

sound advice

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May 2005

"The prime of my life is just ahead of me." –Carol Channing, at age 84

Noteworthy articles

This month I want to draw your attention to a few noteworthy articles regarding a variety of different genres of voiceover—not just commercial, which I concentrate on most.

Our web designer pal, Geoff Long of Dreamsbay, recently referred us to this article, which I've abbreviated here for your immediate consumption. I've included it because it resonates my own sentiments regarding voiceover in film, precisely.

A Defense—and History—of Voice-Over Narration by Sarah Kozloff

In Spike Jonze's 2002 film *Adaptation*, the principal character, Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage), goes to a lecture on screenwriting given by popular authority and real-life figure Robert McKee, here impersonated by the actor Brian Cox. McKee delivers the standard diatribe against voice-over narration: "And God help you if you use voice-over in your work, my friends. God help you. That's flaccid, sloppy writing. Any idiot can write a voice-over narration to explain the thoughts of a character."

In the movie, no one has the guts to debate this sweeping denunciation—McKee is portrayed as a bully who brooks no questioning of his prescriptions—and yet the movie as a whole, which relies heavily on giving the viewer access to Charlie's thoughts, works as a slantwise rebuttal. So it has been throughout the history of filmmaking. Many have issued pronouncements against voice-over, and few have murmured in its defense. Yet voice-over narration remains an integral part of moviemaking—so common that we often overlook its contribution and ignore its development.

From the beginning, film aficionados have felt the need to defend cinema as an art and to do so by setting it apart from other media, especially theater and literature. What makes film distinct and special, these theorists argue, is its capacity to convey information nonverbally—through mise-en-scène, editing, camera movement, POV, facial expression or pantomime. As is well known, many intellectuals and filmmakers, including Rudolf Arnheim, Charlie Chaplin, Sergei Eisenstein, and René Clair, argued against the use of synchronous sound when it emerged in the 1920s, seeing in speech the death of film art. Even today, reference books and textbooks repeat ad infinitum that because film is a visual art, speech should never have a leading role; dialogue must always be minimized—kept in its place.

A fallback charge against voice-over narration is that using it is insulting to the audience. Voice-over narration is suspect because it is a means of "telling" rather than "showing." "Telling" is judged as a mark of laziness and/or condescension. Both of these subtexts are apparent in this quote from Robert McKee's popular screenwriting manual, *Story* (italics his):

"[T]he trend toward using telling narration throughout a film threatens the future of our art. More and more films by some of the finest directors from Hollywood and Europe indulge in this indolent practice. They saturate the screen with lush photography and lavish production values, then tie images together with a voice droning on the soundtrack, turning the cinema into what was once known as *Classic Comic Books* . . . That's fine for children, but it's not cinema."

Voice-over narration is no more or less inherently valuable or cinematic than any other element of film. And when this device is well-executed, it opens up inimitable avenues for filmmakers. Voice-over is notoriously useful for efficiently conveying expositional or historical information, for instance. The David McCullough-narrated sequences of Gary Ross' *Seabiscuit* (2003) set the horse race in context, explaining its significance to the country as a whole. And filmmakers often use voice-over for important character revelations—to give us direct access to a character's thoughts, emotions, and consciousness.

Indeed, narration is such a powerful device for deepening characterizations and leading viewers to share a character's perspective that some film theorists see "the voice" as a counterpoint to "the gaze." Certainly, narration can be a tool for granting those who historically have been objectified by the camera—e.g., women or minorities—the chance to speak for themselves.

Voice-over narration can also add a level of poetry to a movie. Michael Herr's phrasing in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is inherently poetic, and Martin Sheen's soft, bitter delivery makes lines such as, "Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins, they gave me one," memorable and evocative.

Because voice-over narration automatically creates a double layering of commentary over visual track, it is unparalleled as a mechanism for creating distance and irony. In films such as *Badlands* (1973) and *Raising Arizona* (1987), filmmakers use the characters' benighted comments about their situations to point up their blindness and limitations. Or a third person voice-over can speak with ironic authority about a tribal blind spots, as in *The Age of Innocence* (1993), when the narrator remarks: "It was widely known in New York, but never acknowledged, that Americans want to get away from amusement even more quickly that they want to get to it." Voice-over has the potential to instill a Brechtian self-reflexivity, as when Jean-Luc Godard offers a few clues for late-comers to the movie theater in *Band of Outsiders* (1964) or when Dede Truitt (Christine Ricci) in Don Roos' *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) dismissively talks back to the camera. And, fundamentally, because voice-over refers to the most traditional of storytelling forms—that of oral storytelling—it reaches out to the audience in a singular way, making the film-going experience feel more "natural," more intimate. Like "dear reader" references in a novel, or dramatic actors making eye contact with a theater audience, using voice-over narration implies an implicit recognition of the spectator; the device flatters us with its confiding tones or challenges us with its direct appeal.

