

# On the relation between sound and meaning in Hicks' *Snow Falling on Cedars*

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## *Abstract*

*This article looks at the semiotics of speech in a Hollywood film. Sound — and especially speech — plays a crucial role in the cinematic experience, but a minimal role in film theory and criticism. Filmic speech generally drives plot and characterization, while visual techniques are developed to construct and comment upon a film's thematic statements. An interpretive analysis of the 1999 film *Snow Falling on Cedars* however, demonstrates that director Scott Hicks reverses this common relationship between the visual and the aural, deploying speech to construct and comment upon the film's main theme of memory.*

According to Laura Mulvey, filmmaker Josef von Sternberg once said he would 'welcome his films being projected upside down so that story and character involvement would not interfere with the spectator's undiluted appreciation of the screen image' (Mulvey 1989 [1975]: 22). Sternberg's point, Mulvey notes, was to emphasize the importance to cinema of the visual, pictorial space and of visual composition through framing and juxtaposition of photographic images. Showing the film upside down, Sternberg implied, would disrupt the spectator's attention to plot without disrupting the appreciation of visual form. Sternberg wanted to sideline the referentiality of visual images.

This same point applies with even greater force to sound — and especially to dialogue — in film. The referentiality of dialogue is so powerful that its artistry often goes unnoticed — indeed, often unexploited. Filmmakers and viewers rely on the speech in a movie to explain and drive the plot and characterization, leaving little attention for symbolic connections to other filmic themes. As Weis and Belton note, Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock are the exceptional directors in English-language cinema who can be considered 'sound stylists' (Weis and Belton 1985: 286). Directors,

such as Welles and Hitchcock, however, for whom sound functions as an 'independent element of composition and meaning' (Weis and Belton 1985: 288) might well wish that their soundtracks would be played in reverse so that the artistry of the composition can be heard above the meanings of the words.<sup>1</sup>

This article argues that Scott Hicks does just that in his recent film, *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999). This film stands the relationship between the visual and the aural image on its head, as aural style becomes as important as visual style. Speech participates in this film's cinematic codes, commenting on the film's theme of memory.

### 1. The semiotics of filmic sound

Sound plays a crucial role in the cinematic experience, but it has been largely ignored in film aesthetics. Conceptualized as 'moving pictures,' films have been theorized primarily as a visual medium. The development of photography popularized visual realism in the nineteenth century (cf. Benjamin 1969), and early 'movies' added motion to the mechanical, 'objective' reproduction of visual reality (cf. Bazin 1999 [1945]). According to legend, early motion picture audiences were so awed by the simulacrum of reality films presented that they sometimes fled from images of an onrushing locomotive.

The visual, however, has been fetishized in film studies (cf. Doane 1985; Altman 1992, *inter alia*), eliding the important contribution sound makes to the impression of reality in cinema. Indeed, the anecdote described above is usually understood to demonstrate the power of the visual images, while it may in fact demonstrate the power of sound more convincingly. The common interpretation relies upon stereotypical notions about 'silent' films, which were, in fact, rarely silent (Williams 1985: 126). Instead, 'silent' films were accompanied by music, dialogue, and sound effects.<sup>2</sup> The latter were so effective that (according to another legend) the blood-curdling screams of an unfortunate projectionist who had touched bare electrical wires while showing a film, merged so seamlessly with the film's action that no one offered assistance (Klenotic 2001: 156). The fact that silent-film audiences expected sound to accompany silent films suggests a more nuanced understanding of the first anecdote. It is possible that audiences fleeing images of an onrushing locomotive were startled not by silent visual imagery, but by the *sound* of an onrushing locomotive — by the simulacrum of reality produced by the conjunction of recorded sound and moving picture.

The talkie revolution brought on an acrimonious debate among film theoreticians, critics, and practitioners. Many leading figures, including Charlie Chaplin and Sergei Eisenstein, opposed 'talkies' on aesthetic grounds, arguing that sync-sound would ruin the truly unique aesthetics of the motion picture (Eisenstein 1949 [1928]).<sup>3</sup> Their arguments focused on the theory of montage, and the techniques of juxtaposition of visual imagery as a way of creating transcendent and salient messages. The debate pitted opposed philosophies of art and aesthetics against each other. Silent-film enthusiasts believed art to be the representation of subjective reality, while sound-film enthusiasts held art to be the representation of objective reality.

Andre Bazin was the leading champion of the sound-film. His influential criticism ushered in a new film aesthetics that celebrated realism, and synchronized sound became a central feature. Bazin championed new visual techniques, such as the long take and the deep-focus shot, because they lent to the cinema the same close relationship to lived experience that photography had. Whereas photography had brought, in the early nineteenth century, objective realism to the visual representation of objects, cinema brought, at the turn of the twentieth century, objective realism to the visual representation of motion. New lens technologies in the 1920s and 1930s enabled deep-focus shots, in which many actors at various distances from the camera could all be in focus at the same time. This, in turn, allowed directors, like Orson Welles, to compose entire scenes to play out theatrically in front of an unmoving camera — as single 'long takes.' Synchronized sound, Bazin felt, completed the cinema's ability to recreate lived experience.

Film sound is of three types — background sound (such as mood music), sound effects (such as gunshots), and character dialogue — but it was the newfound ability to provide realistic dialogue that revolutionized the film world in the late 1920s. To be sure, aesthetic conventions of cinema had long anticipated the presence of filmic speech (Bordwell 1985b: 301). Silent era films had been moving in the direction of dialogue for many years; whereas early silent-era films relied primarily on 'expository titles' to establish character and explain plot, later silent-era films devoted a majority of the inter-titles to character dialogue (Bordwell 1985a: 186). The perfection of sync-sound movies allowed realistic depictions of conversation, which in turn allowed the role of dialogue to be naturalized and to recede from the viewer's focal attention.

Speech in film was so naturalized that it receded from critical attention as well. Speech contributes so much to the meaning and impact of films that a film without it is almost inconceivable today (cf. Camper 1985). Yet a film's treatment of dialogue is rarely analyzed as an independent

component of a film's aesthetics. Speech is anomalous in this respect. Visual dimensions of filmic structure, such as lighting, camera angle and movement, frame composition, and cutting technique, receive extensive discussion.<sup>4</sup> Filmic speech, in contrast, is treated as if it were transparent — unproblematically referential.

While a number of influential film theorists have written about language (cf. Eisenstein 1949 [1934]; Metz 1991 [1971], 1974, *inter alia*), few have dealt with speech. Film semioticians have drawn on ideas about language in order to describe the characteristics of the filmic signifying system. Such theorists looked for analogues to film in structural linguistics, comparing the frames and shots of film structure to the phonemes, morphemes, and sentences of language structure in a search for minimally meaningful units of film (cf. Metz 1991 [1971]). Christian Metz, for example, pointed to inter-cutting as a cinematic morpheme — a minimal unit possessing a specific denotation. Inter-cutting is the common technique whereby a film rapidly alternates between shots from two different scenes. Chase scenes are often constructed in this way, with shots of the pursuers alternating with shots of the pursued. The events depicted in the two scenes are then — conventionally — interpreted as 'happening at the same time.' Metz argued that inter-cutting denotes 'simultaneity' (Metz 1991 [1971]: 117).

Metz termed the set of such conventional norms for interpreting cinematic imagery a 'specialized (cinematic) code,' which he contrasted to a 'cultural code' (Metz 1991 [1971]: 112).<sup>5</sup> Films also convey meaning through cultural codes — but here the communication draws on social conventions that are not specific to the cinema. Actors dressed in a certain style of clothing, for example, communicate meaning through the sartorial codes of a particular cultural location. Similarly, actors animating a character in a particular dialect, accent, or style of speech communicate meaning through the sociolinguistic codes of a particular society. Indeed, films draw heavily on culturally coded language styles for characterization. The 1939 classic, *Gone With the Wind*, for example, characterizes many of the characters through formal aspects of their speech, including features of dialect and style.<sup>6</sup>

The semiotic study of *film-as-a-language* thus reinforced the overwhelming visual emphasis in film studies and helped to further obscure the role of sound in film structure. The publication in 1980 of Rick Altman's pathbreaking volume *Cinema/Sound* broke new ground and led to a series of studies and collections of film theory and criticism focused on aural aspects of the cinema (cf. Weis and Belton 1985; Altman 1992; Abel and Altman 2001; Lastra 2000; Chion 1999 [1982]). Yet even this excellent body of work is devoted primarily to either non-dialogic

aspects of filmic sound, or to purely technological or historical aspects of speech in film. The aesthetic contribution of speech itself — meaningful both as a cultural code and as cinematic code — is almost entirely ignored.

Recently, a small number of studies have emerged that begin to address the cultural coding of speech in films. R. Paul Murphy's brief 1978 article, for example, looked at changing norms for taboo language in filmic dialogue (Murphy 1978), and Laura Martin's 1984 article examined the meaning of code-switching in the Spanish/English film *Zoot Suit* (Martin 1984). In 1991 Amy Lawrence published the first book-length treatment of speech in films, looking at Hollywood's construction of the 'problem' of women's voices when sound films were introduced (Lawrence 1991).

To date, however, the lone work to seriously engage with filmic dialogue as an aspect of a film's cinematic code is Hemmeter and Hemmeters's (1986) analysis of Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980). The Hemmeters show how director Scorsese makes of the film's dialogue a symbolic foil for the film's overall themes. *Raging Bull* tells the tragic story of a boxer (Jake LaMotta, played by Robert DeNiro), whose grace in the ring contrasts with his lack of grace outside of it. Awkward and insecure in private life, LaMotta careens through friendships, marriages, and business relationships, increasingly unable to match his physical grace in the social arena. Scorsese's symbolic oppositions of grace and awkwardness are developed visually through innovative (and frequently commented upon) slow motion and close-up shots of fight scenes. The Hemmeters point out that he develops these themes through speech as well. Success and failure, grace and awkwardness take their aural homologues in verbal oppositions of speech to silence, speech to action, and fluency to disfluency (Hemmeter and Hemmeters 1986).

