Toward a Theory of Voice-Over through *Brief Encounter*  

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There is an old screenplay adage that says if you have to use voice-over it means there’s something wrong with the script. I’m quite certain this is not true, and when thoughts are to be conveyed, especially when they are of a nature which one would not say to another person, there is no other good alternative.

Stanley Kubrick

The sound of one’s own speech always has a strong effect on a person.

Ivan Turgenev

Since the advent of commercial sound cinema, the technique of voice-over has arguably provided the dominant picture of the experience of consciousness in Western culture. However, neither philosophers nor film theorists have contended deeply with this technique’s conceptual scheme. In order to ward off the danger of its naturalization, I want to consider the dynamic of experience and nature, reason and fact, ingrained into voice-over. More specifically, I question what is gained or lost when voice-over makes no distinction between how people sound to the world—their voice—and how they sound to themselves, which is, of course, not a sound at all but only an idea of a voice. That is, I want to think about the fact that typical voice-overs suggest that thought is subject to the same conditions of normativity and facticity and organicity that utterances are, and to wonder what sort of tribunal we are supposed to convene to ask after its realism when we cannot have certain knowledge of others’ private experiences.

Film theory’s hesitation to consider the effect of this method of storytelling perhaps stems from the use of “voice-over,” a term borrowed from the industry that refers to a directive during production (that the actor’s voice would be recorded separately and played over the image), and a term that does little to describe its on-screen function and value. Another reason may be that, historically, film theorists have neglected to differentiate the language of characters from the language of real people, a byproduct of the view that there is “no difference” (Béla Balázs’ view) or “no appreciable loss” (Christian Metz’s view) between an original sound and its recorded playback (quoted in Silverman, 42). The failure to see dialogue as an aesthetic object obscures the ability to contemplate internal relations between kinds of speech in screen fiction. There is also confusion in how voice-over is situated in relation to the narrative it in part comprises. Because, as Kaja Silverman puts it, voice-over “occup[es] a different order from the main diegesis,” it has become common (especially in film courses) to classify voice-over as “semi-diegetic,” meaning that such sound occurs both inside and outside of the world of the story. Similarly, Mary Ann Doane, for whom cinema is largely a visual medium, conceives of voice-over as an attempt to seize what “exceeds the visible.” Yet voice-over is also a technique invented by and for the cinema.

These extant accounts obscure the epistemological and political stakes in the way that voice-over presents not just relations of sound to image and voice to body, but of sound to sound and voice to voice. Conceptualizing voice-over as second-order diegesis distracts from the importance that images of the body typically retain—images that encourage us not just to listen to a character’s
thoughts but also to consider the experience of those thoughts as a matter of the relation of the two planes of existence (visual and aural). At the same time, voice-over is not just about the relation of image-body to voice, because we are meant to understand it as the voice precisely not of the body before us. This voice is defined in opposition to the vocal sound that that body emits to others. In this sense, voice-over is a paradox, a sound that is also not a sound, and a metaphor for the type of linguistic thinking that what we must attribute to a mind (“mind,” though an unpopular word in critical theory these days, remains a useful placeholder for, among other things, aspects of bodies unavailable to others). This paradox pictures consciousness as a means of containment and abandon, a non-space in which a character remains isolated from the world yet free to let fly unutterable thoughts.

In the annals of mainstream cinema, there are few uses of voice-over more renowned than Laura’s (Celia Johnson) in David Lean’s Brief Encounter (1945)—and few characters who have more longed for a sense of abandon. I want to consider Brief Encounter as an instance of sound cinema’s gravitation toward the technique and as a way to elucidate how ideological values can attach to particular uses of voice-over. In listening and looking closely, I also hope to combat the film’s reputation as an icon of British, conservative emotional reserve. Brief Encounter is deeply concerned with the constraints of public, social custom on, to borrow a phrase from its writer Noël Coward, private lives. That it does this through the story of an oppressed woman trying to live a non-normative sexuality is no coincidence. The drama of Brief Encounter, and of its baroque voice-over (like the voice-overs of a range of movies, from Out of the Past [Jacques Tounier, 1947] and Sunset Blvd. [Billy Wilder, 1950] to Clueless [Amy Heckerling, 1995] and The Thin Red Line [Terrence Malick, 1998]), hinges on the ethics of allowing secret fragments of subjectivity, fragments that characters believe matter, to be detected.

