Mise en Esprit: One-Character Films and the Evocation of Sensory Imagination

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What is a One-Character Film?

Over the last decade we have witnessed a remarkable cinematic trend: the flourishing of narrative feature films relying on a single onscreen character. These one-character films, as I will simply call them, have precursors that reach back at least to the 1960s. Yet it is in the 2010s that we can observe a particularly strong propensity among filmmakers in showing only one character on the screen. Far from necessarily a-cinematic or theatrical, one-character films can epitomize the virtues of a sophisticated filmic simplicity, as if to lend credence to an aphorism once quipped by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau: 'Real art is simple, but simplicity requires the greatest art.'[1] Although my inventory is most likely shot through with gaps (just witness the strong bias towards English-language films), I have examples like the following in mind:

- *Yaadein* (1964, by Sunil Dutt, with himself as the only actor);[2]
- *The Human Voice* (1966, by Ted Kotcheff, with Ingrid Bergman) and other adaptations of Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* such as *Die geliebte Stimme* (1960) with Hildegard Knef;
- *Un homme qui dort/The Man Who Sleeps* (1974, by Georges Perec/Bernard Queysanne, with Jacques Spiesser);
- *The Noah* (1975, by Daniel Bourla, with Robert Strauss);
- *Give 'em Hell, Harry!* (1975, by Steven Binder/Peter H. Hunt, with James Whitmore);
- *Brontë* (1983, by Delbert Mann, with Julie Harris);
- *Secret Honor* (1984, by Robert Altman, with Philip Baker Hall);

- *Missing Link* (1988, by Carol and David Hughes, with Peter Elliott);
- *Krapp's Last Tape* (2000, by Atom Egoyan, with John Hurt) and other adaptations of Beckett's monodrama;
- *Buried* (2010, by Rodrigo Cortés, with Ryan Reynolds);
- *Locke* (2013, by Steven Knight, with Tom Hardy);
- *All is Lost* (2013, by J. C. Chandor, with Robert Redford);
- *Nightingale* (2014, by Elliott Lester with David Oyelowo);
- *Kollektor/Collector* (2016, by Alexey Krasovsky, with Konstantin Khabensky);
- *Den Skyldige/The Guilty* (2018, by Gustav Möller, with Jakob Cedergren);
- *Arctic* (2019, by Joe Penna, with Mads Mikkelsen).[3]

Of course, crafting a new category is risky business and might raise eyebrows. Therefore a number of caveats seem necessary. First, I categorize films like *The Man Who Sleeps*, *The Guilty* and *Arctic* as one-character films, even though they contain brief appearances of other persons and feature short interactions. However, in all three cases the bit parts are negligibly small; in fact, the persons encountered by the character resemble background props more than supporting characters with agency. Second, I see no reason to distinguish between films with a theatrical release and movies made for television like ABC's *The Human Voice* or HBO's *Nightingale*. Third, I have deliberately put emphasis on the term 'character', because I focus exclusively on narrative fiction films. Thus, one-*person* avant-garde films like Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963, with John Giorno) and Thierry Zéno's *Vase de noces* (1974, with Dominique Garny), documentaries with one protagonist like Kim Ki-duk's *Arirang* (2011, with himself as the only one onscreen) or experimental-documentary hybrids such as Romuald Karmakar's *Das Himmler-Projekt* (2000, with Manfred Zapatka) fall outside of my scope. The same goes for filmed one-person stage performances like Jonathan Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987, with Spalding Gray). This decision is somewhat arbitrary, but it will allow a more focused analysis. Suffice it to say that a number of my observations below may also illuminate the discussion of non-fictional one-person films.

Finally, I have qualified the term 'one-character film' with a reference to a character *onscreen*. This qualification is important because some of the most striking one-character films feature protagonists that are present via telecommunication devices but remain absent onscreen;

throughout the film these offscreen characters appear only as *acousmatic voices*, to use Michel Chion's well-known term. Thus, depending on how strictly one defines one-character films, some of the above-mentioned films do not fully qualify. In the end it might therefore be more useful to endorse prototype theory: some one-character films (say *Secret Honor* or *All is Lost*) are more prototypical than others (such as *The Guilty* or *Arctic*).