This article builds on the Hemmeters' pioneering work to argue for a social semiotics of voice in the cinema. Interpreting aural imagery in Scott Hicks' *Snow Falling on Cedars*, I will show how sound — and especially dialogue — functions as a cinematic code in developing the film's overarching themes of love, loss, and memory.

## 2. *Snow Falling on Cedars*

Scott Hicks' 1999 film, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, adapts David Guterson's award-winning novel of the same name.<sup>7</sup> The plot revolves around a murder trial set in a small-town on a Pacific coast island shortly after the end of World War II.<sup>8</sup> The backdrop for the trial includes an island community long split between Japanese-Americans and Anglo-Americans. Generations of Japanese immigrants had worked the land and brought

up their families alongside Anglo neighbors, and the two groups had long co-existed in a tense inequality papered over with the trappings of equality. The outbreak of World War II changed all that, as the Japanese-heritage residents were removed from their homes, trucked past silent neighbors, and incarcerated for years in faraway internment camps. The trial thus takes place in a community that is just coming to grips with the war's devastatingly divisive effects.

The film stars Ethan Hawke as Ishmael Chambers, the town's Anglo-American newspaper publisher, and Youki Kudo as Hatsue Miyamoto, his Japanese-American classmate. The two fell in love as children, but the war, its internment camps, and the emerging hostility between ethnic groups on the island separated them. Hatsue's family was relocated to an internment camp, where, bowing to family pressure, she broke up with Ishmael and married Kazuo Miyamoto — a Japanese-American man.

Thus the trial reunites Ishmael and Hatsue: Hatsue's husband is tried for murder, and Ishmael covers the trial for his newspaper. Kazuo was born, and grew up on the island, but the trial seems destined to go badly for him, as the murder accusation has galvanized anti-Japanese anger in the town. Ishmael comes across evidence that could exonerate Miyamoto. Not quite over his childhood love for Hatsue, however, and feeling abandoned by her marriage to the defendant, Ishmael is not certain he wants to help Hatsue free her husband. The trial thus becomes a test of character and a point of personal growth for Ishmael as he confronts his memories of Hatsue's love.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Sound and image in *Snow Falling on Cedars*

The film opens with a stunning sequence: shots of two fishing boats encountering each other in the gloom of a nighttime fog followed by shots of the town sheriff and his deputy discovering the waterlogged body of a fisherman drowned in his own nets. These initial scenes set the stage for the trial, in which one fisherman (Kazuo Miyamoto) is tried for the murder of the other (Carl Heine Jr.).

The opening sequence also sets the stage for the film's distinctive aural style. The soundtrack for these scenes is strikingly — uncannily — noisy and silent at the same time. The scenes are, on the one hand, filled with sound. We hear the creaks and groans of boats rolling in high seas, the blasts of a foghorn, the screams of seagulls, the sounds of rescuers pulling in nets — and (then) the sounds of the rescuers responding to the gruesome sight of the corpse. Yet these same scenes also come across as silent.

Though not actually voiceless, the shots obscure dialogue that is anticipated. When the image track shows the sheriff and deputy hauling in the lifeless body, for example, the soundtrack includes, but obscures their conversation. We hear the directions and exhortations exchanged between them, the grunts of their effort, and, finally, their expressions of disgust as they glimpse the corpse. But these segments of talk are barely audible, and they overlap in odd ways. The camera does not focus on the speaker when the sound plays a voice, and, when the camera does show faces, the characters are not speaking. In these and other ways what is seen is disconnected from what is said, and the film generates a gap between aural and visual images. This rupture is simultaneously soothing and disconcerting to the viewer, and it calls attention to the soundtrack and marks it as a structuring element of the film.

If the first two scenes subordinate sound to image, the third scene subordinates image to sound. In the opening scenes the pictures told a story even in the absence of coherent dialogue. In the subsequent scene the dialogue tells a story in the absence of coherent images, as the sound becomes central and the image inflectional.<sup>10</sup> In Table 1 the film's third scene is transcribed so as to show the correspondence between shot structure and dialogue structure. In this and other scene transcripts in this paper, horizontal lines identify simultaneity in time. As Table 1 shows, the relationship between shots, visual imagery, and speaker turns is quite complex. The cut between shots 22 and 23, for example, bisects Moran's line of dialogue, 'Only to see if somebody talked to him.'<sup>11</sup>

This scene begins Sheriff Art Moran's investigation of the fisherman's death, and Ishmael's coverage of the story. As can be seen in Table 1, the image track starts (shot 22) with a long shot of Ishmael, viewed from high above and behind, as he walks through a warehouse toward the wharf (Figure 1). A cut takes the image track to a medium shot of Moran, at the wharf, speaking to a group of the town's fishermen (Figure 2). Shot 24 returns to Ishmael, shown again from behind, but this time from close by, as Ishmael stops atop a flight of stairs, overlooking (and overhearing) Moran's conversation (Figure 3). Shot 25 then looks up at Ishmael from roughly the position Moran occupies (Figure 4). Shot 26 returns to Ishmael's view of Moran and his interlocutors (Figure 5), and shot 27 returns to Moran, this time as a closeup (Figure 6). The sequence ends with a long shot that shows the entire scene (Figure 7).

What makes this scene interesting is that the visual imagery is out of sync with the dialogue. This rupture is marked in several ways. As Table 1 shows, we hear dialogue well before we see speakers. Shot 22 juxtaposes the voices of Moran and a fisherman with the image of Ishmael. (Indeed, the person we see on camera in shot 22, Ishmael, never does

Table 1.

Shot	Visual imagery	Speaker	Dialogue
22	Camera follows Ishmael Chambers (from above and behind) as he walks through a warehouse	M	So did any more of you guys see Carl out at Ship Channel Banks last night?
		F1	What do you want to know for---
		M	---Only to / see if somebody talked to him
23	Sheriff Ari Moran (M) speaking to group of fishermen (F1-5) on pier.	F1	Fish went sour on me when the fog rolled in, I got the hell out of there,
			Ok /
		F2	we got Ferry, Hartwell, Molten, Niyomoto,
24	From behind Ishmael as he approaches the group of fishermen talking with Moran.	M	Anybody else?
		F3	Japs,
			I figured you'd have heard by now.
25	Reverse shot: from perspective of fisherman below looking up at Ishmael	M	All right uh,
			If you see any of these guys--
26	Shot from Ishmael's perspective, looking down on fishermen and Moran	F4	---Ari's startin to sound like a real sheriff,
		F	(laughter)
		F5	It's just an accident that's all,
27	Reverse shot: from perspective of fishermen looking up at Ishmael, camera		Well of course it is, but a man's dead, William, I gotta write my /
		M	report, (gotta),
28	Long shot of Moran speaking from behind the group of fishermen		

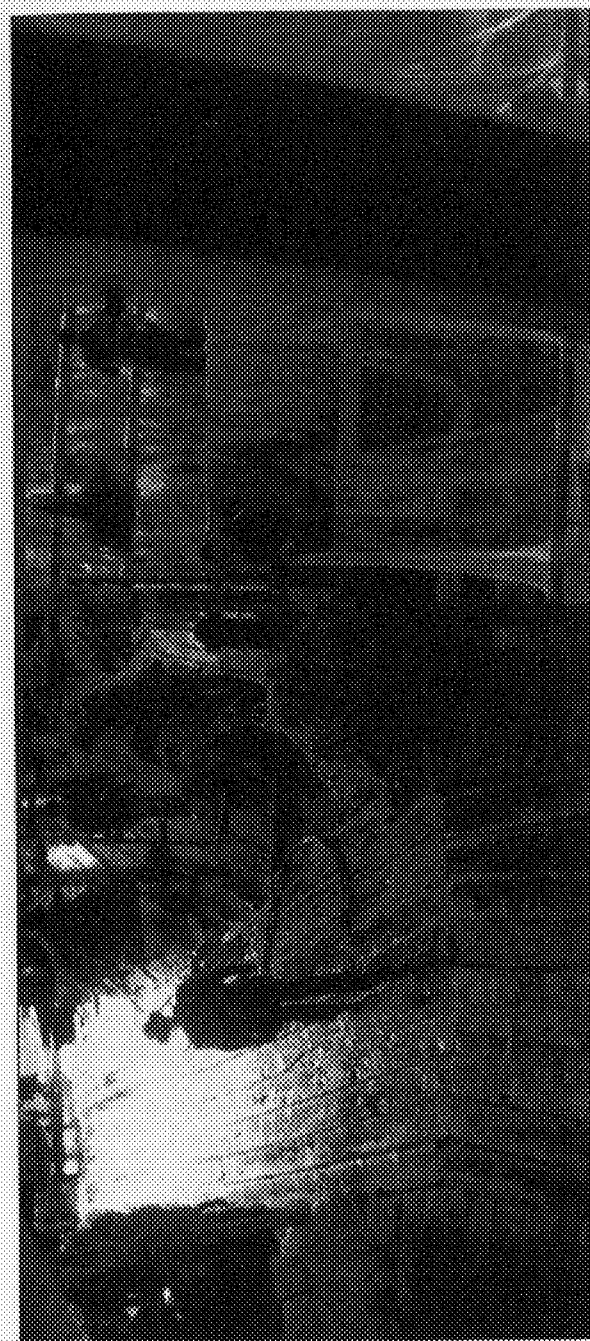


Figure 1.