In *Adaptation*, the fictional Charlie Kaufman is cowed by Robert McKee's diatribe, and from that point on in the film, the voice is silent. Fortunately, however, throughout the history of film real-life screenwriters and directors have blithely ignored the many dire, limiting strictures against voice-over narration, and proceeded to make the most of these invisible storytellers.

Sarah Kozloff is the Chair of Film at Vassar College and the author of Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film and Overhearing Film Dialogue. Her article in its entirety can be found on-line at www.criterioncollection.com.

Speak the Speak, I pray thee...

Did you know there's a whole division of voiceover that requires improvisation skills, mic technique and your ability to play well with others? It's called "looping" or "ADR" work. (ADR stands for 'automated digital recording' or 'automated digital replacement'.) Here are a few terms recently added to the 'Speak the Speak' section of "The Sound Advice Encyclopedia" that will explain in greater detail.

looper—A 'looper' is a talent who records background group vocal tracks for film and television for crowd scenes such as in restaurants, school hallways, courtrooms, etc.

Loopers are employed through 'Loop Groups' that are hired at Union day rates to add crowd or individual ambience to on-camera work. These are very coveted positions because they pay residuals and repeat business can be the equivalent of landing a reoccurring role on sit-com.

Loopers are hired because it's far easier to control the sound of Extras if they are shot silently and the Loop Group add the desired, appropriate sound in post.

This is also known as 'walla work' because prior to digital recording, it was thought group background sounds could simply blend in a wall of mumbles by simply stating, 'walla, walla, walla'.

Today, 'loopers' are recorded in groups of as few as 2 or 3 to as many as twenty to thirty all recorded at actual level. And therefore both recording and improvisational skills are a must.

Loop Groups—'Loop Groups' are necessary to add restaurant, classroom, courtroom and general crowd sounds or human ambience to a film or television soundtrack in post-production. This work is almost exclusively done in Los Angeles. 'Looping' can be considered 'voiceover extra work' or (even closer to the truth) 'human foley' because you'll watch the scene and record appropriate banter that plays as background. This work pays the full SAG day rate which is considerably better than the paltry rate an on-screen extras earn.

'Walla' is done with six or so voice talent in a booth at a recording studio creating vocal 'atmosphere' for a court room on "Law and Order" or street ambience on "CSI: Miami", for example. These tracks are recorded at full conversation volume. The engineer will balance out the necessary level later.

The work requires: you're well versed in mic technique, you possess some well-tuned improvisational skills and that you play well with others, vocally. Of course, breaking into a much-coveted 'Loop Group' is nothing short of an Act of Congress, apparently, considering there are only handful of talent required and only a handful of walla groups are in operation. The ones that are land contracts for a dozen or more sitcoms.

Breaking in is much like so many things in life; it often relies heavily on 'who you know'. So, if you happen to be friends with an established group, the odds fair much better in your favor for employment.

There are a number of Loop Groups in Los Angeles and New York that generally utilize the same rotation of players again and again which is why being asked to join a loop group is so highly sought-after in the profession. It means steady work, including residuals, for film and television. (Nice work if you can get it!)

According to Ann Anderson, veteran Loop Group coordinator, "In any movie or TV show, the background players, called extras, only pretend to talk. That's because actors with scripted lines, or principals, have to be recorded with no ambient noise. In a restaurant, office, street, hospital, battlefield, courtroom, or any scene with extras, their dialogue is added later, in post-production, by a group of improvisational actors called 'loopers'. It's our job to "sweeten" the dialog track, or to make a scene seem more populated if there are too few people on screen. 'Loopers' fill in phone conversations, add hospital or airport pages, "fight grunts," weeping noises, laughter, and bits of dialog. Looping encompasses a wide variety of vocal odd jobs. The operative phrase, sometimes used as a joke is, 'We'll fix it in post.'"

'Walla' (the origin of that name is not known) is also done for foreign films and animations where replacing the pre-existing foreign language tracks with American speech is necessary. Timing is of the essence here as well, because it takes a special knack to watch the visuals and speak within the given time parameters while maintaining character.

Apparently (now this is the rumor part) once you get into a "loop group", you're called in for one of these sessions a few times a month. Financially, that would be equivalent to a nice reoccurring role on a television show. Even better, you can go out to dinner and not be bothered by the paparazzi.

