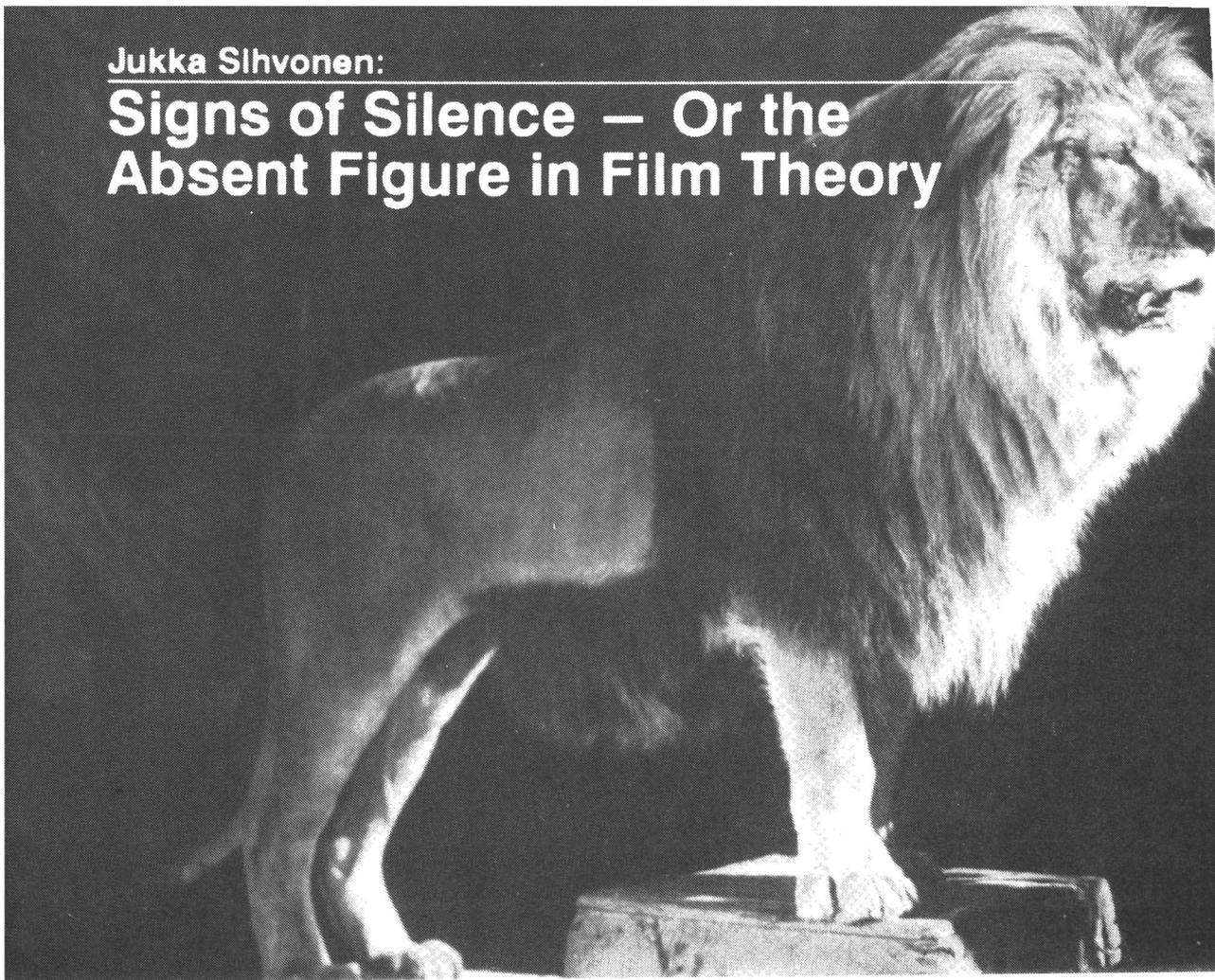


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Signs of Silence – Or the Absent Figure in Film Theory



