

8 The First *Transi-Sounds* of Parallel Editing *Bernard Perron*

This essay is the outcome more of a theoretical reflection on early cinema than of historical research. It is meant to expand on the text I wrote for the 1996 Domitor conference about the Pathé Frères company.¹ On that occasion, I gave a comparative analysis of *The Physician of the Castle* (*Le Médecin du château*), a 1908 Pathé production, and *The Lonely Villa* (directed by Griffith in 1909), two films that rely on the farcical, yet terrifying, plot of the family threatened by thieves who have lured the father away from the house beforehand. Taking *The Physician of the Castle* as a paradigm of the state of film narrative at the beginning of the system of narrative integration (1908–1915),² I have attempted to account for one of the phases in the process of systematization of parallel editing. However, as Richard Abel pointed out in a later discussion, I neglected an essential element, intradiegetic sound. I intend here, therefore, to answer this omission in my analysis of the Pathé film and to consider some more general theoretical propositions.

Referring to Figure 8.1, I will first give a summary of my conclusions on *The Physician of the Castle*. The mode of representation and the articulation of shots in the Pathé film are the product of a theatrical conception. Long shots are explicitly modeled on a proscenium-style theater, and the cuts are largely motivated by the entrance or exit of characters. When these entrances or exits occur in depth, they conform to the theatrical convention in which a character leaving on the right should also reenter on the right, which prevents the creation of a simple and coherent line of action (from left to right as in Griffith's *The Lonely Villa*, for example). These entrances and exits are punctuated with empty frames creating some distance between the locations of the diegesis. In this respect, *The Physician of the Castle* is unable to establish the contiguity of the two rooms of the physician's house it presents to us, namely the living room and the office (see Fig. 8.2). It doesn't connect these two rooms; it juxtaposes them. It is not even able to articulate proximal disjunctions between on-screen (*here*) and off-screen (*there*) spaces in order to, retrospectively, create a parallelism within the same place (of the A1–A2 type) (see Fig. 8.1). Off-screen space remains a vacillating metonymic region that neither surrounds on-screen space nor exerts a continuous pressure on it. Rather, each shot is considered as an autonomous unit, a setting for an event to take place, in short, a scene. The expanse off-screen is not so much spatial (the *there* of a *here*) as narrative. What I call the "off-

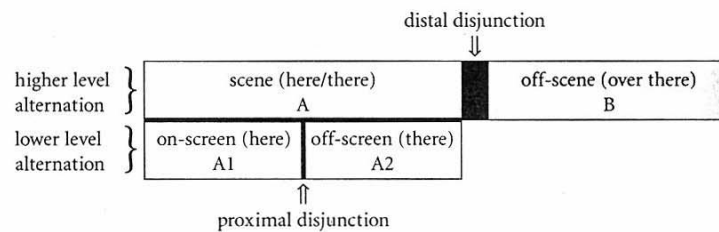


Figure 8.1

screen scene” is this portion of diegetic space that is nonvisible as well as non-contiguous to the setting (*over there*), yet connected to it through the narrative’s development.

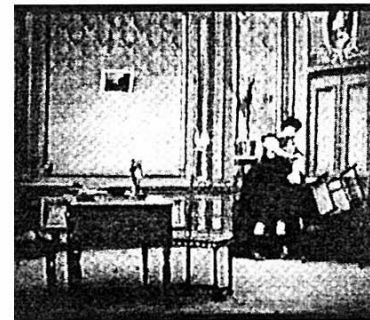
Because there is always a gap between diegetic spaces, *The Physician of the Castle* articulates distal disjunctions only between a scene (*here-there*) and an off-screen scene (*over there*). Clearly marking, with a car ride and a title (“Arriving at the Castle”), the distance separating the HOUSE from the CASTLE where the physician is lured, the film, in this instance, effortlessly takes advantage of an alternation at a higher level between these two narrative segments (of the A–B type) (see Fig. 8.1). In fact, this alternation is made up of three series:

- A) the physician at the CASTLE
- B) the wife and the son in the office at the HOUSE; and
- C*) the two criminals in the living room at the HOUSE.

