

# Lavin, Mathias. 2021. *Puissances de la parole : À l'écoute des films*. San Giovanni: Editions Mimésis. 276 pp.

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Mathias Lavin's new book *Puissances de la parole: À l'écoute des films* offers a rich and extensive analysis of the figurative powers of the spoken words—*la parole*—displayed in films. As Lavin rightfully notices in his introductory remarks, *la parole*, which has no direct English translation, gathers speaking, linguistic and wording dimensions. It represents both the act of speaking, the capacity to formulate a discourse, and it includes complementary aspects such as vocalization, language type, and words.

The study of the visual has been largely and historically privileged. What we see comes first, and what is said is often deferred to second-rank analysis. Facing the lack of academic research in Film Studies, Lavin's *tour de force* has been to find a balance, following previous landmark work which deals with sounds in films since the 1980s, between both audio and visual entanglements. By examining these entanglements from a historical, formal and theoretical perspectives, the author is able to deeply investigate the “interactions between sounds and images, whose modalities are numerous”(Lavin 2021, 19). Lavin brings attention to the powers of words, to their faculties, but also their agency when portrayed in cinema. To do so, he follows a double perspective: first, a figurative approach, how the spoken words are embodied by the medium, even in their corporal and gestural manners; and second, how systems or dispositives implemented in films link the acts of speaking to the ones of listening.

The book is composed of six chapters which cover various modalities from earlier silent films to more contemporary cinema. The chapter on the silent era appears instrumental as it revises a main paradigm according to which the absence of synchronized sound would have been a synonym for silent screening. On the contrary, the author insists on the fact that “silent films keep on

[...] questioning the presence and power of the spoken words, nay its enchantment” (60). Lavin resituates, on the one hand, the importance of early forms of “performed” sounds accompanying screenings (i.e., the role of the lecturer). On the second hand, as the relationship between wording and voices in silent movies is crucial—protagonists are indeed speaking, crying, singing, etc. as if they were heard—, Lavin analyzes silent films such as Jean Epstein’s based on this consideration on sonorities to show how words operate in the film construction even before they were heard.

Another pivotal moment appears in chapter 3: the transition to sound. While focusing on a fascinating yet unknown film, *Miracle Woman* (Frank Capra, 1931), Lavin more generally questions what the advent of sound did to the way films encapsulate the act of speaking. By extending the mediascape to other sound apparatus such as the radio, we find particularly stimulating to think how these devices operated in the making of mediatized voices. With the presence of radio in *Miracle Woman*, Lavin not only focuses on the way words are delivered, but also on the powers that acousmatic dispositives and intermediatic combinations give to these words. By coining the term “radio-effect,” Lavin exposes how the physical presence of the machine in the visual field affects the act of listening and receiving a discourse. Going back to the 1930s, Lavin has a stimulating use of Adorno’s consideration on technological apparatus and their modes of distribution. Brought back to the film, it highlights through the preacher’s words and their radio vehicle, how effective, attractive but also manipulative words can become.

In the fourth chapter, Lavin focuses on spoken situations which show affinities and acquaintances with literature. The film analysis here displays the medium’s ability to encapsulate and translate its proximity with language. This is not to show again that cinema has proven its capacity to efficiently perform speeches and allocutions, making these sequences appealing with the right intonation, shot or angle, but Lavin’s point is to prove that cinema can reveal specific modalities of the discourse itself through its figuration.

Chapter 5 brings closer attention to the voices by dwelling on the singular relationship between wording and voice. From this dialectical tension, Lavin exposes the nature of a desire to speak, and its subsequent pleasures in hearing and listening. Under this complementary perspective, a film like *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013) appears to be an emblematic example on how pleasure can derive from various acousmatic situations. Because of the presence of a computer in *Her*, through which the voice penetrates the protagonists’ environment, such an example brings the author to question “the desiring part linked with voices which would be delivered or produced by apparatuses” (28). Focusing on cinema

and the production of spoken words, Lavin's method and path to apprehend in this film the forms of desire produced by operating systems, indeed opens to broader reflections at a time of AI revolution.

Lavin finally brings us back to the political side of this subject. Among the non-exhaustive typology Lavin makes of different forms of political wordings, such as the authoritative words, he mainly develops the two last categories he proposes: the testimonial, and what he calls "*une parole autre*;" the one which can be denied, hampered. With the film *La blessure* (Nicolas Klotz and Elisabeth Perceval, 2005), he tackles a highly political theme with the story of African migrants in France. By questioning who can speak, and how, Lavin shows that the access and distribution of speaking (following Rancière's demonstration) participate in the construction and marginalization of political bodies. Who holds the power to speak, who can or cannot grasp it, indeed delineates political communities.

What do we gain at listening, *really listening*, to films? At paying equal attention to what they have to say and how, than to what is shown? At a time of rigidifications between academic fields, Lavin demonstrates how rich film analysis can be when coupled with considerations linked to Sound Studies, Critical Theory or Disabled Studies, only to shed new lights on the specific faculties of audio-visual forms of art. We need to shift views on how to incorporate the verbal dimension of cinema, and this much needed book gives an example of it. Lavin not only offers interpretations of various films, he sharpens a general method which can be shared and adapted to understand what films can tell us through their audio and visual co-presences and correspondences.