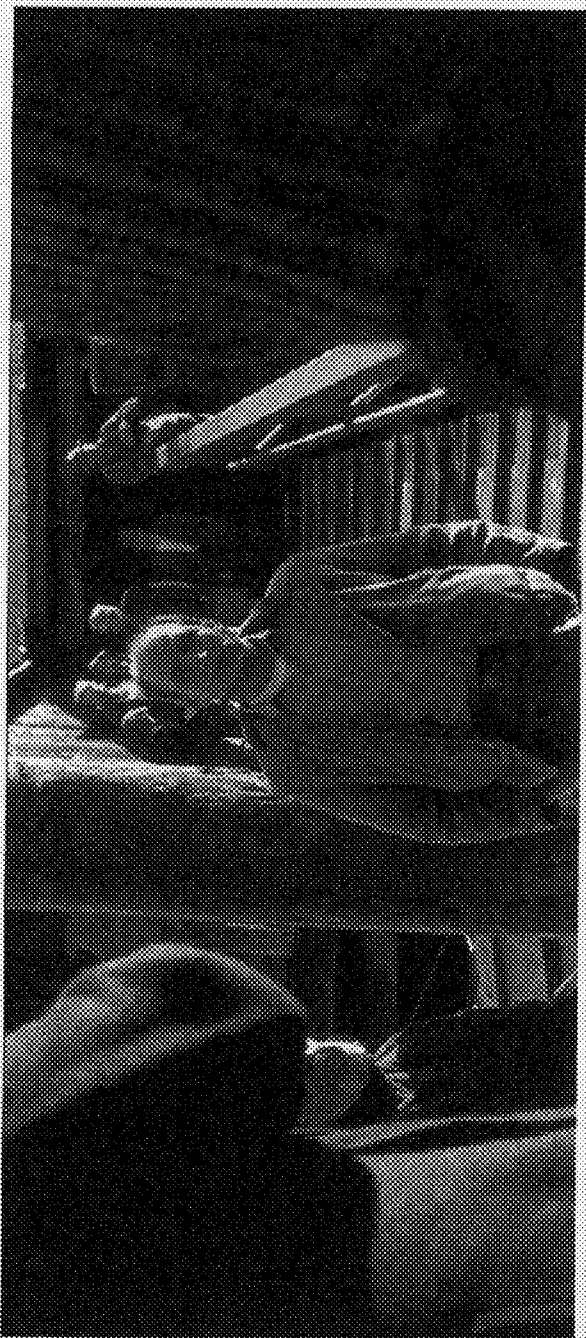


Figure 2.

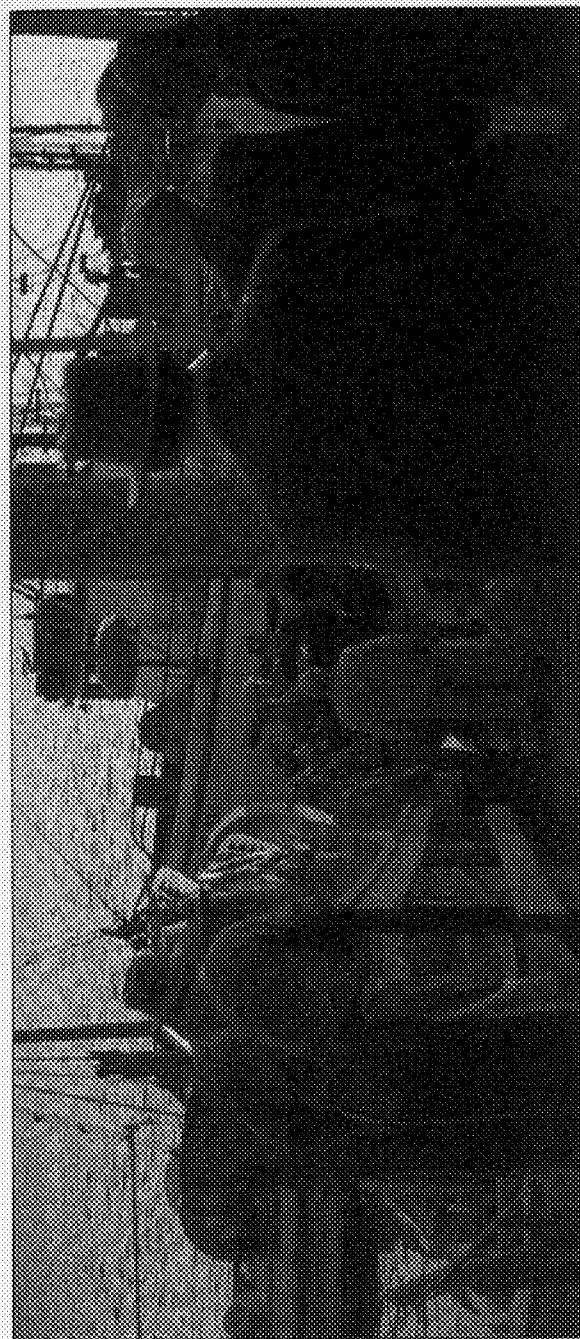


Figure 3.

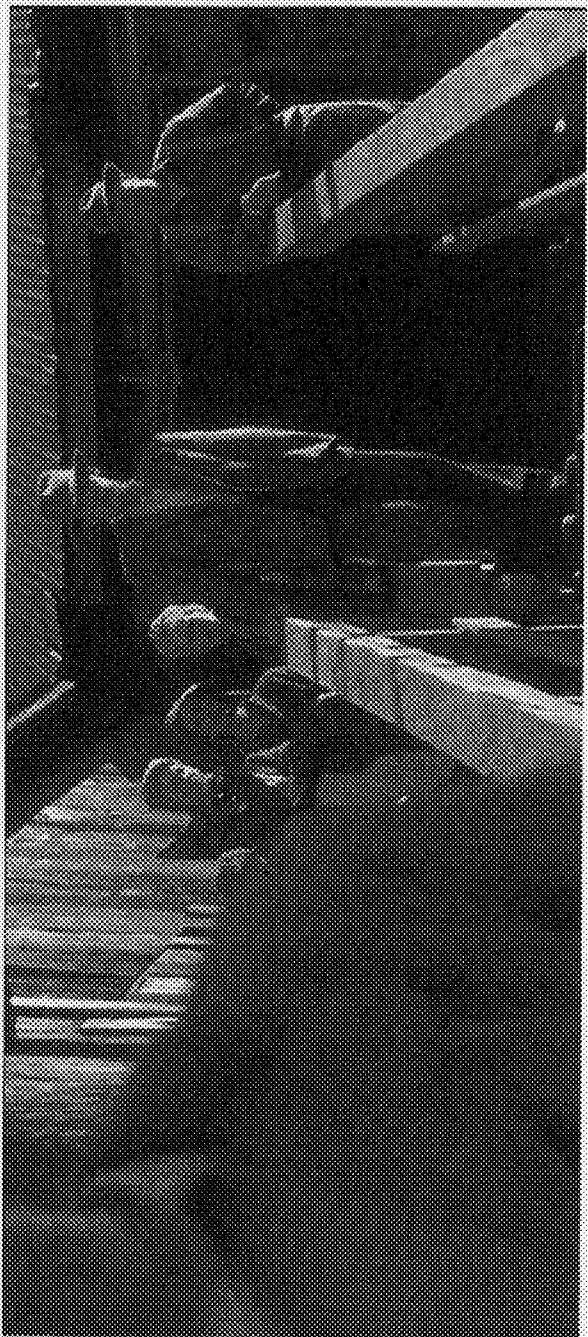


Figure 4.

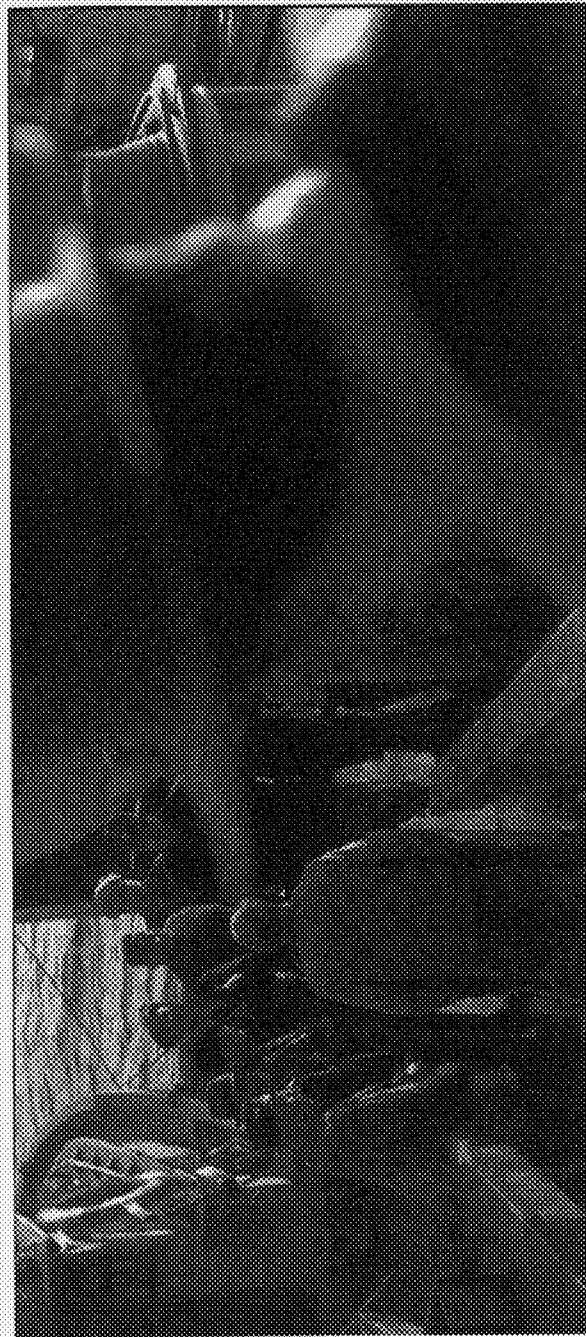


Figure 5.