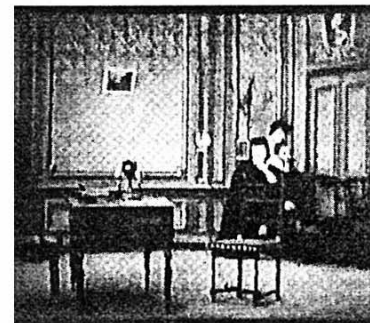
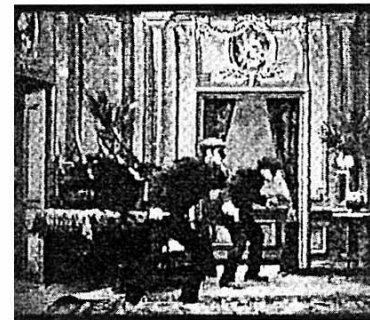
If a proximal disjunction had been established, the series A–C* would then have been considered an A1–A2-type alternation. This conception of the scene/off-scene correlation could have come about only in light of the knowledge that parallel editing was referred to as “parallel scenes” in 1908 parlance. This does not, however, prevent the Pathé film from situating the locations of the drama and connecting them to one another. Once the terms are set down, the alternation unfolds as follows:

Title: “Arriving at the Castle.”

- A) CASTLE: gate—The physician’s car pulls in (shot 13).
living room—The physician meets with the family; everyone turns out to be in good health (shot 14).
- B) HOUSE: office—The physician’s wife and his son enter on the right and barricade the door. Staying close to the door, they are all ears (shot 15).
- C*) HOUSE: living room—The two criminals enter the living room and prick up their ears in order to locate the office. They exit in the background to the right (shot 16).



8.2a-c. Three frame enlargements from *The Physician of the Castle* (Pathé, 1908).



- B) HOUSE: office—The wife stops listening, but the son stays on his guard next to the office door. The wife finds the castle’s phone number and calls there (shot 17).
- A) CASTLE: living room—The physician is still with the family. A servant informs him that his wife has called (shot 18).

- B) HOUSE: office—The physician's wife on the phone (close shot 19).
 A) CASTLE: living room—The physician on the phone (close shot 20).
 living room—The physician leaves the family (shot 21).
 gate—The physician's car pulls away (shot 22).

Regarding Méliès's films and scenarios and the Pathé films before 1914, Isabelle Raynauld has noted that "sound is an integral part of the mise-en-scène and influences the way the story is being told. It is an essential dramatic element of the film narrative in this [silent] period."³ *The Physician of the Castle* supports this observation. Within the parallel construction just described, we find two major intradiegetic sound events, that is to say, two actions directly related to sound which bring narrative information and change the course of the narrative situation.⁴

The first is undoubtedly the more interesting. It involves the listening done by characters in the HOUSE, which is explicitly visualized in shots 15, 16, and 17 (Fig. 8.2). Among the three authors (Abel,⁵ Gunning,⁶ and Salt⁷) who have devoted enough attention to *The Physician of the Castle* to be able to describe its action, none has noted this explicit listening despite the fact that it constitutes the cornerstone of this initial larger-scale parallel construction (living room/office). Like the characters' entrances and exits, the visualization of sound permits the gradual investing of the invisible field, as it decenters the image. From this perspective, and to use a Deleuzian expression that Livio Belloi employed in his "Poétique du hors-champ,"⁸ while there is no thread uniting on-screen and off-screen spaces yet, there certainly is a "wave" that starts from the scene and connects it to the off-screen scene. The articulation of proximal disjunctions and clear, compact spatio-temporal transitions within the same place may not have been possible yet, as they were difficult for spectators to understand. On the other hand, what I call transi-sounds⁹ were quite conceivable (see Fig. 8.3)

The so-called silent cinema—this is a basic fact that needs to be stressed—may not truly appeal to hearing, but it appeals nevertheless to understanding.¹⁰ *The Physician of the Castle* relies on the expectations of an audience versed in theater as well as everyday, ordinary perception of sound. Just as in theater, where an intradiegetic sound process would mark the resonance of hidden rooms, the mise-en-scène in the Pathé film points to the reality unfolding outside the spectators' field of vision and turns the *off-stage* into the *off-scene*.¹¹ The

sound belongs as much to the here as it does to the there or to the over there. Characters listen to noises produced beyond the stage. The audible, as Mikel Dufresne wrote in his *L'Oeil et l'oreille*, holds two co-present dimensions:

sound simultaneously invests me from everywhere, surrounds me, incorporates me, and is situated in a given direction which gives some indication as to its source.¹²

Through its spatial range, which exceeds visible information, and the attention given to the localization of its source, sound makes it possible to bridge the gaps separating diegetic spaces. Most of all, it permits the realization of intelligible transitions between these spaces (hence the arrow in Fig. 8.3). In this way, the supposed proximity of the scenes inside the physician's HOUSE (the living room and the office) is established through the actions of the characters as they prick up their ears toward an off-scene source. The sound event sets up the terms of the parallelism. This is a clue given to the audience so that they can understand the film and fill in the gaps between shots or scenes. In *The Physician of the Castle*, the action of listening literally serves as a point of *transi-sound* (hence the gray dot, which both exceeds and incorporates on-screen space in Fig. 8.3).