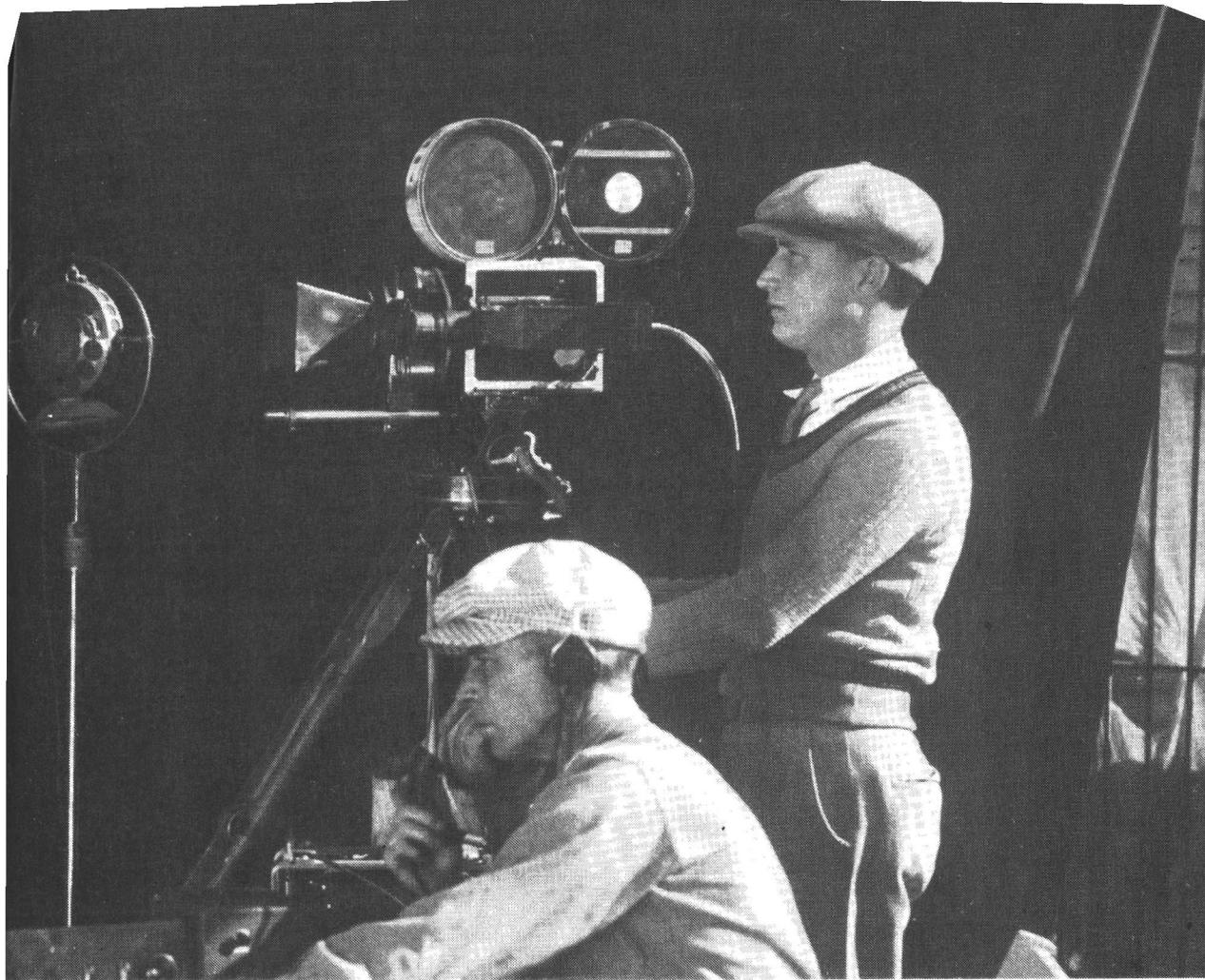
In a way, the theoreticians of silent cinema – for instance Münsterberg in the USA, Arnheim in Germany and the Formalists in Russia – were connected to each other by the same kind of view about the limitations of cinema. According to this view, these restrictions were a *richness* which belonged in a very essential way to film's artistic nature itself. It is well known that from this point of view the absence of sound and color were seen as positive properties. They didn't think that sound could mean an important, additional element in film language. For them that language itself was constructed through the absence of sound.