Yet, and this further emphasizes the trend and encourages me to investigate the category, over and above one-character films narrowly defined we come across an astonishing number of critically acclaimed and/or financially successful films that focus on a single character for a major part of their screen time. Following precursors like *Silent Running* (1972, by Douglas Trumbull, with Bruce Dern) we could think of *Cast Away* (2000, by Robert Zemeckis, with Tom Hanks), *I Am Legend* (2007, by Francis Lawrence, with Will Smith), *127 Hours* (2010, by Danny Boyle, with James Franco), *Life of Pi* (2012, by Ang Lee, with Suraj Sharma), *Gravity* (2013, by Alfonso Cuarón, with Sandra Bullock) and *The Shallows* (2016, by Jaume Collet-Serra, with Blake Lively). In these films the supporting characters either get lost along the way, appear only later in the film, feature in parts that frame an extended one-character section or flare up in memory flashbacks throughout the film. In some cases the one-character section comes close to or even exceeds the screen time of fully fledged one-character films: think of the roughly eighty minutes Tom Hanks has by himself in *Cast Away* or the sixty minutes reserved for Suraj Sharma as the only human character in *Life of Pi*.

Naturally, the one-character film is not without precursors. At least three forerunners have influenced its form. First, the one-character film can be seen as a continuation and radicalization of the *chamber film*, as developed in Germany in the 1920s, with the Carl-Mayer-written films *Scherben/Shattered* (1921) and *Sylvester/New Year's Eve* (1924) as prime examples. Recently, Thomas J. Connelly discussed it under the term 'cinema of confinement' and grouped together films that primarily take place in one setting like *Phone Booth* (2002) or *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016).[4] I speak of a 'radicalization' of the chamber film because one-character films not only further limit the cast, but in cases like *Locke* or *The Guilty* also play out in real time, thus taking the call of the chamber film for unity of time quite literally. Moreover, the one-character film bears resemblance to the *monodrama* in theatre with its rich tradition since Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1762) and Goethe's *Proserpina* (1777).[5] In fact, a number of one-character films

are adaptations of theatrical monodramas — think of Kotcheff's *La Voix humaine/The Human Voice*, Egoyan's *Krapp's Last Tape* or Altman's rendering of the stage play *Secret Honor*. Finally, at least in one of its subtypes the one-character film comes close to and is influenced by the *radio drama* and its popular successor, the *narrative podcast*. This is literally true for Delbert Mann's *Brontë* with Julie Harris, based on William Luce's 1979 radio play *Currer Bell, Esq.* Yet it is more formally the case in those films that will eventually emerge as the main focus of this essay — what I call *centrifugal* one-character films.

   One-character films know a broad spectrum. It ranges from (a) extremely laconic films entirely focused on the action in the narrative here-and-now like *All is Lost* and *Missing Link* where what we get is what we see and even backstories of the solitary characters remain sparse, via (b) highly talkative films that revolve around soliloquies of self-reflection, questioning of identity and a problematizing of the narrative past such as *Secret Honor* and *Krapp's Last Tape* to (c) dialogue-heavy films that — via phones and other telecommunication devices — reach far beyond the depicted scene. In films such as *The Guilty* and *Locke* much of the action does not take place *hic-et-nunc* (here-and-now) but rather *ibi-et-nunc* (there-and-now). While the former do not raise any questions about what goes on elsewhere, in the latter these questions loom large. These films therefore *centrifugally* thrust us into a simultaneous present that remains invisible.

   To put it in a somewhat simplified way: the first group of films places its emphasis on *actions*, the second group focuses on *words*, and the third group revolves around *actions-through-words*. While in the first case we are observers of acting characters and in the second we follow them talking, in the third case we observe characters observing. Or better: we observe them listening to the actions and words of others to which they react with words. In terms of influence the first group of one-character films comes closest to the chamber film, the second to the stage monodrama and the third to the radio play.