Honestly, speaking as a Casting Director, or even as a Producer, if I found myself recording a lot of group work for a specific show, month after month, and I had success with the same Loop Group, you bet I'd be inclined to keep the product as consistent as possible. I WOULD hire the same group of talent again and again if I could. This falls under the 'don't fix it if it's not broke' category.

A few well-know Loop groups include: LA Mad Dogs, Barbara Harris' Loop Group, David Sharp's Totally looped Group, David Kramer's Looping Group and Loop Troup to name a few.

You know something? We may have stumbled onto something here. Maybe *that's* why all those soundtracks on old television shows on Nick at Nite sound soooo strangely similar week after week.

Hmmm. I wonder?

End of An Era -or- Job Opening

Friday, March 25, 2005 Posted: 12:46 PM EST (1746 GMT)

NEW YORK (AP) Howard Reig has been a staff announcer for GE, and then NBC, since 1943.

Through the eras of anchors John Chancellor, Tom Brokaw and now Brian Williams, Howard Reig's voice also was heard when viewers turned on the news.

"This is NBC Nightly News," the clear baritone would say, ushering in headlines from Watergate to terrorism. Now 84, with a career that spans the very life of television itself, Reig retires Friday as NBC's last staff announcer.

A gnomish figure who walks the halls of NBC's Rockefeller Center office with the help of two hearing aids and a pacemaker, he's been working for NBC and its parent General Electric for nearly 62 years. His role as staff announcer is usually limited to those few key words each day. Sometimes he'd even pretape them.

Former "Nightly News" anchorman Tom Brokaw recalled Reig's nightly opening having a settling effect.

"It would be chaos around here, with things happening all over the place and big news breaking, and I'd hear Howard's voice and know it was time to settle down and go to work," Brokaw said Thursday.

With all his announcing work through the years, Reig is proud to be identified with the "NBC Nightly News." His career began in 1943 when, as a high school English teacher, he took a summer acting job at the GE-owned radio station WGY in Schenectady, New York, and its new sister station WRGB-TV.

"They made me the first GE staff announcer -- and the last," he said. (At one time NBC once had several

announcers on staff, with duties that ranged from reading commercials to reading the news. Reig's voice will continue to be heard on tape awhile.)

When he started, WRGB-TV didn't have a regular schedule. "The TV station went on the air whenever we pleased," he said. "Somebody would get on the phone and call the 200 or 300 people who had sets and tell them to turn on their TVs." Some days he'd arrive at the radio station for his morning music program, then do newscasts until noon, a talk show in the afternoon, and an evening variety show on television. He subsequently won a national announcing contest, which earned him a job with NBC in New York. He plans to move to Florida and live with one of his three sons, and dote on five grandchildren.

The Value of a Targeted Web Page

You may think it's in your best interest to have a web page with your headshot, resume, demo and possibly a variety of other things included on it. Well, while I strongly encourage you to have a well-designed web page created, I encourage you to remain single-minded in your intent with it. It's there to promote your demo only, therefore it should only include VOICE-OVER! No headshots, no resumes (your demo is a resume, in fact it's better than a resume! No producer is interested in a voiceover resume unless you have an inordinate amount of conflicts.) I want to *imagine* who you are and what you do from listening to your demo and viewing your smartly designed demo-graphics. Nothing more! I've never known anyone to land a stage role from hosting their headshot on a web site. As for film and television, these are separate mediums and are promoted very differently than voiceover. Again, they should be kept separate.

And if you had any doubt about how valuable a demo web page can be, here's what happened to fellow Sound Advicer, Shaun Jacob, the day *after* his web page was posted:

Subject: Re: Thanks

Crazy story. My college point guards' wife is a hair dresser in San Fran.

He called her last night at her salon to tell her to check out my site and she happened to be doing the hair of a talent agent. The agent took a look at my site with my buddies wife from the salon and said she was VERY impressed with the professional appearance of the site and loved my sound. I am supposed to talk to her some time tomorrow. I don't have her name or the agencies name but I was excited because that is the first feedback I have gotten outside Sound Advice. As I have said before, I am very excited to get going. There is no way I would be able to have done what I have done without your assistance! Thanks a lot! Have a GREAT weekend. --Shaunny J

Reply: That's fantastic! After Chicago, San Francisco is the next biggest commercial voiceover town in the country! If she's with JE Talent or Stars Agency, you're in great shape--they rock! So do you! Nicely done. You never know where this stuff might come from, Shaun. Let her know you have ISDN access and mp3 capabilities, if she's willing to work with you from a distance, you'll be in great shape!--kate

till next time...

Stay out of trouble. Come in and coach with either Lynette or myself. Order a mailing list. Hop in on the workshop. Lots to do before the summer makes you lazy and unavailable! See ya!

-kate & crew