

The Creative Voice: Free Indirect Speech in the Cinema of Rohmer and Bresson

David Heinemann *Middlesex University*

In his essay ‘The “Cinema of Poetry”’, Pasolini identifies a stylistic device in the work of innovative modernist auteurs which, given the expressive ambiguity it generates in their films, represents for him a vital element of poetic cinema: the free indirect point-of-view shot. According to Pasolini, free indirect discourse ‘is, simply, the immersion of the filmmaker in the mind of the character and then the adoption on the part of the filmmaker not only of the psychology of his character but also of his language’ (2005: 175). However, as Pasolini is here concerned not with language but with the language of images, the free indirect style will be manifest visually. The filmmaker ‘cannot make use of the formidable natural instrument of differentiation that is language. *His activity cannot be linguistic; it must, instead, be stylistic*’ (178, emphasis in the original). It must, in other words, be contained within a *shot*. The shot will convey a character’s point of view but, unlike an ordinary point-of-view shot, the free indirect style, like its counterpart in the novel, will depict simultaneously the point of view of narrator-filmmaker and character. Although it may appear to convey the character’s point of view directly, the traces of the narrator’s authorship it contains create an irresolvable tension, a duality of expression, a hybridity of consciousness, a ‘mutual contamination’ of worldviews (180).

This creative functioning of character at the ‘compositional’ level of a film can also be achieved on the soundtrack. Pasolini too hastily relegates free indirect discourse to the linguistic sphere, largely perhaps because he defines it from the point of view of the screenwriter creating film dialogue, and not from that of its function within a film’s narrative. It would seem standard practice for screenwriters and filmmakers to write dialogue, as Pasolini suggests, by attempting to put themselves inside their characters’ minds and to adopt their diction.¹ But might there not be instances in which speech, too, operates in the free indirect mode of cinema – that is to say, not only linguistically but also stylistically? When characters describe their thoughts, feelings, actions or experiences in a reflexive manner (that is, to themselves, even if also to another), and this activity becomes for a time the primary narrational event of the film, these characters step into the role of storyteller. They become both subject and object of their utterances. Their act of narration appears to displace that of the film’s narration, even while continuing to be contained by it, thereby generating a duality of expression, a compositional ambiguity – and also often an interpretative ambiguity for the viewer.

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* Deleuze describes free indirect speech in cinema as ‘a very special use of the voice . . . which goes beyond the opposition of the direct and the indirect’ (1989: 232). He distinguishes between two alternative approaches, finding that the free indirect can either be ‘presented as a passage from the indirect to the direct, or the other way round’ without, however, being a mixture of the two (232). For Deleuze, Rohmer’s cinema typifies the first approach, and Bresson’s the latter. In the former, the free indirect speech-act arises through a character’s interpretation, or even re-creation, of their experience in a bid to cast themselves in a favourable light for the benefit of their interlocutors and also of themselves. It is a moral act of self-definition, outwardly directed. For Bresson’s characters, on the other hand, the free indirect speech-act is born of personal reflection, a movement inward that, rather than having a social function as with Rohmer’s characters, separates them from community and the quotidian, and aligns their experience with a universal expression such as myth. It may potentially serve, therefore, as an act of self-dissolution.

In the work of both filmmakers, however, the use of the free indirect highlights not only the characters’ creative use of speech, but the formal qualities of the text itself. Through the stylised diction and manner of delivery, the characters often seem to be quoting a pre-existing text without, however, revealing an awareness of it. This positions viewers in a

¹ Even directors who arrive at their dialogue through improvisation rely on their actors to “get into character” first.

constantly shifting relationship with the narrative, at one moment encouraging an immersion in the illusionistic unfolding of the plot, the next forcing an awareness of its formal properties, including the partiality and artifice inherent in narrative activity itself. It is a function of the free indirect speech-act to problematise viewer identification, dividing the impulse between the film's narration and the character's narration through generating ambiguity regarding the narrative point of view. Free indirect speech reinforces this ambiguity through the formal opposition it gives rise to – between picture and sound, image and voice – contributing to a polyphonic, multivalent cinema.