Münsterberg writes that "the absence of the words brings the movements which we see to still greater prominence in our mind."¹ For Jean Epstein "The words are lacking, the words have not been found."² In Boris Eikhenbaum's opinion the central point is that "it is not a question of 'silence', but of the lack of the *audible* word and of a new relationship between word and object."³ Yuri Tynjanov, one of Eikhenbaum's contemporaries, writes about "the wordlessness of cinema, or rather, the constructional impossibility of filling the shot with words and sounds."⁴ Rudolf Arnheim considers that "No one missed the sound of walking feet, nor the rustling of leaves, nor the ticking of a clock. The lack of such sounds (speech, of course, is also one of them) was hardly ever apparent --."⁵ And about five years later Arnheim continued in his "A New Laocoön" that "It was precisely the absence of speech that made the silent film develop a

style of its own --."⁶ Finally, even Raymond Spottiswoode doesn't hesitate to mention that "The research and experiment which were devoted to the silent film -- were largely directed at discovering visual counterparts to sounds, so that the absence of the sounds themselves should not be regretted."⁷

Scholars of the Gestaltist tradition (like Arnheim and Münsterberg) emphasized the *effects* of these absences. The idea was that in order to be able to fulfill the image's imaginary loss the spectator was forced to work actively in his or her imagination. The Formalists claimed that, because of its losses, silent film itself was seen as a certain kind of signifying system. It didn't try to reflect reality with the means of its own language of signs. In fact, it couldn't do so. Instead it tried to re-formulate and re-interpret the reality. The spectator of the silent film "learned" to see his or her own reality in a new light, in another way with the help of the silent film's absences. Thus, when re-formulating and re-interpreting, the silent film also *re-placed* its spectator.

In his article "Problems of Cine-Stylistics" Boris Eikhenbaum defines the *ideal* relationship between the spectator and the silent film in the following way: "The spectator's condition is close to solitary, intimate contemplation – he observes, as it were, somebody's dream. The slightest outside noise unconnected with the film annoys him much more than it would if he were in the theatre. Talking by spectators next to him (e.g. reading the titles aloud) prevents him concentrating on the movement of the film; his ideal is not to sense the presence of the other spectators, but to be



alone with the film, to become deaf and dumb."⁸

This spectator (Eikhenbaum's *he*), released by the movie-camera from the kind of speech typical in theater, perceives film so that he advances from the photographed object and movement to the construction of his own internal speech. In other words, even if the spectator cannot hear the *parole*, he nevertheless can create a kind of synchronous speech in his imagination in the mode of the inner speech. In fact, it was not only a question of mere silence. The matter in question was the *loss* of the audible word and a new relationship between word and object grown out of this. The basic meaning of this kind of inner speech was that with its assistance the spectator constituted also the connection between separate shots and sequences, that is, the continuity of the image-flow: "The main peculiarity of cinema is that it gets by without the aid of the spoken word – it is the language of photogeny before us. The director, actor and cameraman are given a task – to 'tell without words', and the spectator's task is to understand this."⁹

This shows that silence was thought to belong to the area *outside* language; it was something "without words". This was by no means a new idea in anyway. Eikhenbaum mentions "photogeny", and indeed the French Impressionists of film theory (Delluc, Epstein and others) who theorized about it and whose works were known to Formalists, had already stated that the proper area of silent film art was the one in which language was incapable. Later French Surrealists adopted the same kind of view. Thus, Linda Williams writes: "Instead of showing what a character thinks,

the Surrealist tendency in film was to show how images themselves can "think" and how the apparent unity of the human subject is really a succession of identification with such "thinking" images."¹⁰

Yuri Tynjanov also observed, how the absence of the spoken word had helped to underline the meaning of the language of gestures and facial expressions in silent film. With the help of these signifying systems it became possible – if not to express what was said, at least to express *how* it was said. In this way they had visually the same functions as intonations and accents had audibly. Because of this, silent film developed a very specific kind of language of gestures and facial expressions which was much different from the corresponding means of expression in theater: "These words which are anticipated by gestures turn the cinema into a kind of incomplete kinetophone."¹¹

It is suggestive how Arnheim also stages speech into foreground and how he constantly criticizes the role of speech in this new mode of expression, the sound film. For him, the great advantage of the silent cinema was, of course, silence itself: "—silent film derives definite artistic potentialities from its silence."¹² Arnheim speaks about "illustrating sounds" when he examines the role of sound in silent film. By this he means the ability of silent film to present visually (instead of sounds) the different sonic qualities of things and actions. His example is a scene from Von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* (1928) "in which a revolver shot is illustrated by the rising of a flock of birds."¹³ Here the image is a sign that refers to an auditive phenomenon.