Brief Encounter’s narrative is a patently standard account of an emotional affair between a prim middle-class woman, Laura, miserably married with two children, and a man, Alec, also married. They meet on a series of Thursdays and fall in love. They do not consummate the relationship, and, in the end, decide that decency matters more than their affection, and welcome an eternity of sadness. At least, that is usually how the film is described. I want to offer a slightly different spin: Laura is cruising the train station—clearly not reading her book—when she picks up Alec. They meet on a series of Thursdays, and she hopes that he will produce something stiffer than his upper lip. They may very well have sex upon their second meeting on a secluded bridge, and fully intend to do so when they are interrupted at a flat Alec arranges for the occasion. After recognizing the moral quandary her bourgeois attachments and sense of duty condition, Laura decides to end the relationship—not because she cares a jot for her husband or children or reputation, but because she cares about herself and realizes that Alec is not giving her what she really wants: freedom, autonomy. No longer able to disavow the lack of freedom and pleasure her future as mother and housewife holds, she contemplates suicide before returning home to reflect on her life.

The film opens with a shot of a train rapidly receding, then the credits, and then a train arriving at the station, bringing us this story. The framing makes it hard not to see an allusion to the Lumière Brothers’ famous actualité and suggests that it is not just vehicles propelled by steam that matter but the cinematic apparatus, too. The train becomes both a bureaucratic oppressor and an instrument that enables Laura and Alec’s clandestine affair (not unlike the way more recent technology is often used). They spend more time discussing the train timetables and platforms than anything else. They are at the mercy of these rushing locomotives, which takes on a metaphorical cast as Laura conceives of her sexual and amorous feelings as things that happen to her. She says: “I’m an ordinary
woman. I didn’t think such violent things could happen to ordinary people. It all started on an ordinary day in the most ordinary place in the world.” (Coward’s joke here, of course, is that such affairs are ordinary.) Like the trains, when Laura’s feelings pull in to her consciousness, they arrive beautiful and terrifying, beyond her control and utterly temporal. Consequently, the majority of Laura’s inner monologue concerns not just time but her bewilderment at her experience of its scale: how time without Alec can be so slow and time with him so fast, etc. (Tellingly, she falls in love with him while he talks about death, the consequence of time.) Laura’s preoccupation with time is introduced in the first voice-over in the film, which comes about eight minutes in:

In a way, to suddenly be admitted into Laura’s thought is a daring prospect. We may suppose that she has previously not been thinking, or proceed to resent the film for denying us constant access. As Lean nears his camera to Laura’s face, the strains of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 ease our sonic transition from the space that she occupies with Dolly, the diegetic objective world, to the soundscape of her mind. The classic, increasingly tight close-ups collide with Laura’s aural liberty, and the black and white optics are in similar tension with the colorful, romantic concerto. Later, after she arrives home, she puts this same music on the record player and sits staring at her foolish husband. Laura begins to wonder what it would be like to tell him her story, and the remainder of the film—it ends when her husband interrupts her reverie—is her imagination of telling him. The story is just for her, a thought experiment, a way to try on the confession. Laura often seems caught between the music and the sounds of the train, which again and again punctuate scenes as if with perfect knowledge of her emotional states, or as if she conducts them to suit the vicissitudes of her affective life. After all, it is the phantom whistle of a train that leads her to weep and motivates her tale, not the apparition of Alec’s voice. In this way, Laura’s imagination bestows special powers upon the train—aligned with cinema—as a shaping force for her imaginary retelling.

In this first voice-over, while music and the push of the camera may help to demarcate Laura’s mind from her body, we confront the paradoxical identity between her mental voice and relational one. She sounds the same talking to Dolly and to her self, but in the latter case we cannot say that she has said anything. We lack vocabulary for referring to this sort of language use. We cannot call her “utterances” constative, performative, illocutionary, and so forth, and labeling them simply “inner speech” amounts to a refusal to probe the way Brief Encounter (and many thematically similar films, from noirs to melodramas) relates mind to mind, mind to body, mind to social realm, sound to image, private and public, etc. Just imagine Dolly’s reaction if she knew a threat had been made upon her life. This scene ensures that we are fully aware Laura’s thoughts are inexpressible in this world, and that we are not tempted to locate the groundwork of her mind by attending primarily to her on-screen body. In her face we see Laura precisely trying not to exhibit her inner life. Voice-over’s gesture of self-regard echoes her self-conscious fear of detection, a suitable means of telling a story about what cannot be expressed—here, due to social custom.