   Alternatively, however, we may also treat these three tendencies as modes or registers *within* a given one-character film: most one-character films smoothly shift registers, even while retaining an overall emphasis on one of the three modes. This may ultimately prove more productive for analysis, also because one-character films can be centrifugal in various temporal forms: they can catapult us not only into a present elsewhere, but also, via messenger reports, into the past or, via character speeches, into the future. Moreover, the degrees of
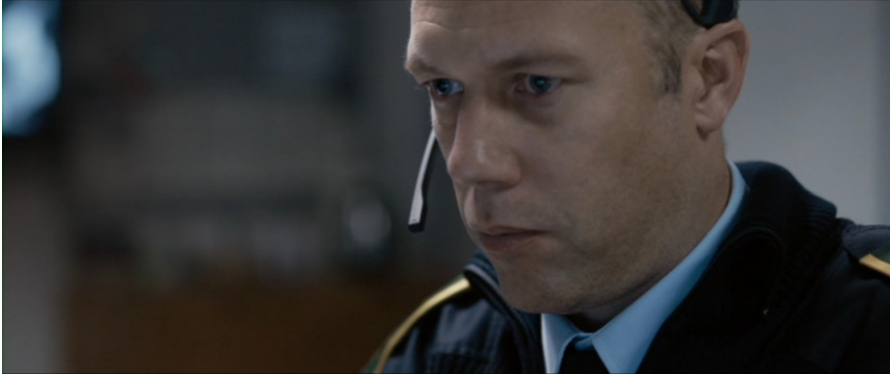
Figure 1. Asger Holm (Jakob Cedergren) in *Den Skyldige/The Guilty* (2018) by Gustav Möller

Figure 2. Paul Conroy (Ryan Reynolds) in Rodrigo Cortés' *Buried* (2010)

centrifugality can vary substantially *between* films and *within* a film, depending on how evocative and suggestive the 'other end of the line' is and hence how vividly the film plays with the viewer's imagination. A film like *The Guilty* (Figure 1) constantly changes its scope, as if expanding and shrinking: during the phone conversations it moves far away from the emergency call centre in which it takes place and comes back to it in moments when we see protagonist Asger Holm (Jakob Cedergren) getting up and going to the water cooler or having a brief conversation with his colleague.

Or consider *Buried* (Figure 2): protagonist Paul Conroy (Ryan Reynolds), taken hostage and held captive in a coffin in the Iraqi desert, needs to solve a series of problems of how to survive (a most popular theme in many one-character films). He has to get rid of his gag and bonds, retrieve a cell phone or fight a snake that has sneaked into his coffin. Besides such displays of physical actions and skilful coping with obstacles, Conroy leads numerous phone conversations with his mother-in-law, a nasty clerk from his company, and so on. However, compared to the strong suggestiveness of many telephone dialogues in *The Guilty*, these conversations focus much less on the actions at the other end of the line but on what the persons tell Conroy to do in the here and now. Yet *Buried*, too, occasionally switches into a centrifugal mode and confronts us with moments in which actions are merely suggested through words and sound effects.

Halfway through the film, Conroy calls a nursing home and requests to speak to his mother. The filtered voice of the nurse answers: 'Um, okay. Let me bring the cordless phone to her room. Hold on one moment please.' We hear footsteps in a hallway and a creaking door. Then the nurse, now somewhat remote from the receiver, says: 'Mrs. Conroy, you have a telephone call, dear. Here, you can use this phone.' While the camera stays with Conroy in close-up, the action verbs 'bring' and 'use', the descriptive noun 'cordless phone' as well as sound effects of walking and door-opening allow us to imagine — more or less vividly — what is going on in the nursing home. What happens to the viewer is a shift of reception mode typical of centrifugal one-character films: a stronger emphasis on *listening* to the detriment of seeing and a heightened focus on *imagination* at the cost of perception.

As these examples indicate, one-character films can strongly toy with the viewers' *sensory imagination*. More specifically, they can make us *mentally visualize* by referring, in clever ways, to absent spaces and actions, thus enabling an experience of 'mental superimposition' or 'mental double-exposure': the audiovisual perception of the film is enriched and layered-on-top with sensory imagination of the visual kind. While we *see* only one character, we are invited to *imagine* an entire cast that remains invisible. To be sure, the vividness of sensory imagination varies between individuals: some persons imagine much more strongly than others. Those who do imagine — if only mildly — will likely feel sent centrifugally beyond the film frame into an imaginary elsewhere. Coining a new term we could claim that the *mise en scène* is enriched by — and embedded in — a *mise en esprit*. The plots ostensibly take place in nothing but a car, a police office

or a coffin underground, but we have to transcend the boundaries of the location and move into an imagined scenery evoked by voices and sounds. We negotiate, in other words, between the on-seen and the off-sent.