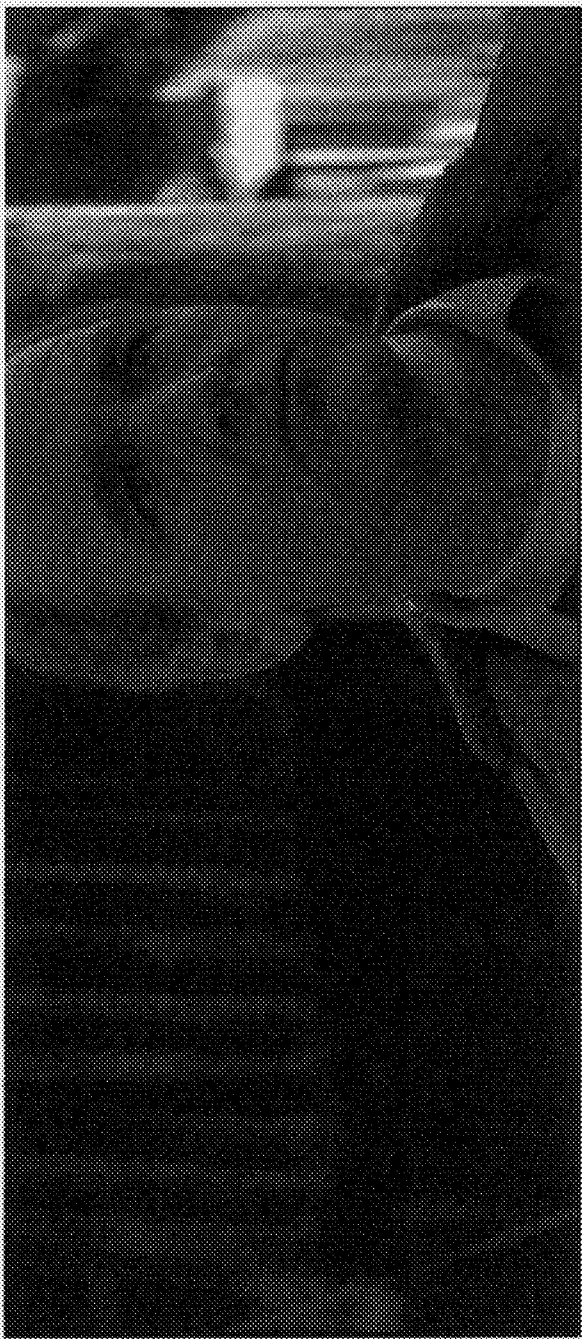


Figure 6.

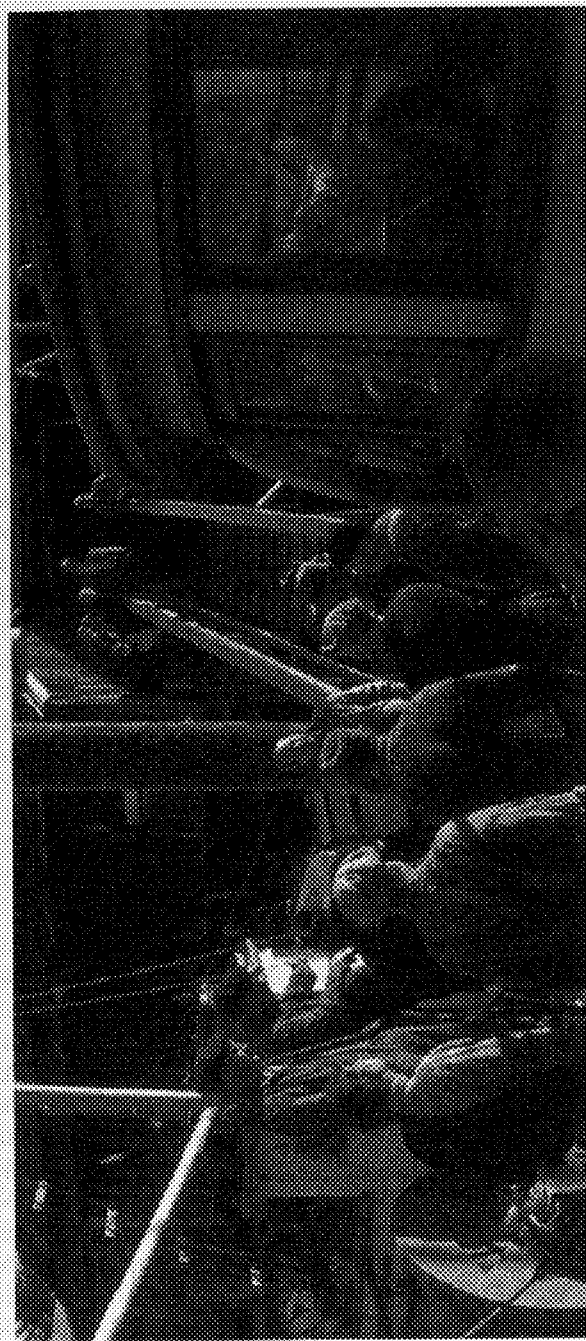


Figure 7.



become a participant in the conversation we hear throughout the scene.) The camera's focus on Ishmael as he approaches, and then observes the conversation (Figures 1, 3, and 5) suggests that the viewer's access to the dialogue parallels Ishmael's access.<sup>12</sup> Yet the film also subverts this diegetic<sup>13</sup> explanation, since we hear the voices of Moran and the fishermen as if from nearby — too loud and too immediate to have been overheard by Ishmael as he walked toward the wharf, or as he stood at the flight of stairs.

Indeed, the film calls attention to the rupture. Shot 24 begins with a view of Moran's back, as in Figure 3. At precisely the moment that Ishmael arrives at the top of the stairs, Moran turns to look up at him and says, 'I figured you'd have heard by now' (Figure 4). The sheriff then turns back to the fishermen and resumes the conversation (Figure 5). Moran's acknowledgment of Ishmael's arrival is uncanny, since no diegetic reason for him to perceive Ishmael's presence is suggested. Moran's words to Chambers are presented with a very different sound quality. This utterance is softer, more reverberant, filled with more background sound than Moran's other utterances in the scene. It is made to sound as if it comes to Chambers (and the camera/microphone) from far away. When Moran turns and again addresses the fishermen, the sound also returns to its earlier volume and immediacy. The aural imagery thus reverses the scene's visual geography. If the viewer experiences the speech as the character Chambers would have overheard it, then Moran's voice should have become louder and more direct when facing Chambers than it was when he had his back to him.

#### 4. Dialogue and classical continuity editing

These opening scenes exemplify a strategy that director Scott Hicks employs throughout his film *Snow Falling on Cedars*. The juxtaposition of aural richness with dialogic silence creates a cinematic tension that stems from the assumed coincidence in modern cinema of dialogue with visual representations of human interactions. The distinctiveness of Hicks' representation of speech in *Snow Falling on Cedars* becomes clear when compared to a film, such as *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960),<sup>14</sup> which utilizes more traditional Hollywood conventions for representing dialogue in movies.<sup>15</sup>

*The World of Suzie Wong* retells a familiar tale, made famous by the opera, *Madame Butterfly*,<sup>16</sup> in which a Western man falls in love with, and seeks to save an Asian prostitute. In this version, the American Robert Lomax (played by William Holden) travels to Hong Kong in

order to try his hand at being an artist. Along the way he meets the beautiful Suzie Wong (played by Nancy Kwan) and is so infatuated with her charms that he seeks to follow her home.

The first scene in this sequence has him asking directions from a traffic policeman in the center of a busy Hong Kong thoroughfare, and this brief conversation is represented using traditional Hollywood conventions. The scene opens with an establishing shot (Figure 8) that sets out for the viewer the context within which the conversation will take place. Lomax and the policeman are shown from the side as the conversation begins. When Lomax utters his first line, the camera cuts to the view shown in Figure 9. Lomax, the speaker, is shown more or less from the policeman's perspective. When the policeman responds, at the close of Lomax's utterance, the camera cuts to the view shown in Figure 10, which is an approximately 'reversed' shot, showing the policeman more or less from Lomax's perspective. This pattern of shot/reverse-shot continues rhythmically throughout the short conversation, representing a two-party dialogue through a sequence of shots showing each speaker, in turn, from the perspective of the interlocutor. Each speaker is framed in close shot while speaking, with the camera angle corresponding to the spatial perspective of the listener. The scene concludes with a return to the establishing shot (Figure 8),<sup>17</sup> as the men take their leave and a dissolve carries the film to another scene.

The shot/reverse-shot convention for representing dialogue is part of a broader set of technical conventions for cinematic narration usually referred to as 'continuity editing' (cf. Bordwell 1985a). Classical Hollywood films are shot and edited so that the story is told with minimal attention paid to the techniques of narration. The camera works as an idealized observer of the represented action. Within a scene, changes in camera position (i.e., cuts to a different shot) recreate the observer's visual attention — turns of the head, as it were. In representing dialogue, continuity editing recreates an idealized listener's consciousness. Cinematic structure thus parallels sociolinguistic structure: a shot equals a turn-at-talk; a cut equals a transition-relevant point; camera position and angle equal the intonation and prosody of an utterance; and the rhythm and pacing of the cutting equal the interactional flow of a conversation.

Continuity editing produces a seamless ('sutured') impression of lived experience in part because it reproduces ideological notions of how people use language. Movies traditionally represent conversation as involving two individuals, speaking one at a time, waiting for the other to conclude before responding, and attentively listening to what their partner has to say. By forcing viewers of a movie like *The World of Suzie Wong* to focus on the speaker, these cinematic conventions reproduce a Western



Figure 8.