This division between what Laura’s mind and body express is further underlined by the revelation that they exist in different timelines. This revelation enjoins us to consider not just inner monologue, but the ideas of the internal voice and (external) speech, and of their relation. To realize that the body we see has fallen outside of the film’s time is jarring, and by screwing with the synchronicity of her conscious voice and body, Laura becomes only ambiguously embodied, a strategy that makes Brief Encounter subtly radical. Silverman notes that “there is a general theoretical consensus” that “the voice-over is privileged to the degree that it transcends the body” and that “it loses power and authority with every corporeal encroachment” until “synchronization marks…the point of fulfillment and complete embodiment”—until, that is, the voice is subject to the same finitude as the
produce though desire retreat into voice steam. Laura may want to dismiss her fleeting thought as though it merely crosses her mind as though it is not free, where she is imprisoned by custom, desire, and deviancy, her impulse causes her to retreat even further, to admit that even here she can produce thoughts that she must exile, now not from the interpersonal world but from herself. Her...

I wonder whether voice-over’s depiction of mental representations in the language of objective, verbal representation helped us take seriously feelings and desires that used to be excluded from the political realm. Does gender anxiety play a role in my pain at hearing my voice recorded and played back? It sounds higher than you expect. It jars your sense of reality. We are used to the resonances of our bones and cavities, and deeper voices have historically been associated with masculinity/profundity while higher pitches have historically been associated with femininity/silliness.

By introducing Laura’s mind as dynamic, like the trains, the clocks, and the music, the division of subjective and not-subjective is established from the outset as a matter not of Laura’s body’s perception of time but of her experience of it. But that does not mean that she has any diegetic control. Laura is constantly too soon or too late, and, as we heard, she does not find relief in the present, either. In contrast to prominent recent political and social theory, which resists futurity in favor of presentism, here, the present is also a box, not the possibility of spontaneity’s freedom, the blissful immersion in discrete moments, or the locus of meaningful control. Once she commences her thought experiment at home, Brief Encounter is set in the protracted present of her imagination. Laura’s initial voice-over thus establishes the rationale for the rest of the film, which is an elongated instance of being “lost in thought.”

Having fleeting thoughts or becoming “lost in thought” are not things that one can intend to do, and yet, if one wants to resist, one can not do them. Brief Encounter’s rumination on attention and intention does not end here, though. Laura’s reason for retreating into her interiority—which is Brief Encounter’s retreat into her interiority, if we believe that she was always thinking and feeling—is to hide from the violence of others’ voices into the presumable solace of her own. This leads to a moment that promises Laura’s inner speech may be something other than internment: the instant that she wishes Dolly dead. Laura’s impulsive desire is predicated upon an extreme close-up of Dolly’s pernicious mouth, and this moment is important for understanding how Brief Encounter views the relation of phenomenal properties and perceptual experience to the content of thought. The close-up of Dolly’s mouth tells us what impressions Laura receives that shape her mind’s directedness, while her response shows that her thought is neither a simple function of the world nor a free space distinct from the visual diegesis. Her experience of Dolly intrudes upon her ability to think freely. It is not just others—Laura knows that she can ignore Dolly with no real consequences—but the experience of others, their impingement upon one’s senses, that is a threat to freedom. (Brief Encounter reminds us that the impression of an image is not a given, natural occurrence. Its reception is a matter of second nature, not first.)

At the same time, Laura regards this fleeting, daydream of a thought as if it happens to her, a thought that merely crosses her mind as though it comes from and is headed somewhere under its own steam. Laura may want to dismiss her fleeting thought, her murderous itch, as trivial, but just as her retreat into voice over already signals where she is not free, where she is imprisoned by custom, desire, and deviancy, her impulse causes her to retreat even further, to admit that even here she can produce thoughts that she must exile, now not from the interpersonal world but from herself. Her...
wish for Dolly’s demise is no mere performance, yet she does not mean it. That Laura is so easily able to forgive herself this minor transgression foreshadows her sense that her major transgressions will matter less to her husband if she does not explicitly lay claim to them. Even if we chalk up fleeting thoughts or being lost in thought to subconscious interruptions, the body’s intrusion as the factory of desire, we must still posit something unusual: that there is something like semi-intentional inner speech, which means that there must be something like intentional consciousness so that we can discriminate between our thoughts. A fleeting thought is not this, my mental voice but that one. It is a voiced thought that is of still another order than either one’s public voice or the voice of thought. A gap exists between thinking a thought that one means and one that is immediately disowned, often registered in the difference between saying “I was thinking that…” vs. “The thought occurred to me….”

Even if we find the difference between thoughts we mean and thoughts we don’t, do we forgive ourselves the same way? Is that what revision becomes about?