It is for this reason that I propose to locate at least some one-character films squarely within the aesthetic tradition I have dubbed 'omission, suggestion, completion': these films deliberately *omit* parts of the action and merely *suggest* what happens so that viewers mentally *complete* what has been left out.[6] Since what the viewer imaginatively fills in is often rich and detailed and involves various bodily registers — for instance visual imagination — it would be wrong to think of centrifugal one-character films as 'austere', 'abstract' or 'ascetic'. While we may talk about an aesthetics of 'absence', 'restriction' or 'simplicity' (as I have done above), the often-used term 'minimalist' is convincing only in an economic sense but does not describe the viewer's varied aesthetic experience.

I am particularly interested in how centrifugal one-character films derive their dramatic tension from keeping the viewer's sensory imagination busy. And imagine they do: we can retrieve abundant evidence from user comments on IMDb, film reviews in newspapers and magazines as well as directors' commentaries. Jeannette Catsoulis, for one, writes in the *New York Times*: 'the stripped-down Danish thriller *The Guilty* paints such vivid pictures with words that, afterward, we're not exactly sure what we saw and what was merely imagined.'[7] The director of *Locke*, Steven Knight, himself reports that 'One of the best things people say to me afterward is they forget they haven't seen the other characters. They do it themselves.'[8] Of course, these comments only testify *that* sensory imagining occurred, but not through what means it was evoked and how it was experienced. These aspects will be the goal of the rest of my essay.

How to Evoke the Viewer's Sensory Imagination

First, we need to clarify how we designate the space we mentally fill in. Are we dealing with a lateral ellipsis here — that is, a spatial rather than temporal omission in which an important narrative element is spatially circumnavigated and conspicuously left aside?[9] In a previous essay I have proposed to speak of a lateral ellipsis only if there are *no* direct sensual suggestions of what remains absent.[10] Since there are abundant aural cues in centrifugal one-character films, it is better to resort to

the term 'offscreen space'. However, offscreen space is not a well-defined term, as Chion pointed out a long time ago. Pertinently for our case, he asks: 'where should we situate sounds (usually voices) that come from electrical devices located in the action and that the image suggests or directly shows: telephone receivers, radios, public-address speakers?'[11] I therefore suggest distinguishing between the *immediate off* and the *medial off*.[12] The immediate off refers to offscreen space more or less directly beyond the film frame and within the range of normal sense perception of the characters (thus covering the six segments of offscreen space defined by Noël Burch); the medial off includes those parts of offscreen space we have aural or visual access to *via media* but which are located far beyond the immediate off.

Usually, what brings into play this medial off in one-character films are telecommunication devices like the cell phone, the walkie-talkie or the hands-free kit which connect the protagonist to the offscreen personage. But how to mark off this invisible personage if we want to avoid the term 'character'? With Chion we might call the protagonist the *proxi-locutor* and the latter the *tele-locutor*.[13] (Of course, the mere use of a telephone call does not guarantee a strong centrifugal tendency, as the adaptations of Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* and the many telephone scenes in *Nightingale* make clear, where we aurally stay with the protagonist and do not hear what the tele-locutor says in the medial off.)

It is precisely in this medial off where a lot of the action takes place, but it is in our embodied minds where we have to actualize and concretize it. When in *The Guilty* Asger Holm presses a button to take his next emergency call, a new filmic world elsewhere suddenly seems to open its gates. It magnetizes our attention — at least in parts — away from Asger and his emergency desk and we begin to 'mentally look' into that space beyond. It's an acousmatic world of voices and sound effects to which we have no visual access, a *mise en esprit* which gradually takes shape in our mind through acoustic information. But just as the *mise en scène* can be densely packed or rarefied, so can the *mise en esprit* be plastic or vague. Moreover, the conversations between proxi- and tele-locotur can open up far-reaching deep worlds or they can remain small and flat and close to the unseen interlocutor on the phone. In his phenomenology of the radio drama Friedrich Knilli has introduced a distinction between plays that make listeners evoke an entire scene (*Szenenstücke*) and plays that conjure up predominantly persons (*Personenstücke*). While the former include the entire world of things, the latter restrict themselves almost exclusively to the

tele-locutors.[14] This distinction is also useful for how the medial off takes shape in our mind: as mentioned above, a film like *Buried* hardly ever leaves the confines of the 'person piece', while *The Guilty* goes to great lengths to evoke entire scenes.

