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Words in Action

Forms and techniques of film dialogue

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Introduction
The perfect dialogue

In the last scene of *The Devil Wears Prada* (USA 2006), the protagonist and antagonist of the film randomly catch sight of one another on the streets of Manhattan. By now some time has passed since the young assistant Andrea (Anne Hathaway) rebuffed her boss, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep), resisting the temptations of the diabolic director of *Runway*.

Now that all is said and done, destiny seems to have brought them together for one last time. They have not seen each other since their thorny adieu. Andrea, however, found out that Miranda showed confidence and grace to Andrea's resignation by writing a letter of recommendation to an editorial office for her, so she could fulfill her dream of becoming a journalist. The opportunity to thank her ex-boss arrives unexpectedly, right now.

Andrea catches sight of Miranda and stops. The magazine director still hasn't seen her. She walks in haste, searching for her car. She is on the phone complaining, in her usual cross manner, about the driver being late. Then, as the car pulls up to the curb for her to get in, Miranda spots Andrea. She freezes.

For a brief moment, the two women hold each other's gaze from opposite sidewalks.

There are no words, but their looks make for intense dialogue.

Andrea hints at a smile. She raises her hand timidly to wave. Her gesture is equivalent to a line that is never said:

ANDREA
The letter… Thanks.

Miranda, however, does not wave back.

She is cold, impassible and stares at Andrea from head to toe. She quickly gets into the car. She remains silent, but it is as if Meryl Streep says:

MIRANDA
You still disappointed me. Goodbye.

Andrea just smiles and shakes her head before walking away. She also remains silent, but it is as if she says:

ANDREA
(to herself)
You'll never change. The icy, one and only… Miranda. I'll never forget you.

Miranda is now inside the car. She takes off her sunglasses – the main accessory to complement her look in public. She sits in the back seat and sighs wearily.

Her gesture, the deep look in her eye that has become melancholic, is yet another unspoken line:

MIRANDA
(to herself)
Such solitude… I can't take it anymore.

Miranda then looks up and stares at Andrea, who is walking away. She briefly recalls everything that happened between them and makes peace with herself.

Then, as the screenplay reads, "And Miranda, alone, finally breaks into a real smile", the audience picks up the last, unspoken line:

MIRANDA
(to herself)
Good choice, Andrea. As for me… it's not easy being the Devil, but…
someone has to do it.

Her brief inner crises is left behind and her normal personality returns to the fore. Miranda looks at the driver and very impatiently says, “Go!”. With this spoken line, the Devil puts her sunglasses back on and situates herself back into her public figure. She leaves the scene as the car disappears into traffic and the ending credits start to roll.

Another example of a film with a dialogue that has no words, or rather, a dialogue that can only be heard within the minds of the characters and the audience, is *The Town*.

After robbing a bank, Doug MacRay (Ben Affleck) and his gang have almost made their dangerous escape. Gotten the police off the track, the bandits pull over to switch cars. They spread strands of hair collected from barber shops all over the city in the first car to throw off forensics.

Then something unexpected happens.

The robbers stop in their tracks as they catch sight of a parked squad car on the other side of the street. It’s just a patrol car, parked there by chance. There is only one cop inside, whose blood runs from his face as he stares at them – five outlaws in latex masks holding machine guns.

No one else is in sight. There are no witnesses. As for the cop, it’s hard to say whether he is caught off-guard or terrified. The bandits, instead, feel the entire Boston Police Department breathing down their necks.

The criminals and the cop stare at one another. There is a moment of suspense. This dialogue needs no words. The situation says it all, with great accuracy:

BANDITS
(tense)
If you call in our location,
you’re dead.

COP
(scared)
But… if you shoot, they’ll
know where you are…

BANDITS
True, dammit. So what do you want to do? Become the hero?

COP
I don't want to look like a coward!

BANDITS
Think hard. If you let us go, we're certainly not going to tell the department…

COP
(to himself)
And if they do get you one day, You'll be too worried about the electric chair to remember me.

BANDITS
No one has seen us… Is it a deal?

COP
Deal.

The cop looks away so the bandits can continue their escape, undisturbed. No words were needed in this negotiation.