Storytelling: (re-)creating the event

In most films, dialogue serves to ground the spectator in present-tense diegetic reality and to provide support for the forward movement of the story. Although it conveys information and contributes to the drama, it functions primarily as an adjunct to the image, a textural element, a guarantor of the true-to-life nature of what is seen. According to Pascal Bonitzer:

The general tendency in film today . . . is systematically to reduce speech, less to noises coming out of the mouth, than to a sort of short, choppy clamour, to obscene and stereotypical interjections, in principle to magnify the reign of the action, or that of the image.

(Bonitzer 1999: 19)

In essence, this is Michel Chion's 'theatrical speech' in which filmmakers 'treat the dialogue as action' (Chion 1994: 171). While Chion rightly claims that these sorts of films are structured 'through and around speech', it does not necessarily follow that speech is therefore the central element in them. Rather it could be argued, with Bonitzer, that speech forms a part of a certain kind of filmic reality, one that favours action over reflection and attempts to secure the spectator's belief in this action through synchronised and realistic, but largely insignificant, dialogue. The dialogue may be treated as action, but it merely doubles the action of the picture track; we can grasp the essence of a scene through the actors' performances, without listening to them speak.

In the cinema of Rohmer, speech counterbalances, and at times overwhelms the image. Clear, goal-oriented action is marooned in character reflection and interpretation of events, events that in mainstream cinema would seem minor indeed. In revisiting an event already represented on the image track, Rohmer's characters open up a space between the 'objective' photographic presentation of it by the film's narration, and their own recasting of this event in language. What on the image track may have seemed straightforward and factual, becomes in the retelling complex and ambiguous. Viewers are made to perceive, in the gap between the seen and the reported, the poverty – but also the inherent multivalency – of the visual representation and, conversely, the richness of the character's emotional and psychological experience. Speech realigns the sound-image relationship. Although the voice is still, as Duras once described it, 'screwed into' the image (synchronised) (quoted in Bonitzer 1976: 44), it nevertheless seems out-of-synch with the image track of the scene to which it refers back. Like Chion's 'textual speech' the voice here has the power to act upon the image, not to call it up or control it, but to call it into question. Unlike textual speech, however, it is neither 'all-seeing' nor does it 'control [the] film's narration' (Chion 1994: 172-3). Rather, it challenges the film's narration with an alternative version, one which may add depth or dimension to it, or may instead mislead; the character's account may very well be inaccurate or even, quite simply, a lie. Rohmer in particular uses the distinctive quality and functionality of the free indirect speech-act to generate uncertainty about the meaning of story events.

Near the end of *Le Genou de Claire/Claire's Knee* (Rohmer, 1970), the film's protagonist, Jerome, recounts to his novelist friend, Aurora, his exploits of earlier that day when he sheltered from a thunderstorm with the young, attractive Claire and caressed her knee. The film's narration has already presented this scene in an objective fashion employing neither point-of-view shot, nor close-up, but principally the less intimate over-the-shoulder

shot. Even the climax of the scene, the moment in which Jerome reaches out to touch Claire's knee, is covered from behind Jerome in a two-shot favouring Claire. This staging obscures from the audience Jerome's feelings and intentions just prior to his act. The camera zooms in to a tighter framing of the hand and knee, significantly framing out Claire's face in order to focus our attention on the physical fact of the caress.