In Arnheim's view the absent sound provided silent film in general with a possibility of powerful visual accentuation; it offered a possibility to emphasize the qualities and effects of the unheard sounds and voices. You couldn't make them heard but you could, in many ways, signify them visually. This possibility to choose between these many ways had an important function in the creative activities of the filmmaker. In other words, silent film's potential to visualize, to make sounds visible, was also for Arnheim one of its most central aesthetic advantages.

Later, in his "A New Laocöon", Arnheim returned to the problem of talking pictures and restated again that speech was destructive in its effects to film as an art-form. The dialogue narrowed the world of the film; the dialogue paralysed visual action; the dialogue pushed film towards photographed theater: "This meant replacing the visually fruitful image of man in action with the sterile one of the man who talks."¹⁴

Speech, however, is only one element in the aural world of the cinema – also for Arnheim. Another element, music, was – as well for Arnheim as for Münsterberg – a positive phenomenon. It increased the possibilities of stylization and appealed to the specific issues of the film's image-world.

Theoreticians of the silent film (or at least most of the prominent ones) saw the nature of the moving picture in relation to – or to put it more precisely – *dependent* on the absence of sound, word and speech. In general it is a question of *absence* and *lack*. On the other hand it is clear that this absence refers to a presence of something else, as well as this lack refers to having and possessing something else. From the point of view of the silent film this presence and this possession is naturally the presence and possession of the visually perceivable image, the "moving picture" itself. Generally speaking, sounds are absent, lacking and held back in favour of the image's all-powerful presence.

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Roman Jakobson noted in 1933: "The theoreticians have hastily assumed that silence is one of the cinema's structural properties, and now they are offended that its venture into sound makes it deviate from their biased formulae. If the facts do not correspond to their theory, they accuse the facts instead of recognizing the fallacy of the theory."¹⁵ In a way Jakobson's comment is correct, but it is also a fallacy to state that when theorizing about silent film the theoreticians had named silence as "one of the cinema's structural properties". They rarely talked about silence, rather – as we have seen – they talked about the absence of speech and these two are not necessarily one and the same thing. In fact, one of the most typical features in their thinking was the insistence to reduce the area of sound to cover almost exclusively only the "audible word" or "speech". This means that silence was seen in a mutual relationship with speech, language and ineffability. It was seen, as it were, as the Other of the speech.

A French economist, Jacques Attali has examined among other things this particular phenomenon in his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, where he sees silence as a negative form of power in the modern, industrial techno-society. The idea about silence as the Other of the speech means in this view the power to silence the listeners. "It is no longer a question of making people believe, as it was in representation. Rather, it is a question of Silencing – through direct channeled control, through imposed silence instead of persuasion."¹⁶ For Attali this means, then, that noise is an essential *cause* for silence to exist because by being noisy the system silences in its participants. To be silent means for Attali the same as to be hindered from making any questions, comments or critical announcements about the system. In his view, silence as the Other of the speech is a sign of

institutional oppression. Remember what Hitler already said: "Without the loudspeakers, we would never have conquered Germany."

On the other hand, silence itself could be seen as a means of power and control. This kind of situation is presented for instance by Jacques Aumont, when he describes the relationship between Eisenstein and his "fathers".¹⁷ Interestingly a similar notion is present in Jean-Michel Rabaté's analysis of *Dubliners* by Joyce: "– everything will appear hinged on the silent name of the capitalised Father."¹⁸ Here silence can be seen as a sign of the paralysing power, which in its turn is linked to what Lacan called The-Name-of-The-Father.