The dialogue between Andrea and Miranda crowns the work done on the antagonist by screenwriter Aline Brosh McKenna and director David Frankel, whose character is based on the bestseller by Lauren Weisberger[1]. This scene, in fact, is not in the book, just like there is no letter of recommendation written by Miranda for Andrea. A viewer that read the original novel is well aware that the transformation of the antagonist from a neurotic and trite woman (Miranda in the novel) to a ruthless temptress who does have a heart (Miranda in the film) was fundamental for a successful adaptation. It is noteworthy that this adaptation ends with an unspoken dialogue.

1 Lauren Weisberger, *The Devil Wears Prada*, Broadway Books, New York 2003.

Not even the "telepathic" negotiation between the bandits and the cop in *The Town* was present in the original novel, which was entitled *The Prince of Thieves* (written by Chuck Hogan[2] and adapted for the big screen in 2010 with screenplay by Ben Affleck, who not only starred in the film, but was also director and co-writer along with Peter Craig and Aaron Stockard).

While the screenplay was still being developed, anyone at Warner who got their hands on the script of this great detective story praised this scene and asked the writers where they got the idea[3]. The scene is very short, not even half a page and only 30 seconds long on film. It's something extra. The getaway itself has already created quite a show and the audience would have been satisfied even without this last shot of an unexpected cop on the same street as the robbers. Yet the trained eyes of script analysis experts were enraptured by this scene[4].

These two scenes, taken from films that have successfully gone down in the history of their film genres, are examples of a well-known assumption in the world of cinema – the perfect dialogue is a dialogue with no words.

This is the objective to lean towards when writing for the big screen. Even Hitchcock upheld this assumption in some of his famous quotes: "Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms"[5]. More recently, David Mamet, a great playwright and screenwriter with an unmistakable style for writing dialogue, states,

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2 Chuck Hogan, *Prince of Thieves: a Novel*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2004.

3 *Cfr.* Jeff Goldsmith's audio interview with Ben Affleck, who starred, directed and co-wrote the film, "Ben Affleck – The Town Q&A", <http://creativescreenwritingmagazine.blogspot.com/2010/12/ben-affleck-town-q.html>, 31/12/2010.

4 In adapting Hogan's book to the big screen, the screenwriters toured American prisons to interview bank robbers. Each interview ended by asking the criminal to think of one interesting or curious event that happened during a robbery. Affleck tells that this scene was recalled by a criminal who actually found himself in the same circumstances. *Cfr*. Jeff Goldsmith, "Ben Affleck – The Town Q&A", *cit.*

5 François Truffaut, in collaboration with Helen Scott, *Le cinéma selon Hitchcock* Editions Robert Laffont, Paris 1966.

"If you pretend the characters can't speak, and write a silent movie, you will be writing great drama"[6].

In the best screenwriting handbook in circulation today, Robert McKee stresses the same point even more, "The best advice for writing film dialogue is *don't*"[7].

In other words, let the scene communicate without relying on words. We can see clearly how this is true by comparing cinema to theater. Theater is the big brother that film has inherited[8].

In theater, however, dialogue is of prime importance.

The different role of dialogue in theatre and in cinema

Theater lives within the confined space of the scene, within the space of the stage. As one would expect, given the short span of motion and close interaction between actors, the most immediate and natural action are words.

Moreover, the further one sits from the stage and the less in detail he can see the actors, the more listening becomes important. Thus performances are organized so that the audience must listen to what is said as much as they must watch what is going on.

These are the first two "structural" reasons for which dialogue is so important in theater.

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6 David Mamet, in a memo written for the screenwriting staff of the series *The Unit*, cited on *Movieline.com*, <http://www.movieline.com/2010/03/david-mametsmemo-to-the-writers-of-the-unit.php>. This concept was already expressed by Mamet in his book *On Directing Film*, Penguin Books, New York 1991: "Basically, the perfect movie doesn't have any dialogue. So you should always be striving to make a perfect movie" (p. 71).

7 Robert McKee, *Story*: *Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principle of Screenwriting*, Harper Collins, New York 1997.

8 A powerful summary of the differences between theater and cinema can be found in Armando Fumagalli, *I vestiti nuovi del narratore. L'adattamento da letteratura a cinema*, Il Castoro, Milan 2004, chap. 5.