In his account of the incident to Aurora, Jerome describes the physical action quite accurately, but transforms a straightforward scene of apparently little import to a scene of high drama, seduction and sexual conquest, in which he, like the hero of a novel, through an act of 'courage' and 'pure will' overcomes adversity and achieves his goal. After all, it was Jerome's objective to put his hand on Claire's knee in a consensual fashion as he and Aurora, who claims to be looking for material for her next novel, had decided. Marion Vidal refers to this narrational act as the 'realising fabrication' (*fabulation réalisante*) in which 'speech creates the event out of nothing . . . [giving] substance to an impalpable, practically non-existent reality' (Vidal 1977: 126-7). And yet Rohmer ensures that we question Jerome's version of events, as well as the motivation behind it. Aurora remarks to Jerome, 'Your story is charming, but perfectly harmless. The only perversity in it is what you claim to put there.' With this new perspective, we are left in a state of uncertainty regarding the ultimate significance of the episode, which the film's narration does little to dispel. If indeed 'everything takes place in the narrator's mind' as Rohmer has remarked concerning his *Moral Tales* (Rohmer 1980: viii), then photographic evidence will not help to corroborate a hypothesis about the 'true' meaning of what happened.

The free indirect style thus permits Rohmer to generate a radical and irresolvable ambiguity regarding the significance of character behaviour, and to privilege the complexity of the inner life over the certitude of ocular proof. Signifying trumps seeing as the voice overshadows the image. The act of telling is privileged and upstages the prior showing. Jerome's account of the episode with Claire consumes almost as much screen time as the event it re-presents. His diction moreover is distinctly literary, belying the realism of the picture track and rendering his speech both act and object:

She sat facing me, one leg outstretched, the other bent. Her knee was sharp, narrow, smooth, delicate, within reach. Within reach of my hand. My arm was positioned in such a way that I only had to extend it to touch her knee. Touching her knee was the most extravagant thing, the one thing not to do, and at the same time the easiest. Even as I realised how easy, how simple the gesture was, I also felt it was impossible. As if you're on the edge of a cliff, only one step away, but even if you want to jump, you can't.

Jerome's use of adjectives and metaphor, and his careful structuring of the story to delay the resolution and generate suspense, all combine to transform the scene located in the past into an exciting event and a significant achievement with implications for the present. Not only does Jerome think of himself as a character in a novel,² but his narration takes on the character of a rehearsed performance of his own pre-existing text. Putting an emphasis on the materiality of the word at the expense of physical action, Rohmer draws attention to Jerome's literary artifice and the creative role it plays in the fabrication of his self image.

In his essay, 'Film and the three levels of discourse', Rohmer argues for a creative and stylised use of dialogue in order to achieve a more nuanced representation of character experience than is generally found in mainstream film. He finds that the novel is more flexible in its representation of dialogue primarily due to the greater scope it has to depart from accepted notions of realism. He distinguishes between two types of dialogue found in the narrative arts of film, theatre and the novel: the necessary, which contains information essential for the audience's understanding of the moment-to-moment unfolding of the plot, and verisimilitude, speech employed principally to affirm the true-to-life nature of story

² 'My heroes, somewhat like Don Quixote, think of themselves as characters in a novel, but perhaps there isn't any novel' (Rohmer 1980: viii).

events. 'All that the characters say among themselves in a given situation that is not concerned with informing the audience', he explains, 'is *verisimilitude*' (Rohmer 1989: 85, emphasis in the original). Rohmer states his objection to the overuse of verisimilitude in dialogue. The cinematic quest after a kind of hyperrealism through the use of both the content and manner of delivery of true-to-life dialogue sacrifices the creative potential of speech to convincing the audience of what is already effortlessly conveyed by the *mise-en-scène*: the reality of the diegetic world. Instead, it is more fruitful to take a lesson from the novel which, thanks to the licence it has to remodel reality, can take liberties with the style of its dialogue, marrying verisimilitude with necessity and thereby presenting a more complex relationship between characters' inner and outer worlds.