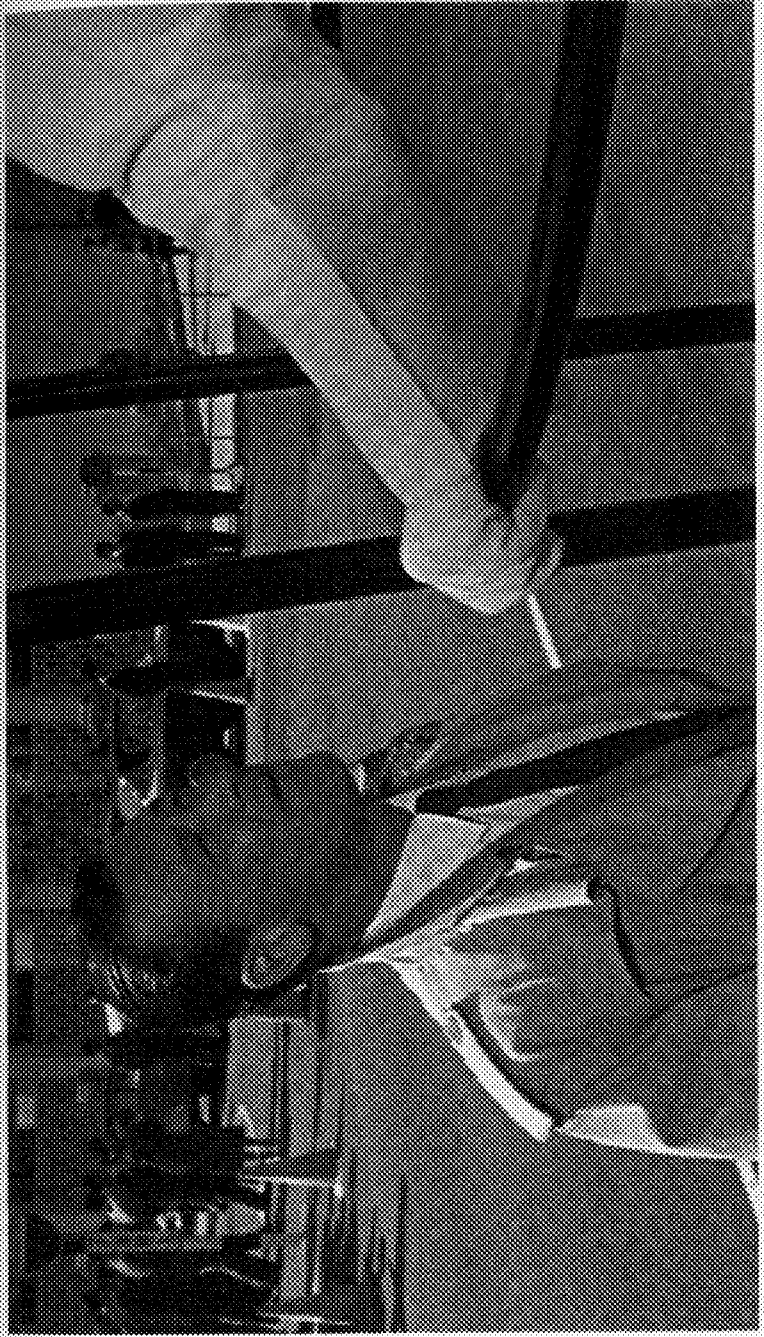


Figure 9.

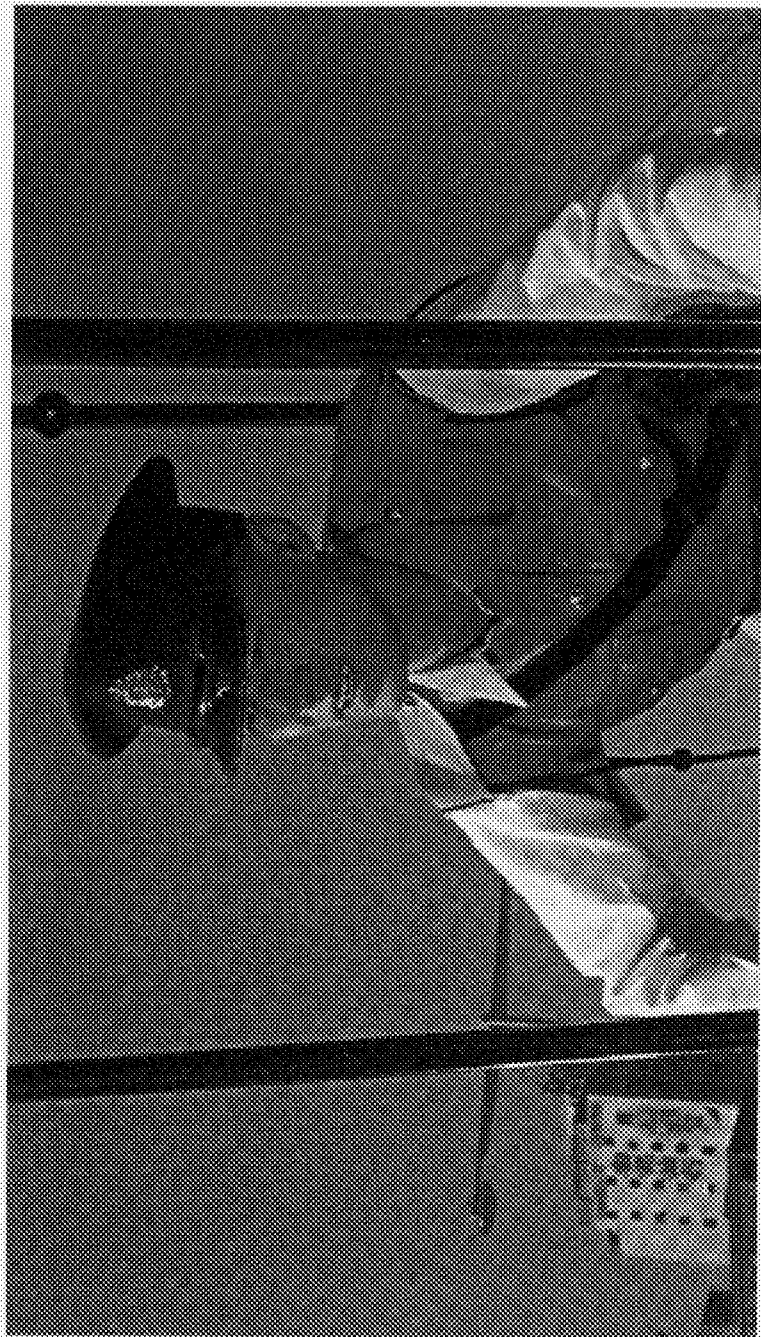


Figure 10.

ideology of language that privileges the speaking subject and the referential function of language. A generation of discourse analysis has shown, however, that actual conversations proceed quite differently. Many real-world conversations, for example, involve more than two individuals, performing roles more complex than speaker/hearer (Goffman 1983), participating in contrapuntal rhythms of interruption and overlap (cf. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), and doing myriad things with their speech other than communicating ideas.<sup>18</sup>

### 5. Dialogue in *Snow Falling on Cedars*

In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, the director subverts the seamless conventions of continuity editing, calling attention instead to his manipulation of sound, image, and dialogue. Hicks uses sound much in the way that Penny Mintz describes for Orson Welles, to create a tension 'between the space and the sound; between our aural and visual perceptions . . . Sound becomes disembodied and takes on a force and presence of its own.' (Mintz 1985: 289). *Snow Falling on Cedars* marks a gap between the spoken and seen narrations, establishing a symbolic role for speech in the film's cinematic code.

Returning to my earlier discussion of the film's third scene, we can see some of the ways Hicks deconstructs the traditional suturing of sound and image. The image track establishes a shot/reverse-shot pattern for the scene that suggests a conversation between Moran and Chambers. Comparing Figures 1, 3, and 5 to Figures 2, 4, and 6, we note that the shots alternate systematically between those that show Chambers (odd-numbered Figures) and those that show Moran (even-numbered Figures). The pattern includes a progressive approach of the camera to the scene, as Figures 1/2 are long or medium shots, Figures 3/4 are closer shots, and Figures 5/6 are closer still. Seen in this way, the scene's final shot, Figure 7, can be viewed as an establishing shot. The conversation suggested by the image structure, though, is contradicted by the aural structure, in which Chambers does not become a participant.

The sequence also subverts the shot/reverse-shot structure by placing the listener on-screen more consistently than the speaker. In most of the shots in scene 3 the camera is focused somewhere other than on the speaker. In shot 22, for example, we hear the sheriff speaking, but we see the journalist's back (Figure 1). Shot 23 (Figure 2) is a medium close shot of the speaking subject (Sheriff Moran), but this cut occurs toward the end of his utterance. This shot is taken from the perspective of the half-dozen men Moran is addressing, and who do most of the talking



during the shot, but none are shown visually. Shots 24–26 show Ishmael as an interlocutor, but he makes no audible (or visually audible)<sup>19</sup> contribution.

Hicks further challenges continuity conventions in this scene by playing with utterance coherence. As can be seen in Table 1, the dialogue is represented as intermittent. In shot 22 Moran's long, slow question, 'So did any more of you guys see Carl out at Ship Channel Banks last night,' is followed by two staccato utterances. A fisherman asks, 'What do you want to know for,' and Moran replies, 'Only to see if somebody talked to him.' Each of the latter utterances begins abruptly, leaving no pause between turns-at-talk (represented on the transcript as a conversational latch). This latching produces the effect of an aural jump-cut,<sup>20</sup> as the abruptness of speaker (and topic) change imparts a discontinuous feel to a continuous segment of dialogue. The aural jump-cut occurs again between shots 23 and 24. Shot 23 ends with one fisherman narrating his recollections, but shot 24 switches to another man reading a list of fishermen. The change in topic mapped onto change of speaker produces a markedly abrupt transition. The visual imagery, however, provides no digetic explanation for the aural discontinuities in the conversation.