The term *transi-sound* permits one to emphasize both the idea of passage and the importance of sound. In my opinion, this casts a new light on Eileen Bowser's reflection on the systematization of parallel editing in cinema:

It seems significant to me that the early examples of parallel editing deal with adjacent spaces and not distant ones. This is evidently the first step in the development of the concept.¹³

Elsewhere, she notes that several of these early examples "might be interpreted as the need to show visual equivalents of sounds, sounds to which the characters react."¹⁴ The parallel scenes in *The Mill Girl*, the 1907 Vitagraph film which Bowser studied in detail and from which she drew her conclusions, are eloquent. The action takes place near a window inside and outside a house. Unable to articulate proximal disjunctions, Vitagraph was careful to leave the window of the house outside the field of vision of the audience, as Bowser noted. Like the criminals in *The Physician of the Castle*, the main protagonist of the film moves his hand near his ear in order to listen to outside noises and locate the assailants in the off-scene. As for the assailants, they make noise as they place a ladder against the wall, which earns them a rebuke from their leader who orders silence through gesticulations. The intradiegetic sound encroachment plays an important role here. Again, the parallel structure rests on transi-sounds. This is also the case in another canonical example mentioned by Bowser, Edison's 1907 *The Trainer's Daughter*; or, *A Race for Love*. Here, the shot of a man who calls jockeys by blowing into a cornet is inserted in a scene at the stable, where said daughter must prepare for the race. In this case, the comprehension of the link between spaces much farther apart from each other is made possible by the reach of the cornet. This type of amplified sound communication¹⁵ leads me to a quick dis-

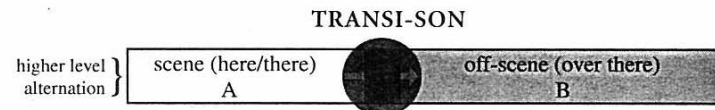


Figure 8.3

cussion of the second sound event in the parallel structure I have described above.

The second larger-scale parallel structure in *The Physician of the Castle* (HOUSE/CASTLE) stages a suspenseful phone call. This instance also involves another sound device that several other contemporary films have used. It is probably understood at this point that the use of an instrument that makes it possible to transmit sounds from a distance and connect spaces remote from each other perfectly illustrates my point. Accordingly, I will not expand on the representation of phone calls, but I will still segue from Bowser¹⁶ and Gunning¹⁷ to note that the introduction of this new technology allowed for a naturalization of cinema's power to move through time and space. Curiously, it is at this time that Pathé opts for a shift in the space of the scene of *The Physician of the Castle* in order to provide us with two exceptional close shots of the physician and his wife on the phone. The visualization of the act of listening produces a strong dramatic effect. Yet, if all phone conversations were reproduced through parallel editing after 1908, it is well-known that they were initially the product of a theatrical conception. Filmmakers re-created phone calls in long shots by using divided sets or screens, which directly juxtaposed scene and off-scene. In order to express simultaneity, filmmakers did not resort to spatio-temporal transitions between distally disjunct shots but instead used transi-sounds between distinct areas of action. Porter's famous *College Chums* (1907) remarkably exemplifies such a practice. Inside irises positioned at the extremities of the frame and placed above the image of a city, a couple is seen conversing on the telephone. To express their exchange, Porter animates letters, which seem to drift in the air toward the man and the woman, creating a wave connecting the interlocutors. This is a lovely example of a literal transi-sound!

The neologism I have just introduced and the conception I have laid out allow for a better terminology and definition of one of the processes used in early spatio-temporal articulations. Of course, transi-sounds were not the only way to effect passages between two diegetic spaces (some "mute" transitions existed¹⁸). They were not limited to either parallel editing or early cinema, since they took on more and more importance in cinema as it underwent institutionalization, as well as in sound cinema. Yet we have to reckon that, from 1907–1908 on, the visualization of sound and listening played an important part in the suturing of space (particularly within the same place) and the systematization of parallel editing. In order to see it, one simply had to lend it an ear.