But what are preconditions and causes that allow films to make viewers populate and furnish a well-defined *mise en esprit* through mental visualizations and other forms of sensory imagination? The following list ranges from mere facilitating factors (point a) to catalysts of mental visualizations (points b–d).

a) Reduced within-modality interference
In comparison to reading a literary text or listening to a radio play, the film spectator is in a disadvantaged position when it comes to visually imagining what is not shown. Visually, the reader of a literary text is merely confronted with what Anežka Kuzmičová calls the decoding of 'flat monochrome signs on a page', an activity that 'does not necessarily have to interfere, or not too strongly, with mental imagery'.[15] The listener to the radio drama can look at an unmoving background like a wall or even close his or her eyes altogether to focus on the act of imagining.[16] The film spectator, on the other hand, usually follows what is shown onscreen with his or her sense of sight and therefore might run the risk of what cognitive scientists call 'within-modality interference'. As Kuzmičová explains: 'Within-modality interference (…) entails that mental imaging in a given sensory modality becomes more difficult if a physical stimulus is simultaneously present in the same modality.'[17] Neuroscientists assume that the negative effect of visual activity on mental visualization derives from the involvement of the same brain regions in vision and visual imagination because both have common neural substrates.[18] In other words, to visualize mentally while watching a film might be cognitively taxing — unless the filmmaker takes precautions and lessens the cognitive visual load. This is why directors often use long takes to avoid the abrupt shifts in perspective and other visual distractions that come with editing. Similarly, the camera remains either static or the mobile frame is reduced to slow pans or zooms. Not least, the *mise en scène* is freed of attention-grabbing content, most notably because we are dealing with stationary characters lying in a coffin, driving a car or sitting at a desk.

While involved in — what for the viewer are meant to be imagination-igniting — conversations, these characters often look captivated and focused into off-screen space.[19] It is as if these characters

were trying to imagine what is happening at the other end of the line, thus allowing us to switch into the mode of imagining ourselves. Here unobtrusive acting often dominates as well: in *The Guilty* and *Locke* the characters have emotional outbursts only *between* the conversations. Finally, scientific studies have shown that mental visualizations suffer in brightly illuminated spaces — visual imagination, in other words, functions best in the dark.[20] This confirms the strategy of filmmakers to situate their one-character films in dark environments. Here the barely illuminated coffin in *Buried* — essentially a 95-minute exercise in chiaroscuro lighting — serves as a case in point. Similarly, *Locke* and *The Guilty* not only take place at night, but the latter also finds narrative motivation for creating imagination-conducive conditions for the viewer: the more intense the narrative, the darker the surroundings.

b) Suggestive verbalizations

The reduced within-modality-interference is a mere facilitating factor, but it does not ignite sensory imagination itself. It helps to free cognitive resources and allows us to glide smoothly from perception-controlled viewing into a mode of spectatorship dominated by imagining. For a strong catalyst of mental visualization we have to move on to 'suggestive verbalizations'. With this term I designate particularly plastic, vivid language that invites, challenges, even forces a viewer to imagine in a visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory or tactile way something that is not shown — language that enables the viewer to make present to him- or herself the non-present in a sensory way. In order to evoke linguistically what remains absent all kinds of language can be brought into play.[21]

For example, at the beginning of *The Guilty* we hear a man calling from his cell phone, cars are passing by in the background, rain is falling. The man explains that he has just been mugged and that he is sitting in his car: 'A woman pulled a knife and took my wallet and computer — which contains work I need.' Asger asks him if this had happened on the street. 'No, as I said, in my car!' the man replies. These brief snippets may be enough to elicit a relatively clearly defined visualization of the man's environment and what happened during the mugging. But the dialogue furnishes the *mise en esprit* with further brief descriptions of persons and props, like the man's blue BMW. When Asger asks how the woman looked, the man answers: 'She was young. Dark hair.' — 'Danish?' — 'No, more...' — 'Eastern European?'– 'Yes.'

In recent years cognitive scientists and literary scholars have made considerable headway in identifying types of language encouraging mental visualizations and other forms of sensory imagination. One major lesson is that the principle of 'the more descriptive detail, the better' can lead to cognitive overload.[22] In contrast, the narration of *simple, bodily actions* easily prompts the reader or listener to visualize. This is especially true if these bodily actions are *volitional* and *goal-oriented*.[23] In centrifugal one-character films we can find various narratively motivated scenes with character speeches containing purposive bodily actions, precisely because the characters have to give instructions to their tele-locutors. For instance, Ivan Locke at one point calls his son to retrieve an item for him: 'In my blue coat in the kitchen, yes? There's a notebook. There's a phone number in the notebook of somebody called Cassidy who works for the council clerk of works. I need the number.'