This gap challenges the viewer's (conventional) expectations concerning the relationship between sound and image in the representation of speech/dialogue. Like dreams or memories, the disjuncture draws on what Freud has called the 'uncanny' (Freud 2003 [1919]). Viewers hear voices as if they originated from the characters seen on the image track, but this identification is subverted by the film's suggestion that the viewer imagined the link him/herself. *Snow Falling on Cedars* disrupts the (naturalized) connection between speech and action in film sufficiently to make the assumed connection appear surprising — uncanny.

The dissociation of speech from its unmarked connection to conversation is also signaled by moments of uncanny relationship between (aural) speech and (visual) dialogue. One such moment was described in the film's third scene, when Moran inexplicably turns to acknowledge Chambers at just the moment Chambers has arrived at the top of the stairs. Another occurs in a later scene, toward the middle of the film. Ishmael is on his way to a lighthouse where he wants to examine coast guard weather and shipping records. As this sub-plot begins, Chambers is shown having his car filled up with gas. He chats with Dave, the attendant, whom he appears to know well.

The entire scene is presented as a single long take, recorded by a single camera motion. The shot's composition creates the impression of an interaction. As the scene unfolds, the camera pans around Chambers' car in one direction as Dave walks around the car in the other. The camera

motion (and consequent changes of perspective) combines with Dave's motion to construct alternations of camera gaze on the interlocutors, simulating the shot/reverse-shot dialogic structure. The scene opens with the screen nearly filled with a dark shape that resolves into Dave's winter coat as he is hunched over, re-applying Chambers' gas cap (Figure 11).<sup>21</sup> The attendant's voice is heard first, saying 'It's plowed clear out to the point,' in apparent response to Chambers' unheard question. Dave's follow-up question, 'What's the big attraction?' elicits the banter that fills the remainder of the scene (see Table 2). The camera's pan alights on Chambers (seen through the passenger side window) just as he finishes his response, 'I'm checking lighthouse records to see if it's the biggest snowstorm in island history.' As the conversation continues, the camera and attendant trace opposite trajectories around the car. Both conversationalists are in the frame for the remainder of the scene, but their speech is not represented visually. No shot shows either man's mouth moving, for example (Figure 12). The rhythm and pacing of the dialogue is also subtly off. The time between lines 10/11 is cut short, and that between lines 11/12 even shorter, suggesting aural jump-cuts.

The point of uncanniness, however, comes in the final line. Chambers' friendly departing comment, 'Always a pleasure, Dave,' is heard on the soundtrack well after the image track has shown his car departing and the attendant waving on another customer. This line is uncanny because it is heard more softly than the rest of the dialogue. Previous utterances were shouted, consistent with the representation of a conversation taking place outside in a blizzard. The utterance thus takes the form of a normal conversational utterance, but, said softly after his car has pulled away, it cannot possibly function in this way. Rather, the viewer must (re)interpret the final line of the scene as an aside that Chambers says to himself.

Thus the ruptures Hicks inserts here and elsewhere into the sound/image relationship in *Snow Falling on Cedars* create a symbolic link between the uttered speech of dialogue and the inner speech of memory.

## 6. Memory in *Snow Falling on Cedars*

Memory — its power and fallibility — constitutes a pivotal theme in *Snow Falling on Cedars*. This poignant story of childhood love and loss (as remembered by Ishmael and forgotten by Hatsue) is embedded in a trial (narrated by the recollections of witness testimony), that is told by way of flashbacks, that tell of a history (of prejudice and displacement) long forgotten by mainstream culture.



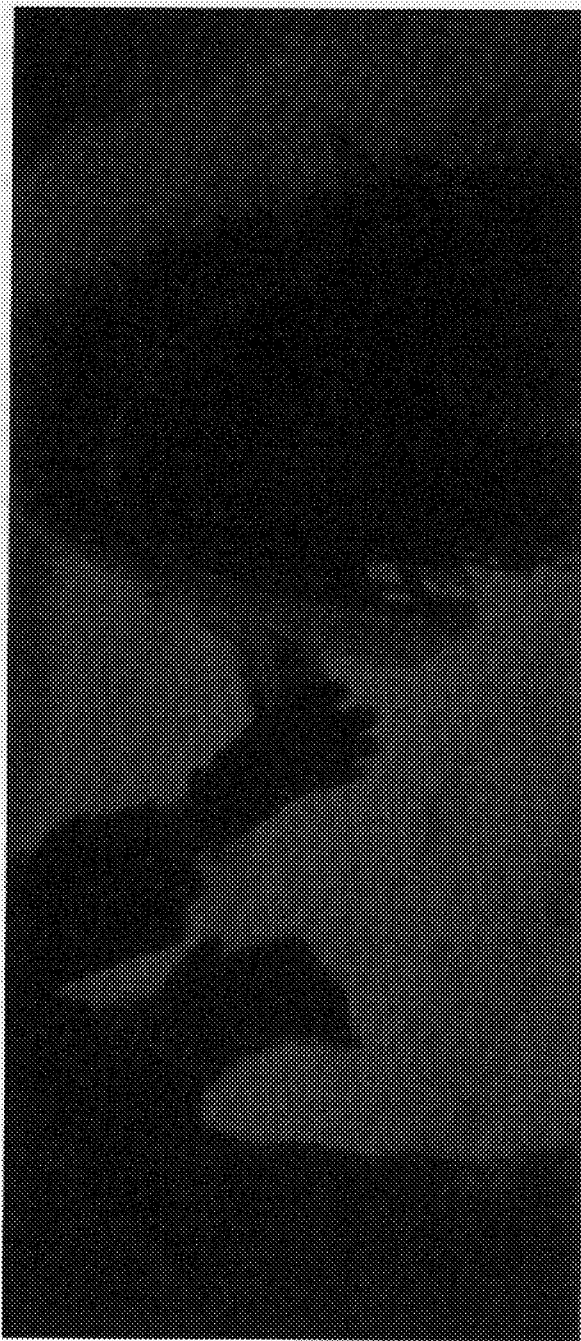


Figure 11.

Table 2.

Shot	Visual imagery	Speaker	Dialogue	Line
	Camera draws back from close-up of station attendant's black coat as he is leaning over Ishmael's car.	((None))		
		Dave	It's plowed clear out to the point.	1
	Camera pans upward and rightward across car, coming to rest briefly on passenger side window, through which Ishmael is seen.		What's the big attraction.	2
		Ishmael	I'm checkin the lighthouse records.	3
			To see if it's the biggest snowstorm in island history.	4
		Dave	Where were you in 29,	5
			That was a snowstorm?	6
			Real blizzard.	7
174		Ishmael	That right.	8
		Dave	You don't believe me?	9
	Camera continues pan around the front of the car, ending with a view in the driver's window.		Check those coast guard weather records if you want proof?	10
		Ishmael	Well there should be a story in it?	11
		Dave	Scribble scribble scribble while the rest of us have to work for a living?	12
			((laugh))	
	As Ishmael's car drives out of frame left, camera focuses on Dave as he waves another car on.	Ishmael	Always a pleasure Dave,	13

The film's treatment of the power and fallibility of memory begins with memories of sentiment. Ishmael remembers his childhood love for Hatsue and resents her for apparently forgetting hers. Ishmael continues to love Hatsue — perhaps obsessively — even as events have propelled Hatsue onward. Ishmael sees Hatsue's marriage to Kazuo, a Japanese-American man, as a forgetting of their love, but in so doing he fails to discern the

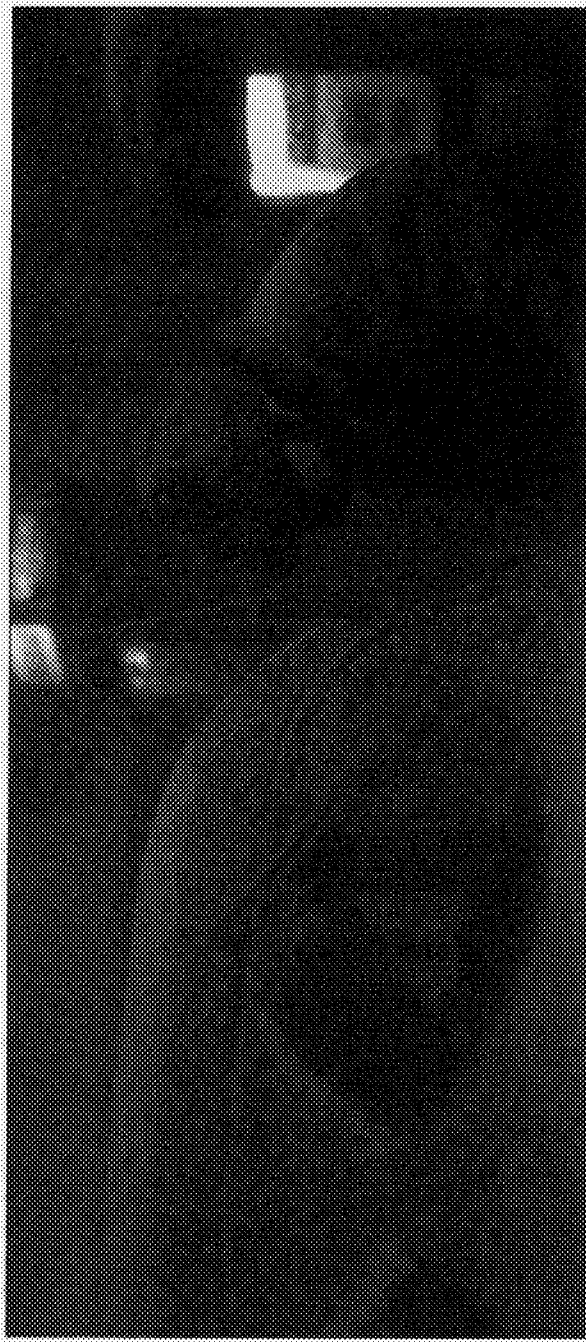


Figure 12.

forces at work on her memory. The film shows us Hatsue's stern mother insisting that she find a Japanese husband, as well as the harsh internment camps reminding of the racialized boundary separating them. The plot's climax — Ishmael's discovery of evidence exonerating Hatsue's husband — comes as Ishmael is wrestling with his remembered and current feelings for Hatsue. He hesitates to share the information, uncertain whether he wants to help her. The film thus shows how history and location alter memory. If Hatsue's memories of love for Ishmael were changed by her experiences in the internment camp, the film allows us to see that Ishmael's memories of love for Hatsue were changed as well by her marriage.

