:

Whenever we needed money, we'd rob the airport. To us, it was better than Citibank. For us to live any other way was nuts. To us those goody-good people who worked shitty jobs for bum pay-checks and took the subway to work and worried about bills, were dead. They were suckers. They had no balls. If we wanted something, we just took it.

That's the character Henry Hill played by Ray Liotta in *Goodfellas* (1990). Or by contrast:

As far back as anyone could remember, New York had been divided into two great clans.

Among the Mingotts you could dine on canvas back duck, terrapin and vintage wines.

At the Archers, you could talk about Alpine scenery and "The Marble Faun" but receive

tepid Veuve Cliquot without a year and warmed-up croquettes from Philadelphia.

And that is the unknown narrator in *Age of Innocence* (Edith Wharton book 1920, film 1993) which was beautifully voiced by Joanne Woodward.

This reminds me of a statement on the subject by the late wonderful filmmaker, Terence Davies:

*There are four great voiceovers in cinema: William Holden in *Sunset Boulevard*; Joanne Woodward in *The Age of Innocence*; Joan Fontaine in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*; and, to my mind the greatest of them all, Dennis Price in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. It's utterly perfect; there isn't a flaw in it. The way Price delivers it is quite extraordinary. The truth is, without Dennis Price there wouldn't be a film. He holds it all together with the most elegant diction. It's quite wonderful, even just to listen to.. (The Guardian, 13th September 2011)*

Kind Hearts and Coronets was directed by Robert Hamer, (1949) and based on the book *Israel Rank: the Autobiography of a Criminal* (1907) by Roy Horniman.

It is not surprising that Terence couples the name of the actor with each voice over. Originally an actor himself he is an expert in the art of choosing who says what in films. His own voice is the perfect accompaniment in his *Of Time and the City* (2008) – a love letter to his home town: Liverpool.

As for *Letter from an Unknown Woman* – (book 1922, Stefan Zweig; film 1948, Max Ophuls), Terence was right to praise this black and white masterpiece which begins thus:

Vienna 1900. It is night. A coach pulls up in a cobbled street. It is pouring with rain. A man (Louis Jourdan) steps down and exchanges words with his companions in the coach about being ready to duel in the morning. He enters his dwelling mounts the stairs and his man servant gives him a letter that has been left for him. After refreshing himself he settles to read it. As he does so the voice of the woman (Joan Fontaine) who has written it begins:

By the time you read this letter I may be dead. I have so much to tell you and perhaps very little time. Will I ever send it? I don't know. I must find the strength to write now before it's too late. And as I write it may become clear that what happened to us had its own reasons beyond our poor understanding. If

this reaches you, you will understand how I became yours, and you didn't know who I was or even that I existed. I think everything has two births – the day of its physical birth and the beginning of its conscious life. (cut to exterior day) Nothing is vivid in my memory before that day in spring when I came home from school and found a moving van in front of our building. I wondered about our new neighbour who owned such beautiful things...

Her mother calls out to her – Lisa, come in at once!

At the end of the film, which portrays the life of a self-centred musician, we return to him, as he finishes reading the letter and we learn that she is already dead and he will never know her. The pathos created by our being witness to her unfulfilled love alongside his ignorance of her existence is unparalleled in either literature or this masterful transposition by Max Ophuls. It is the voice over that allows him to work this magic.

Much of what I have so far brought in evidence relates to exposition but endings can also be served by the device. Take Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). After the film starting as a monologue to camera, thus establishing the character Allen is playing as the story-teller, this is a prime example of voice over carrying the film. It is climaxed by a sort of post-script:

It was great seeing Annie again – I realised what a terrific person she was and how much fun it was just knowing her and I thought of that old joke you know this guy goes to a psychiatrist and says doc my brother's crazy he thinks he's a chicken and the doctor says well why don't you turn him in and he says I would, but I need the eggs. Well I think that's pretty much how I feel about relationships you know they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd but I guess we keep going through it because most of us need the eggs.

Here Allen, already writer, director and actor becomes the stand-up comedian, joking with his audience.

Perhaps the most beautiful voice speaking the most beautiful voice over was Richard Burton as the prime narrator of Dylan Thomas's marvellous *Under Milk Wood* in the film version (1972) by Andrew Sinclair. The irony here is that the piece was written for radio, commissioned by the BBC and first broadcast in 1953, Thomas called it a 'play for voices'. I first heard it on the original set of long playing records at the home of a school friend – seventy or more years ago!

The Turkish filmmaker, Nuri Bilge Ceylan has used voice over very sparingly but with great effect. For instance at the end of *Winter Sleep* (2014) the protagonist returns home after a period of absence and we hear his thoughts which he has never expressed directly to his wife – thus exacerbating the distance that has grown between them. Similarly in *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018), Ceylan uses voice over just the once.

It comes after, Sinan, the protagonist, recently returned from completing his studies, has a delicate and disturbing encounter with a woman who clearly had meant a great deal to him in his youth but was expected to marry another boy in the community. By now we have become aware of his family relationships and his desire to be a published author though with low expectation and a near certainty that his best hope of avoiding being sucked back into his rural community is the chance to qualify as a teacher.

Joining his male friends on a joy ride to the river side he muses to himself about life:

*When we learn we are not so important, why is our instinct to be hurt?
Wouldn't it be better to treat it as a key moment of insight?
We engender our own beliefs, thus we need to believe in separation
As much as in beauty and love and to be prepared
Because rupture and separation lie in wait for everything beautiful.*

*In which case why not treat these tribulations as constructive disasters
That help us pierce our own mysteries*

I will end with the poetic licence involved in giving a mute character a voice. At the end of *The Piano* (1993) by Jane Campion, we hear this inner voice of the central character, played by Holly Hunter, who has just avoided drowning. In voice over she quotes the opening three lines of Thomas Hood's 1823 sonnet to *Silence*:

*There is a silence where hath been no sound,
There is a silence where no sound may be,
In the cold grave—under the deep, deep sea,*

The poem continues:

*Or in a wide desert where no life is found,
Which hath been mute, and still must sleep profound;
No voice is hush'd—no life treads silently,
But clouds and cloudy shadows wander free,
That never spoke, over the idle ground:
But in green ruins, in the desolate walls
Of antique palaces, where Man hath been,
Though the dun fox or wild hyæna calls,
And owls, that flit continually between,
Shriek to the echo, and the low winds moan—
There the true Silence is, self-conscious and alone.*