But how might one approach this in practice? Rohmer suggests that the tone, content and function of a character's speech is influenced by the style of discourse in which it is written. In the novel speech can be represented in three different styles, the indirect, the direct and, though rarely, the hyperdirect. (Rohmer does not discuss free indirect discourse.) Given that fiction film is not generally narrated by a non-diegetic authorial voice that can weave characters' speeches into the narration as with indirect discourse, nor link the speech to the narration by enclosing it within quotation marks as with direct discourse, it would seem that film is confined to the latter style alone: the hyperdirect. In the novel the hyperdirect style 'creates a new plane of discourse situated at the forefront: it pulls the character toward us, isolating him from the narrative background, conferring an autonomy on his words that are uninterrupted by necessity' (Rohmer 1989: 87). This description suggests that cinematic discourse is doomed to remain trapped in an eternal present dominated by verisimilitude, and that speech cannot be integrated into or inscribed by the film's narration. In fact, Rohmer finds that every film contains these different levels of discourse: 'To see them, one must simply believe in them. The problem is that we do not, as can be seen by the curious ways in which scripts are still written' with dialogue set off from action lines and preceded by the character's name in capital letters (88).

The first step toward consciously exploiting the levels of discourse is to conceive of scriptwriting and film dialogue in a new way. According to Rohmer, '[i]t is entirely natural for a scriptwriter, to get a better grip on the realism of his film, to be tempted to use a novelistic device, like quotation marks or an indirect style' (88) – entirely natural, in other words, to write a script in a manner similar to that of a novel. By remaining sensitive to the levels of discourse in his films, Rohmer now draws his characters away from the narrative background through snappy, colloquial dialogue, arrived at while rehearsing the actors on set, now embeds them in the web of the narrative through the use of literary dialogue and/or self-conscious delivery. And it is precisely the variation of tone and style this novelistic approach permits that results in greater psychological realism, for our experience in the world is, to a large degree, a narrative one. We make sense of events through our interpretation of them, itself determined by the role we perceive ourselves to be playing. Our moral activity is therefore of at least equal importance to our physical activity; Rohmer's practice, which he has called a 'yearning' after literature (Rohmer 1980: x), is an attempt to represent this on film.

Myth-making: mining the event

If Rohmer's route to the free indirect style is via a novelistic form of scriptwriting and a dramatic delivery of dialogue which are then woven together in the film's narration to create the sense that characters are quoting themselves in a variation of direct discourse, then Bresson's approach, clearly demonstrated in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*/*Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), would seem to be to trace the same path but in the opposite direction. Like Rohmer, Bresson here begins with a literary text to which he attempts to remain faithful partly through maintaining, alongside and in contrast to the realism of the images, the literary quality of the novelistic source. In his seminal essay on *Diary of a Country Priest* Bazin remarks:

Like marble from a quarry, the words of the film continue to be part of the novel. Of course the deliberate emphasis on their literary character can be interpreted as a search after artistic stylisation, which is the very opposite of realism. The fact is, however, that in this case the reality is not the descriptive content, moral or intellectual, of the text – it is the very text itself, or more properly, the style.

(Bazin 1967: 136)

Thus, again like Rohmer, Bresson aims to give a textual quality to speech, to remind the viewer of the origin of the words.³ He achieves this not only through extracting the dialogue almost word for word from Bernanos' novel, but also and more significantly through the performance of the actors and the use of voice-over.

In Bresson's cinema, beginning with *Diary of Country Priest*, the actors do not make their lines their own in the manner of psychological realism; rather they often seem to be listening to what they say as though their speech were reported by another. This effect, remarked upon by both Chion and Deleuze,⁴ can be attributed largely to the singular quality of performance that Bresson elicits from his 'models' (the term he uses to describe his actors). Bresson aims for a de-dramatised delivery, as he makes explicit in his *Notes on the Cinematographer*: 'To your models: "Don't think what you're saying, don't think what you're doing." And also: "Don't think *about* what you say, don't think *about* what you do"' (Bresson 1986: 15). Later in *Notes* he writes: "'Speak as if you were speaking to yourselves." MONOLOGUE INSTEAD OF DIALOGUE'. (74, emphasis in original). Over the course of his career, this approach developed into a monotone reading, devoid not only of expression but of reverberation in space. Characters thus appear alienated from the world around them and also from themselves, their voice, whether in voice-over or post-synchronised to the picture, failing to integrate with the environment in which they find themselves.