The film also thematizes a kind of identity memory, as the narrative pivots about struggles inheriting or rejecting parental values. Several of the film's main characters wrestle with the consequences of what they recall — inherit — from their parents. Both victim (Carl Heine Jr.) and accused (Kazuo Miyamoto) in the fishing death, for example, inherited their positions in the conflict from their parents. Carl's father, portrayed as generous and sincere, agrees to hold some land for Kazuo's father while he is in internment. Carl's mother, however, portrayed as greedy and bigoted, violates the agreement when her husband dies.

The film also shows Kazuo and Ishmael wrestling with parental inheritances of a different kind. We see Kazuo's memory, for example, of himself as a young boy rebelling against his stern Japanese father teaching him emotional discipline and Kendo fighting skills. Later we see the young man further rebelling against this inheritance when he enlists in the American army during the war. Ishmael, too, struggles with his inheritance. Ishmael is the son of a man who had been a courageous liberal in a conservative town. We see Ishmael's memory of the elder Chambers publishing an editorial condemning the town's anti-Japanese rhetoric during World War II, but Ishmael remains ambivalent about the town's racist rhetoric during the trial. Abandoned by Hatsue, maimed by the war (he has lost his left arm), unmarried and unattached, Ishmael has become, as his name suggests, a man adrift. He has taken over his father's newspaper but cannot fill his father's shoes.<sup>22</sup>

Finally — and perhaps most importantly — the film thematizes national and cultural memories. Produced in the 1990s but set in the 1950s, the film constructs — and subverts — a nostalgic memory of an idyllic small-town, rural life that has come to stand for 'America' at just the time that it finally disappeared from America. The film challenges such memories with the gross *forgettings* of war, injustice, and racism that gave rise to our current generation of Americans who barely knew about Americans' internment of their fellow citizens.

## 7. Voice in *Snow Falling on Cedars*

Speech becomes a foil for the theme of memory in *Snow Falling on Cedars*. The two phenomena come together most prominently in the film's central plot structure: the trial. The story of the trial is conveyed primarily through witness testimony — verbal re-presentations of remembered events. The film further embeds this notion of voice by presenting much of this testimony with the cinematic device of enacted flashback. Memory is thus doubly embedded as speech.

Here too the film plays with the power of personal and cultural memories, suggesting the power of memory while simultaneously showing its fallibility. Hicks seamlessly blends the here-and-now of the courtroom scene with the flashbacks that bring to (visual) life the witness' memories. The film's stylistic reliance on enacted flashbacks lends an authority and authenticity to the memories they would not have otherwise. When we see verbally described events playing out visually, they take on great materiality.

But at the same time Hicks subverts this materiality and decenters such certainty by displacing the aural/visual unity in uncanny ways. In one testimony sequence, for example, the victim's mother, Etta, is on the witness stand testifying about the arrangement her husband had made with Kazuo's father.<sup>23</sup> As she begins to speak, the image track cuts to an enactment of the events she is describing verbally, and her speaking voice becomes a voiceover narration. The visual imagery shows two men chatting in the middle of a plowed field. We begin to hear the voices of the two men — snippets of their conversation — and the camera alternates between shots of the men in the field and shots of Etta in the house observing them. The voices (and images) from the here-and-now of the courtroom are interwoven with the voices (and images) of the there-and-then of the recalled scene. The transitions (or junctures) between the speaking, the spoken-of, and the embedded-speaking scenes are rendered seamless, calling to mind the seamlessness of memory as it inserts itself into consciousness. As in the introductory scenes described at the outset of this article, the film creates an uncanny inconsistency in the enacted scene. Some shots suggest Etta as a party to the conversation. Other shots emphasize the impossibility of her participation — she is shown observing from behind a closed window far above the field.

In pointing to the vagaries of memory, Hicks also points up the pragmatic uses to which memory is often put by playing with shifting footings between the here-and-now of a witness testifying and the 'then' of the memory being narrated. In one intriguing sequence, for example, the

enacted flashback bridges a witness's direct testimony to the same witness's rendition of the same event in cross-examination.

Flashbacks comprise a key strategy in the film, and sound (as well as speech more specifically) is a crucial device for establishing this narrative device. Hicks uses sound to demarcate narrational time. Sound systematically delimits filmic transitions between the here-and-now and the various displaced times of flashback narration. Ishmael's recollections of his love affair with Hatsue, for example, recur throughout the film, and each time they are accompanied by a particular non-diegetic sound (i.e., background music). These childhood love scenes are visually luscious with a backdrop of natural beauty formed by undulating seashore, verdant forest, or lush ferns. The scenes unfold wordlessly — suffused by visual imagery and musical backdrop, but lacking audible dialogue. The transformation from diegetic-dominant to non-diegetic-dominant soundtrack thus establishes the narrative juncture and suggests a shift from normal consciousness (in which the self is immersed in a visually and aurally complex milieu) to memorized consciousness (in which sensory perception is partial or focused).

Background sound thus constitutes one means for representing memory, but Hicks uses sound effects in this role as well. Sharp drumbeats, rhythmic sounds, and other aural signals become signs of temporal displacement, marking many flashbacks in the film. At some narrational junctures the sound/image correspondence becomes quite artful. At one point, for example, the film interrupts the flow of the trial to enact Ishmael's memory of himself as a boy watching a parade. This flashback ends with him running along a picket fence, pulling a wagon behind him. The soundtrack appends a clicking or ratcheting sound that spans the transition from flashback back to the here-and-now. The viewer associates this striking sound first with the pickets as the wagon passes by, and then with the slats of the courtroom balcony's railing, as the camera pans back to Ishmael.

## 8. Discussion

Voice is the film's central symbolic vehicle for representing memory, the film's theme. Speech stands for memory in this film in all its various forms and guises. At the level of plot, for example, the core dilemma facing the protagonist Ishmael pits speech against silence. By virtue of being a good reporter, Ishmael has discovered information exonerating the defendant, but he is tormented as to whether or not to reveal his knowledge. Ishmael's struggle with speech is ironic because of his profession as a

newspaper reporter — a professional teller, as it were.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately his decision to reveal — to speak — leads to the trial's happy ending, as justice prevails over prejudice and good triumphs over evil. Moreover, in speaking out the protagonist also assures his own personal happy ending, as he confronts his debilitating obsession with Hatsue and overcomes obstacles to his personal growth. Speech in this sense is purging and purifying.

Traditionally Hollywood films treat speech naturalistically. Speech is the vehicle for communicating ideas, and it is the ideas that then participate in the film's meaning system. Speech itself is often treated as if it were transparent. The naturalism of speech, moreover, guarantees a more general naturalism in filmic representation, which, in turn, feeds back into a spiraling warrant of viewers' assumptions about speech. Hollywood has long adhered to a strict 'hierarchy of languages' that privileges the resonant voice of the white, male American, as Ella Shohat (1991: 219) has noted. The naturalness of filmic representation lends credence, then, both to the power of the standard and to the weakness of the various non-standards (dialect, accent, etc.) that subaltern characters are given to speak.

Returning to my earlier comparison with *The World of Suzie Wong*, it is interesting to note that while the 1960 film represented *dialogue* normatively, it represented *dialect* quixotically. While dialogue unfolds in accordance with normative ideas about social interaction, subaltern characters are made to speak a broken and quixotic dialect. The film establishes an opposition between the protagonist's resonant, ultra-standard male voice and Wong's broken and child-like English. Wong is thus represented as physically beautiful, but vocally impaired (cf. Lawrence 1991). The plot acknowledges (in places) her mastery of her own language — and Lomax's inability to master it — but this aspect of language is never given direct vocal representation.<sup>25</sup> All of Wong's lines are in her broken English (in part because potential conversations with Chinese men and women can play no role in the film's master narrative). Filmic speech in *Suzie Wong* connotes through cultural codes — not cinematic codes — as language helps to establish who the various characters are, and where they stand with respect to the film's setting. Language (or dialogue) plays no role, however, in the construction of, and commentary on the film's overall themes.

*Snow Falling on Cedars*, in contrast, represents dialect normatively, but dialogue quixotically. This more recent film takes evident care not to build characterization on stereotypes of Asians — linguistically or otherwise. Special care is taken to represent the complexity of language as spoken by Asian and Asian-American people in the American northwest

realistically. The language of the (American born) second generation is unaccented, idiomatic American English. It is only the speech of the parent generation, immigrants themselves back in the 1920s and 1930s of the film's temporal setting, that is represented as broken, non-native. Asian characters are all good, hard working, and ultimately innocent of wrongdoing, while the film's suspect characters are all white. And the film explicitly holds up for ridicule the racist stereotype of Asian inscrutability (though perhaps not entirely avoiding reinvesting it with meaning).