In relation to silent film theories, it is now possible to claim that images had to be silent (read: silenced) in order to flourish since sound was seen as an excess and an intervention. So, there is an interesting paradox: the image had to be silent in order to be able to "speak" since the audible speech in and with the image would silence the original "speech" of the image. In this respect, there are two competitive voices in sound film: the voice of the image and the voice of the sound, and according to silent film theories, the voice of the sound will silence the voice of the image. Thus, the typical "iconocentric" hierarchy is present already during the silent era: image over sound, voice over other sounds, sound over silence and finally the silence of the voice over the silence of other sounds.

Adding synchronous sound into image marks the birth of a very specific and different kind of system of signs than those based on images or sounds as separate entities. But nevertheless, we have to ask, what kind of ideology there is behind this idea of sound as an excess and an intervention? Isn't it clearly an ideology of censorship; an attempt to hold image and sound separate so that the image would not become "polluted" – or like Arnheim hints, "sterilized" – or even "paralysed" by the sound?

In Rick Altman's terms this idea about sound as a pollutant exemplifies the "ontological fallacy" in the tradition of film theory. Altman seems to be quite correct, when he states that the "fallacies are the prescriptive arguments of silent filmmakers intent on preserving the purity of their "poetic" medium."¹⁹ This kind of thinking about the "purity of art" can also be seen in a straight relation to problematics of silence. Susan Sontag for instance writes in her "The Aesthetics of Silence" that the "tenacious concept of art as "expression" has given rise to the most common, and dubious, version of the notion of silence – which invokes the idea of "the ineffable". The theory supposes that the province of art is "the beautiful", which implies effects of unspeakableness, indescribability, ineffability."²⁰

"The beautiful", "the poetic", "the ineffable" – concepts like these are very illustrative and typical to silent film theories. Clearly they show the insistence (and inability) to attach classical aesthetic categories to a new mode of expression. Behind all this there is, of course, the intention to assure that film was an art-form. This way another tautological definition was born: film is art because it is silent and film is silent because it is art.

"Silenced listeners" and "silencing the enunciator" are implications of ideology and powerrelations. In fact, there is in this ideology the same tradition of thinking about silence that has become most clearly present in relationship to religion. Silence is a central, even a necessary positive state of being in many religions. In order to be enlightened, you have to be silent, you have to live inside a certain kind of holy silence, you have to become deaf and dumb. This is a necessary condition for you to be able to discuss with God. Here again, silence is also a sign of the relationship between power and its object, although it is in this case a voluntary silence (and thus positive) and not a

forced, negative silence.

From the point of view of this ideology, silent film is holy and sacred in a sense silence itself includes features of religious sanctity. The sound film signifies in this respect a turning point towards the secularization of the cinema. We can refer to the role that music had during silent film-screenings. Music served the same kind of purpose it does during religious rituals. Münsterberg already noted that "The music does not tell a part of the plot and does not replace the picture as words would do, but simply re-enforces the emotional setting."²¹ And Eikhenbaum: "Music bears the role of an amplifier of emotions, and accompanies the process of internal speech."²²

Thus, the presence of the accompanying music was also seen in relation to spectator's "deafness and dumbness". Eikhenbaum refers to Leon Moussinac's idea of the harmony between imagistic and musical rhythm and on the other hand to Bela Balazs' view that music only annoys if it comes too close to the image. Eikhenbaum is clearly for Balazs and against Moussinac: music's job is to reinforce the spectator's ability to form his internal speech and this becomes possible only if the spectator doesn't consciously listen to the music. He must be deaf and dumb also in this respect. This point of view emphasizes again the spectator's mental (verbal and visual) activity and auditive passivity. The aim is the spectator's inner speech – and that is also a verbo-visual rather than an aural phenomenon.

All this obliges us to ask, whether it is really correct to say – like Martin Rubin has said about John Stahl's melodramas – that "silence is the voice of the image".²³ Do we not see – just like the theoreticians of silent film – when thinking in this way, an *icon* in every image; that the secret divinity, the hidden "obtuse" meaning of each image is buried in its silence? (Indeed, *buried*; most of the few references concerning silence, for example in Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, are to death.) Should we not also have to predicate more clearly of what is the image *about*? That is, silence of what *kind* of image? And what is the voice of the silence? Is it the image? And again, what *kind* of image? Maybe it is so that images (moving or not) are never silent in spite of the fact that there were no audible sounds presented in or with them. It might be more fruitful to think that silence is not *either* an aural *or* a visual, but in a very essential way an *audio-visual* phenomenon.