While distinguishing between thoughts that we call ours and thoughts that occur to us is theoretically arduous, Brief Encounter dramatizes the stakes of this difference. That it delivers even this sort of thought, the fleeting kind, in Laura’s real voice (her interpersonal voice) blurs the line between judging and acting, between what it looks like to enjoy freedom as a judge and freedom as an agent, and constructs thought as a space of action, an ethical space. Hence, while voice-over might seem to furnish Laura an imaginative arena, a fantasy life free of guilt, its formal consistency indicates that such abandon is unobtainable.

Such blurring is pointed in a story about repression, and in a film that is avant-garde in representing seriously women’s desires outside the confines of marriage, and we might start to see why voice-over finds its way into tales that bind sexual and suicidal desire. I want to now turn to the climactic ending, in which Laura is too late to die. At this point in the movie, we return through her retelling to the space of the initial scene—with more knowledge and a reshaped visual perspective. We now know that Laura has just bid Alec farewell in the moment that precedes the scene of the earlier voice-over.

Her voice-over at the platform’s precipice is not what she thinks then, but is a reminiscence, a cinematic gesture of trying to capture a past present. She remembers having no thoughts at all during her flash of suicidal ecstasy, though such mental silence is impossible (outside of certain mystical practices). Still, the wish to rid the mind of language and social pressures—both of which are necessary for thought and meaning to emerge in the first place—is also perfectly ordinary. Etymologically, the irrational state of ekstasis means “to stand beside oneself,” and this scene’s schism between the past Laura (rendered in the presentness of the visual image) and the present Laura (rendered in the grammatical past tense of the voice-over) seems to embody this notion of intense experience. This climax confirms our suspicion that central to Laura’s predicament is her desire to not think, to escape herself.

Through Laura’s self-censure of her fleeting thoughts, Brief Encounter has already shown that her mental voice is two—the I and the not-I necessary to consciousness according to Sartre (which could be mistaken for death but of course is not). Because these Is are uniform, thereby negating the difference between public and private thought, voice-over annuls the existence of Laura’s subjectivity, her experience of selfhood. In this way, voice-over resembles the gesture of suicide. Voice-over seems to suggest that the internal voice is the realm of the conceptual, but that it takes a
form that exists only in reality (shared, objective reality) also suggests that there is no conceptual realm—and so, within its dualist logic, that there is only body, corpse. In this sense, when, at the very moment she almost ends her subjective life, Laura professes to have “no thoughts at all” in voice-over, she is absolutely correct.

Alec tells Laura in their first meeting that she “is too sane to be musical,” meaning that she is a routine-based person, too technic, too like the trains. Like Laura, do we seem sane to ourselves because our inner thoughts always “sound” the same? Are not subject to the voice’s fragility? They do not break or get scratchy at the end of a long day. This feels formal and gives us the illusion of consistency and maybe good sense, since that’s also measured as consistency. Maybe we even feel form first in our voices, laughing and crying. An internal scream is never as therapeutic. But can you claim that? Do other people talk to you as you do?

Unlike philosophical idealists who do not recognize a reality outside the conceptual sphere, voice-over proposes the converse—which is very different than the individualist notion of selfhood that voice-over, as classical device, is often assumed to peddle. To depict mental content sonically reinforces the common view that people are material governed by physical, even mechanical, laws, and it does so at the expense of the view that people may be able to reason in relation to reality, to have some modicum of freedom. At the same time, to depict mental content sonically foregrounds the internalization of ideology and the social condition of the mind, even down to the prosody one bestows upon one’s mental language. Laura cannot experience the distance between public and private that is essential to the desire to know the relation of self and others, and the relation of that relation to the world. With a mental voice comprised of objective sound, and with a uniform sound to her self and world, she cannot identify moments when the world mis-hears her. She cannot know when her public self meets and departs from her private one—in this case, the emotionally and sexually deviant self that despises the only self that the world acknowledges. In this light, Laura’s suicidal desire is understandable, even beautiful. To have no thoughts at all would alleviate the dilemma of how to extend into the world, conquering the threat of skepticism by being wholly present. The anguish of Brief Encounter’s voice-over is not that others hear Laura as she hears herself, that she manifests her words in the world as she thinks them, or that her inner subversiveness can be counted as real, but that she is doomed only to hear herself as others hear her.

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Notes

3 Silverman, 49.
4 Ibid., 50.

In *Intention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), G.E.M. Anscombe suggests that we *simply do* know the difference between “words that occur in somebody’s mind without his meaning them” and those that are meant (49).