In *Diary of a Country Priest*, performed in a more dramatic style than later works, this tendency manifests itself most clearly in the priest's voice-over, associated with his frequent journal entries in which he revisits events already depicted, but also employed when he reflects on his encounters with other characters even as we see these scenes unfold. In this latter case, the voice-over becomes an internal monologue seemingly contemporaneous with the events represented on the picture track. Intruding into the middle of dialogue scenes, however, it casts the shadow of the past tense over the present tense of the picture and serves to distance the character, as well as the viewer, from the moment-to-moment playing out of the drama. Furthermore, the expression in the voice-over is often at odds with emotional content it comments on. When the Curé de Torcy and the priest have a conversation in a cattle hut, Torcy, framed in a single shot, suddenly stops in the middle of a sentence: 'What's the matter? You're crying?' A reverse shot reveals that the priest has begun weeping off screen; tears run down his impassive face. In voice-over the priest remarks, 'I hadn't realised I was crying. I wasn't thinking about it.' Both the on-camera performance and that of the voice-over belie his inner turmoil: both downplay the drama and invite the viewer to see the tears more as a fact than an expression of emotion with which we ought to identify. It is as if, despite being in the first person, the speech were delivered not by a participant in, but by witness to the scene.

At this point a new scene, in which the picture-sound dynamic is inverted, opens up within the existing one. Voice now dominates picture. In voice-over the priest reflects on the reason for his tears, bringing the dialogue scene to a standstill and relegating the *mise-en-scène* to a supporting role. The Curé de Torcy remains silent and offscreen while the priest narrates: 'The truth is that it has always been on the Mount of Olives that I find myself. . . . And suddenly Our Lord . . . revealed to me, through the lips of my old master . . . that I was a prisoner of the Holy Agony.' The hyperdirect discourse of the exchange between the two

³ Bazin's claim that foregrounding the text on which the film is based represents a form of realism will be echoed by Rohmer in his defence of his period adaptations, *Die Marquise von O...* (1976) and *Perceval le Gallois* (1979).

⁴ In *The Voice in Cinema* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* respectively. Chion and Deleuze do not, however, arrive at the same conclusions regarding the significance of this.

priests, now cast into the past tense, takes on the character of direct discourse, as though quoted by the Priest, and is embedded in a narrative that could easily be – and indeed is taken to be – *written* as an episode reported in his diary. Within this context the priest casts his monologue, along with the reported communication from God, in an indirect style. The priest's narration momentarily dominates the film's narration and gives rise to the free indirect style in which two authorial voices coexist.

The almost seamless movement from an objective to a subjective viewpoint, and from the present to the past, itself contained within and coexisting with a new present (i.e., the future, relative to the present of the image), generates a double action of objectification and identification, an 'opposition between appearance and voice which is valorised by the film as "spirituality"' (Browne 1998: 221). Through the use of the free indirect style, the priest's journey is represented as, on the one hand, individual and particular, and on the other as universal and mythical. The picture ties his experience to the quotidian – a conversation in a cow hut in which the Curé de Torcy remarks of the priest's finest moment, in which he delivers the lapsed Countess back into the hands of God, that 'there is nothing miraculous about it, you can be sure' – while the voice-over, representing his moment-to-moment reflections, finds universal significance in his suffering, locating it within a (grand) narrative.