The problem of silence equals the problems of power, language, image and in general, the problem of absence and lack. In particular, it is a sign of the insistence to justify (if not even to glorify) the existence of the lack.²⁴ Theoreticians of silent film talked about the absence of sound (meaning "speech") and after sound film replaced silent film, they criticized sound (meaning still "speech") because in their opinion it narrowed the possibilities of the "imaginistic expression", the "thinking" of the images. Sound fixed the image and pushed it close to photographed theater, as well as it fixed the spectator and his or her inner speech. In the presence of silence, the theoreticians of silent film saw the fountain of signs. On the other hand, the presence of silence was replaced with the absence of the spoken word in their discourse. Thus, it is not unnatural at all, that for many of them the victory of sound film meant the same as the drying of that fountain. The paradox, of course, is that the fountain of signs was only a *fata morgana*, since only sound film made it possible to replace silence with the absence of speech.

Thoughts about silence in early film theory should be seen in relation to more general theories of audio-visual expression. The restrictions seen in language as a system were reflected in the film theory, too. Silent, speechless film provided a new possibility for those

who thought that language in the mode of audible speech was not capable of revealing the essence of reality. In early film theory, the basic sign of silence is the silence itself. The theoreticians didn't talk about silence but about absence and lack. This lack is the sign of silence, too; the absent figure in film theory is silence, because the theory – with few exceptions – has been so silent about it.

Notes

1. Hugo Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 34.
2. Jean Epstein, "The Senses I", *Afterimage* 10 (Autumn 1981): 13.
3. Boris Eikhenbaum, "Problems of Cine-Stylistics", in *The Poetics of Cinema* (Oxford: RPT Publications, 1982), 11.
4. Yuri Tynjanov, "The Fundamentals of Cinema", in *The Poetics of Cinema*, 36.
5. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 36-37.
6. *Ibid.*, 187.
7. Raymond Spottiswoode, *A Grammar of the Film* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 230.
8. Eikhenbaum, "Problems of Cine-Stylistics", 10.
9. *Ibid.*, 28.
10. Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 51.
11. Tynjanov, "The Fundamentals of Cinema", 45.
12. Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 94.
13. *Ibid.*, 93.
14. *Ibid.*, 188.
15. Roman Jakobson, "Is the Cinema in Decline?" in *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1976), 147.
16. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 121-122.
17. "The first manifestation of "bad luck", however, particularly with respect to his father figures (Mikhail Osipovich Eisenstein, Meyerhold, and also Stalin, not to mention the Soviet state itself), is that all of them exacted their respective censures on him. It begins with silence: Meyerhold's "tight lip" about artistic matters, his father's silence about sex, the buffoonery of the "fathers" who "smothered his faith", and the "doctors of the law" who will fail to cure him of dialectical thinking (IM, p. 214) – and to crown it all, the most awesome silence, the deafening lie of the Stalinist era." Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 13.
18. Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Silence in *Dubliners*", in Colin MacCabe (ed.), *James Joyce: New Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 48.
19. Rick Altman, "Introduction", *Yale French Studies* 60 ("Cinema/Sound") (1980): 15.
20. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 201-202.
21. Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study*, 88.
22. Eikhenbaum, "Problems of Cine-Stylistics", 14.
23. Martin Rubin, "The Voice of Silence: Sound Style in John Stahl's *Back Street*", in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 283.
24. About lack and film theory see, for example Kaja Silverman, "Lost Objects and Mistaken Subjects; Film Theory's Structuring Lack", *Wide Angle* 7, nos. 1&2 (1985): 28: "The female subject's involuntary incorporation of the various losses which haunt cinema from the fore-closed real to the invisible agency of enunciation, makes possible the male subject's identification with the symbolic father, and his imaginary alignment with creative vision and speech. Indeed, not only is woman made to assume male lack as her own, but her obligatory receptivity to the male gaze is what establishes its superiority, just as her obedience to the male voice is what "proves" its power."