TRANSLATED BY FRANCK LE GAC AND WENDY SCHUBRING

Notes

1. This text was written within the framework of GRAFICS (Groupe de Recherche sur l'Avènement et la Formation des Institutions Cinématographique et Scénique; Research Group on the Creation and Formation of Cinematographic and Theatrical Institutions) at the Université de Montréal, supported by the Conseil de recherches en sci-

ences humaines du Canada (Canadian Council on Research in Human Sciences) and the FCAR fund (Quebec).

2. *The Physician of the Castle* (1908) stands at the cusp of two modes of filming practice: the system of monstrative attractions (1895–1908) and that of narrative integration (1908–1915). See André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Le Cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l'histoire du cinéma?" in *Histoire du cinéma: Nouvelles approches*, ed. Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault, and Michel Marie (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1989), 49–63.

3. "Importance, présence et représentation du son dans les scénarios et les films Pathé dits muets," in *La Firme Pathé Frères, 1896–1914*, ed. Michel Marie and Thierry Lefebvre (Paris: L'Association française de recherche en histoire de cinéma, forthcoming).

4. See Isabelle Raynault, "Présence, fonction et représentation du son dans les scénarios et les films de Georges Méliès (1896–1912)," in *Georges Méliès, l'illusionniste fin de siècle?*, ed. Jacques Malthête and Michel Marie (Paris: La Sorbonne Nouvelle/Colloque de Cerisy, 1997).

5. In *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 285. Since he put me on the track of sound by pointing out the listening by the gangsters, it is curious that Abel would not note the importance of sound in this Pathé film, whereas in other instances he makes sure to mention certain "sound cues" (pp. 131, 135, and 147). In any case, he told me after my talk that he had paid more attention to the close shots in the film than to the mise-en-scène of sound.

6. In *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 190. Although Tom Gunning explained to me at the conference that his analysis concerned the articulation of the shots in *The Physician of the Castle* and not its sound, it is worth noting that when he described the shots in Griffith's 1909 *The Lonely Villa*, Gunning mentioned the sounds heard (p. 198). This is, in my opinion, revealing in terms of the status of the two films and the additional attention received by Griffith's film compared with Pathé's. On this topic, see the introduction to my analysis of *The Physician of the Castle*: "L'alternance du Médecin du Château (1908): scène/hors-scène," in *La Firme Pathé Frères*.

7. "The Physician of the Castle," *Sight and Sound* 54 (Winter 1985–86), 284–285.

8. In *Revue belge du cinéma* 31 (1992).

9. I am aware that the translation of my neologism in English does not work as it does in French (where only an "i" is missing in the passage from *transition* to *transi-sons*, while in English "sound" and "-tion" are pronounced quite differently). I still think that the term *transi-sound* expresses the idea that I want to emphasize just as well as, if not better than, does *sound link* or *sound bridge*. The latter terms, whether translated or used in French, emphasize only what serves as a link, not the notion of transition.

10. Translator's note: the French term used in the original text is "*entendement*," which means "understanding," but is derived from the same root as the verb "*entendre*" (to hear).

11. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

12. Mikel Dufresne, *L'Oeil et l'oreille* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), 86.

13. Eileen Bowser, "Towards Narrative, 1907: *The Mill Girl*," in *Film before Griffith*, ed. J. L. Fell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 338.

14. Eileen Bowser, "Griffith's Film Career before *The Adventures of Dollie*," in *Film before Griffith*, 370.

15. "We have a *proximal* disjunction any time the audience may assume, from the spatial information provided by the film, a possibility for non-amplified sound or visual communication (the telescope, for instance, is a means of visual amplification while the telephone would constitute a means of sound amplification) between two non-contiguous spaces brought together by editing." In André Gaudreault and François Jost, *Le Récit cinématographique* (Paris: Nathan, 1990), 95.

16. Eileen Bowser, "Le coup de téléphone dans les films des premiers temps," in *Les Premiers ans du cinéma français*, ed. Pierre Guibert (Perpignan: Institut Vigo, 1985), 218–224.

17. Tom Gunning, "Heard over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology," *Screen* 32, no. 2 (1991), 184–186.

18. In fact, right before the excerpt to *The Physician of the Castle* that I have described, there are direct, "mute" spatio-temporal transitions between the HOUSE and the CASTLE. However, these are two spaces between which the distance has been clearly established.