Instead of having speech establish identity, Hicks uses comments about speech — and dialogue — to reflect upon memory. His play with dialogue, rather than dialect, is consistent with the overall role of speech in the film. We associate dialect with identity — with fixed, aboriginal qualities — and this is just what Hicks uses speech to challenge. Hicks' systematic delinking of speech from vision opens up a symbolic space within which he explores the nature and function of memory. Hicks' displacement of the viewer's expectations regarding the representation of dialogue therefore establishes speech as an independently structuring element of the film. The vagaries of speech in the film point up the vagaries of memory. Just as speech comes unhinged from its mooring in the bedrock of lived experience and the solid relationship between speaker and enunciator, so too, the film says, the materiality of memory is subject to dislocation. In *Snow Falling on Cedars* the viewer's expectations of transparent speech are frustrated from the beginning. Speech is multiply disembodied: in conversations visual imagery is out-of-sync with aural imagery, and the camera frequently violates the shot/reverse-shot norm by focusing on the recipient, rather than the enunciator of speech. Speech seems to waft in and out of this film, recalling (while constructing) the dreamlike qualities of thought, memory, inner voice, and reflection. So too, the film says, memory — be it the generational memory of cultural heritage, the racial memory of prejudice, the emotional memory of love, or the personal memory of identity — fools us into thinking we are on firmer footing than we in fact are.

## 9. Postscript

Hicks realizes, with respect to sound, the idea von Sternberg suggested for vision. By turning dialogue upside down in *Snow Falling on Cedars* Hicks forces the viewer to attend to the meanings with which he has vested speech: the problematics of memory. While this article has argued that Hicks' film is technically interesting, it must be admitted that the film as a whole leaves much to be desired as a representation of subaltern



voices in twenty-first century America. *Snow Falling on Cedars* ultimately focalizes a single dynamic character, the white Ishmael Chambers, as he overcomes his personal challenge. In doing so it shunts to the side the narrative it begins of the catastrophic injustice done to hundreds of thousands of Japanese-American detainees. Likewise, it sloughs off the narrative it begins of the extraordinary prejudice that nearly brought personal tragedy to a good (Asian) man. Instead, the film focuses on the onlooker, the white man whose childhood obsessive love for the *Other* rises to assume greater significance than the death and dispossession of thousands of other *Others*. Indeed, not only is his personal tragedy positioned above the collective tragedy, but also the avoidance of evil, the righting of racism, is given to him as an act of central heroism.

While Hicks successfully turns sound on its head, he regrettably leaves Hollywood's dominant hierarchy of identities intact.

## Notes

1. Interestingly, upside down sound was in fact utilized in Hollywood cinema. The western *Scouts to the Rescue* (Alan James and Ray Taylor, 1939) actually used reverse-recorded English dialogue to simulate the exotic non-language imagined to properly represent the speech of the film's Indian characters (Kilpatrick 1999: 37).
2. Some modern work has challenged some of these assumptions, experimenting, for example, with truly silent films intended to be viewed in total silence (Camper 1985). Jean-Luc Godard, for example, has included silent sequences within sound films (Williams 1985), but such experimentation has been rare in Hollywood, and mainstream American films continue to take the referentiality of dialogue for granted. The voice satisfies the audience's desire to know 'what's happening,' while lighting, camera angle, special effects, and other vision-oriented devices open up spaces for the director to insert authorial stance and connotative commentary on the film's theme.
3. The movie traditionally credited as the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*, was produced in 1927.
4. The study of film noir, for example, devotes careful analysis to the function of lighting.
5. Metz draws on the work of Roland Barthes, especially (Barthes 1977 [1970], 1977 [1972]), in developing these ideas.
6. Animated cartoons draw especially heavily on culturally coded linguistic features for characterization (cf. Lefkowitz in preparation; Lippi-Green 1997: 79–103).
7. Other well-known films directed by Hicks include *Shine* (1996) and *Hearts in Atlantis* (2001).
8. In this paper I limit my analysis to the film, making only passing reference to its literary source. While Guterson's novel won awards, Hicks' film has not been a critical success. Many critics criticize the film's length and slow pacing. I have chosen to write about this film because it demonstrates an innovative treatment of language — not to celebrate its aesthetic quality.
9. *Snow Falling on Cedars* falls into the familiar Hollywood pattern of drawing on ethnicity for settings and drama, but reserving protagonist status for white (male) Americans.

Although this film is filled with Japanese (and other ethnic) characters, only the white Chambers is fully characterized as a dynamic individual with whom the viewer identifies. The film touches on numerous cultural, social, and personal issues worthy of serious treatment, but it is only Ishmael's overcoming his obsessive love for a woman he can't have that gains the film's focus.

10. I borrow the term 'inflectional' from linguistics, where it refers to the grammatical markers, such as the [s] of plurality, that add information to a word like 'table' without changing its base meaning.
11. The dialogue transcription follows standard discourse analysis conventions for representing conversational speech, including the symbol == to indicate latched turns. Forward slash (/) indicates continuous speech across a change in shot (cut).
12. Following traditional cinematic convention, the viewer assumes — and tries to construct — a diegetic explanation for the sound/image relationship.
13. 'Diegetic' and 'exegetic' are film theory terms that are useful in describing cinematic effects. Diegetic refers to the world of the frame, while exegetic refers to the world external to the filmed scenes. For example, if the film visuals depict a band playing a tune, that tune is called diegetic music; much Hollywood music, however, is exegetic music, mood music added to the soundtrack without having an explained source in the filmic scene. Here I am using 'diegetic' to make clear that the film subverts the viewer's desire to link the dialogue he hears on the soundtrack (the fishermen speaking with the sheriff) to something visually depicted by the film (e.g., Chambers approaching the wharf).
14. This chapter grew out of ongoing work on the representation of Asians in Hollywood films, and the choice of two films dealing with Asian subject matter is simply an artifact of the research orientation.
15. The continuity editing conventions for representing dialogue were established in the 1930s — based in large part on earlier conventions of the silent-film era (cf. Bordwell 1985a).
16. The theme is revisited again in the 1993 film *M Butterfly* (David Cronenberg).
17. Directors often use establishing shots at the beginning and end of a shot/reverse-shot sequence to bracket the dialogue, as is done in this example.
18. Recent film sound innovators have addressed some of these problems. Robert Altman, for example, introduced multitrack recording techniques in his early films, especially *Nashville* (1975), in order to represent overlapped speech. And many of Jean Luc Godard's films, including *Masculin Feminin* (1966), experiment with de-linking the speaker/hearer dyad.
19. By visually audible I mean one of the many gestures that substitute for speech in actual conversation — nods of the head, movements about the eyes, waves of the hands, etc. (cf. Goffman 1983).
20. A jump cut is traditionally a visual technique, in which the editor removes a section of film from a shot so as to give smooth action a discontinuous look (Katz 2001: 716).
21. Hicks uses an effective match on the shape and color of Dave's overcoat to transition into this scene. The preceding scene ended with a closeup of the trial judge's black robe, and the cut is framed so as to match the judicial robe with the attendant's coat.
22. It is interesting to note that of three main characters in the film only the female character, Hatsue, has her struggles with such inheritance unnarrativized. The film suggests that her abandonment of the young Ishmael is very much due to her mother's urgings to 'marry a Japanese man,' but, inasmuch as the film shows her giving in to this pressure (and marrying Kazuo Miyamoto), it fails to narrativize her struggle as parallel to that of the two leading male characters, Ishmael and Kazuo.

23. The complex agreement to hold land was necessitated by discriminatory laws then in effect that prevented Japanese from owning land. Kazuo's parents were Japanese immigrants who had long worked the island's berry fields, but had never gained legal title to the land. Their internment in faraway camps threatened to dispossess them of any rights to use the land upon their return.
24. The irony of the speech/silence opposition also derives from the film's treatment of the 'inscrutable Asian' stereotype. At a surface, explicit level, the film holds this stereotype up for ridicule, but at a deeper level the film seems to reproduce it. The Asian characters are ultimately inscrutable, since we learn nothing of their thoughts, feelings, and transformations.
25. Indirectly, this fact becomes a source of comic relief in the film. A telling bit of humor, for example, shows Holden, in the conversation with the traffic cop discussed earlier, clumsily reciting uninterpretable Chinese from a Berlitz phrase book only to discover that the policeman speaks fluent English. The positioning of this bit of sociolinguistic realism as comic relief subverts its deconstructive effect.

### Filmography

*Gone With The Wind*, 1939, Victor Fleming.  
*Nashville*, 1975, Robert Altman.  
*Raging Bull*, 1980, Martin Scorsese.  
*Scouts to the Rescue*, 1939, Alan James and Ray Taylor.  
*Snow Falling on Cedars*, 1999, Scott Hicks.  
*The World of Suzie Wong*, 1960, Richard Quine.  
*Zoot Suit*, 1982, Luis Valdez.

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### Abstract

*According to Charles S. Peirce we have to take responsibility for our scientific concepts. Having introduced the scientific world to a concept we have to revise it whenever further investigation alters the meaning of the concept. This article revises the definition of the fundamental sign, a concept developed by me and thus my responsibility. I define it in relation to Peirce's formal conditions for communication and community. These formal conditions make it possible to understand the fundamental sign as part of a discourse community, carrying the qualities of the community — the sense of community.*

### 1. Introduction

I consider Peirce's Ethics of Terminology (*CP* 2.219–2.226) to be a very important set of ethic rules when conducting science. The seven rules, which are cited below have served and still serve as a source of inspiration in my attempt to conduct science. Of course, the rules are normative since they are based on ethics. They are norms for how to develop stringent terminology; we ought but need not follow them. However, violation of the rules seems undoubtedly to weaken good science. The rules are:

*First:* To take pains to avoid following any recommendation of an arbitrary nature as to the use of philosophical terminology.

*Second:* To avoid using words and phrases of vernacular origin as technical terms of philosophy.

*Third:* To use the scholastic terms in their anglicised forms for philosophical conceptions, so far as they are strictly applicable; and never to use them in other than their proper senses.