The priest's account of his experience, although it naturally casts him as the protagonist in a narrative of his own devising, nevertheless differs from that of Jerome in *Claire's Knee*. Not only is the priest's a private performance, but the film's narration suggests that it is a sincere attempt to get to the truth. In the opening lines of the film the priest states in voice-over that he will write down 'from day to day, with absolute frankness, the simplest and most insignificant secrets of a life which in any case lacks mystery'. The unadorned portrayal of his journal writing emphasises this frankness. The doubling of the camera's representation of his writing, clearly legible on the screen, by his voice-over reading the same words, valorises his activity. We witness him in the process of turning his experience into a written narrative ostensibly for his own use, in contrast to Jerome who transforms a narrative apparently composed in his head into an experience for the consumption of an audience. Rohmer's film invites us to compare Jerome's account with the original event, then to cast a critical eye on it following Aurora's lead.⁵ In *Diary of a Country Priest*, on the other hand, the film's narration privileges the voice-over, doubling it with the picture track, pausing the action in dialogue scenes to accommodate it, and either eliminating or dipping the levels of concurrent speech and sound effects. Through such techniques Bresson effects a dramatic shift from a point of view emphasising opaque and mundane reality to one which illuminates the priest's inner world. This movement inward is simultaneously a movement away from the physical world and toward an existence that cannot be represented visually. The opposition between the two narrative points of view, represented stylistically through the free indirect speech-act, marks a conflict between visual appearance and the life of the spirit, between the individuated person in society and the universal nature of the soul.

Although Rohmer and Bresson employ the free indirect style for different purposes, they are alike in using this narrative device to privilege speech as a creative force. The symbolic nature of language gives words the power to create images and meaning that cannot be captured or conveyed by the camera alone. Using language in this way not only dimensionalises character but, on a formal level, creates a role for sound that allows it to exist not as an appendage to the image, but for its own sake. The logical extension of this tendency is to disengage speech entirely from image, a strategy employed by Marguerite Duras. Even the partial separation of voice from image, as found in the cinema of Rohmer and Bresson, allows at least two stories to be told at once, suggesting a dual reality of inner and outer worlds, thought and image, character and filmmaker. The 'cinema of poetry', according to Pasolini, 'has the common characteristic of producing films with a double nature', the film that the filmmaker would have made had he not delved into the psychology of his character

⁵ And following the coda of the film which shows Jerome to have been wrong to assume his revelations to Claire about her boyfriend would end their relationship.

and, superimposed upon it, the film comprising elements that express *stylistically* that character's unique point of view (2005: 182). In terms of the free indirect speech-act, Duras, in her introduction to the published script of *India Song*, expresses it aptly. Voices, she writes, can function as a 'means of exploration, revelation'. Identifying the voice as the vehicle for communicating memories, she states that discovering particular voices makes it 'possible to let the narrative be forgotten and put at the disposal of memories other than that of the author. . . . Memories that distort. That create' (1976: 6, emphasis in the original).

References

- Bazin, André. 'Le Journal d'un curé de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson.' *What Is Cinema?* Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967. 125-143.
- Bonitzer, Pascal. *Le Regard et la voix: Essais sur le cinéma*. Paris: Union Général d'Éditions, 1976.
- Bonitzer, Pascal. *Eric Rohmer*. Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1999.
- Bresson, Robert. *Notes on the Cinematographer*. 1975. Trans. Jonathan Griffin. London: Quartet, 1986.
- Browne, Nick. 'Film Form/Voice-Over: Bresson's *The Diary of a Country Priest*.' 1980. *Robert Bresson*. Ed. James Quandt. Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1998. 215-221.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. 1990. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Chion, Michel. *The Voice in Cinema*. 1982. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. 1985. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Continuum, 1989.
- Duras, Marguerite. *India Song*. 1973. Trans. Barbara Bray. New York: Grove, 1976.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. 'The "Cinema of Poetry."' 1965. *Heretical Empiricism*. Trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett. Washington: New Academia, 2005. 167-186.
- Rohmer, Eric. 'Film and the three levels of discourse: indirect, direct and hyperdirect'. 1977. *The Taste for Beauty*. Trans. Carol Volk. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. 84-92.
- Rohmer, Eric. *Six Moral Tales*. 1974. Trans. Sabine d'Estré. New York: Viking, 1980.
- Vidal, Marion. *Les Contes Moraux d'Eric Rohmer*. Paris: Lherminier, 1977.