In addition, these *imperatives* to execute simple, bodily actions — which also function as implicit calls to the viewer to imagine — often include either explicitly or implicitly the objects on which the tele-locutors have to act and the affordances of these objects. This is helpful for imagining because, as Kuzmičová adds, language becomes particularly imagination-friendly if it includes *transitive movements* — that is, movements that involve physical objects. What is more, the transitive movements are best directed at *everyday artefacts* whose affordances are well known.[24] In a dialogue between Ivan Locke and his assistant, Donal, Locke's brief imperatives not only explicitly mention everyday objects (pen, drawer, folder), but also include implicit descriptions of how to act on what these objects afford (for instance, opening a drawer by grabbing its handle and pulling it).

But centrifugal dialogue passages do not only play out in the form of imperatives, but they may also follow a *question-and-answer model*. This seems highly conducive to mental visualizations because questions imply retarding moments that raise curiosity. The most harrowing scene in *The Guilty*, for instance, is shot through with questions, answered by brief suggestive verbalizations, as when Asger, on the phone, asks a colleague about the state of a four-year-old girl: 'I don't know, but she has blood on her hands and blouse.'

c) The acousmatic voice
What the voice from the medial off describes is arguably the single most crucial factor for how we imagine the *mise en esprit*. But, as Don Ihde reminds us, '*What is* said, the discursive, in voice is never present

alone but is amplified within the possibilities of *how* the voice says it.'[25] Particularly, in 'person pieces' that remain focused on the tele-locutors and do not provide much further visualizable information, but also in those moments of 'scene pieces' when the evocative power of the linguistic content recedes, the voice itself carries evocative force. First of all, the voice can lend a — however vague — visual quality to the tele-locutor as a person *in general*. This is certainly true in terms of gender and age. But in combination with narrative content and through dialect, sociolect or accent we can often also infer regional background and social class, which might elicit idiosyncratic (visual) connotations for each viewer. For instance, from the hoarse voice of Iben, the woman in *The Guilty* allegedly abducted by her husband, one could deduce that she is either a heavy smoker or drinker or both and that this might qualify her as a member of the lower class.

But on top of these *general* qualities of the tele-locutor, the modulated voice also allows us to visualize *momentary* facial expressions and bodily postures that come with emotions or altered physiological states: the angry shout, the sad cry, the scared scream, the startled exclamation, the derisive laughter, the slurred voice of a person who drank too much — these invisible vocal expressions may also come with a visualizable quality.

Again, I do not claim that we necessarily have very plastic visualizations of the tele-locutors, nor that we always imagine them in detail. As Zenon Pylyshyn exemplifies: 'I often feel I have a vivid image of someone's face, but when asked whether the person wears glasses, I find that my image is silent on that question: it neither has nor lacks glasses, (...) nor does it contain the information that something is missing.'[26] Quoting Ned Block, Emily Troscianko calls this feature of our imagination 'inexplicitly noncommittal'.[27] But indeterminacy is not an argument against the occurrence of mental visualizations per se. In fact, the phenomenon Chion calls *de-acousmatization* — when the acousmatic voice is finally endowed with a face and the viewer gets to see the previously invisible character — often comes with a (however mild) rupture because the acousmatic voice had evoked a different visual expectation.[28]

d) Sound effects

'[T]he shortest, simplest sound can conjure up an entire scene, if it is charged clearly and sufficiently with unequivocal associations. For example: any dull thud is indefinite, but the sound of a champagne glass is unmistakable,' Rudolf Arnheim writes.[29] Sound effects are a

vital factor for igniting the viewer's imagination, and they come in various forms:

1. *Immediately recognizable sounds*: this is the term Chion uses for sounds that are clearly and irrefutably identified, at least by persons belonging to a particular community or demographic, such as trains, cars, horses, dogs, seagulls, police sirens, rain drops, church bells, footsteps, slammed doors and so on.[30] For instance, in the harrowing child scene from *The Guilty* the sound effects from the medial off comprise footsteps of various speeds and creaking doors.
2. *Keynotes*: According to R. Murray Schafer, keynotes are background sounds not listened to consciously but connected to specific societies or locales which they might evoke, such as foghorns connected to port towns. For instance, in *Buried* we can hear — from the immediate (not the medial) off the stereotypical sound of a muezzin singing — which may evoke a sun-flooded, dry Arab countryside.
3. *Materializing sound indices*: this is Chion's technical term for those aspects of sound that make us realize the material nature of its source and how they were emitted: they not only inform about the substance causing the sound (wood, metal, paper) but also how the sound is produced (by friction, impact, periodic movement back and forth).[31] In the nursing home scene from *Buried*, we can hear female footsteps that evoke high-heels walking on a tiled floor in an empty hallway. Thus, they give away much more sound indices — and hence are more visualizable — than the rather abstract footsteps in *The Guilty*.

Sound effects can also evoke spatial dimensions and dynamics in rather concrete ways through factors like depth, distance, direction and reverberation. Think of the aforementioned depth of the medial off: are we dealing with a flat versus a deep scene, a scene that remains close to the tele-locutor or that opens up a world beyond him or her? Volume and the pitching and filtering of the actor's voice can indicate if a person is close to the telecommunication device or standing far away, if she is moving away from it or towards it (remember, again, the nursing home scene from *Buried*). The scene can also be layered, include a foreground and a background and shift the focus from fore- to background and vice versa. Not least, reverberation or lack of echo can indicate something about the extension of space (in *Buried* the

effect of being situated in an empty nursing home corridor derives
from the strong reverberation in this scene).[32]

Director Gustav Moeller uses particularly evocative sound effects
in a scene with a quasi-live character some sixteen minutes into *The
Guilty* — it's as if we were listening to the broadcast of an O. J.
Simpson-like car chase on a freeway. We see Asger Holm tensely
listening to the report of a colleague in a police patrol car on the
freeway heading north of Copenhagen through the rain and at high
speed in order to find an abducted victim. From the medial off we can
hear the patrol car's engine and the sound of cars passing. Again, the
centrifugal dialogue largely follows a question-and-answer structure.
At first the policemen seem to lose the vehicle, but then they turn on
their sirens and close in on a white van. We can hear the car stop, the
engine turned off, a voice in the background. With the line open, the
policemen leave the car. The nearest sounds are from the windshield
wipers in the patrol car, which keep moving throughout the scene, but
we also hear footsteps whose volume decreases and which are gradually
moving away from the car. In the background we hear the voice of
one man screaming 'Police. Let me see your hands. Keep them on the
wheel.' Again footsteps, screams in the background, noise from the
walkie-talkie and so on.

Centrifugal one-character films like *The Guilty* thus allow for a
refocused attention to the aural world and, more specifically, the
onscreen and offscreen human voice. While early champions of
the visual close-up — from Béla Balázs to Fritz Lang — dreamed
of a 'rediscovery' of the human face, one-character films offer an
intricate interplay and 'rediscovery' of the human face *and* the
human voice as well as a sensory confrontation between two forms
of actor's performance: an audiovisual, full-bodied one versus an
auditory, voiced-based one. Simultaneously, centrifugal one-character
films enable an aesthetic experience suspended between what Chion
calls *visualized* listening (where we see the sound source) and *acousmatic*
listening (where the sound source remains invisible), between *audio-
vision* (where the image is the centre of attention to which sound adds
value) and *visio-audition* (where the auditory part is focused on and
the image merely adds to it), between *watching* a film and *imagining*
the rest of it. No doubt, for many viewers this elicits deep pleasure:
discovering the potency of film as a medium of mental visualizations
and a foregrounding of sensory imagination.

NOTES

1   Quoted from Graham Petrie, *Hollywood Destinies: European Directors in America, 1922–1931*, revised edition (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 74.

2   I did not have a chance to see *Yaadein*, but its opening credits reportedly describe it as the 'World's First One-Actor Movie', https://scroll.in/reel/832009/rajkummar-rao-isnt-the-only-one-who-is-trapped-he-shares-his-agonywith-sunil-dutt-in-yaadein, consulted 14 August 2019.

3   Apart from feature films we can find single characters also in short films (Mike Leigh's *A Sense of History* from 1992, with Jim Broadbent), as part of an omnibus film ('Una voce umana' from Roberto Rossellini's 1948 *L'Amore*, with Anna Magnani) or in television series (the 2015 'Heaven Sent' episode from the ninth season of *Doctor Who*, with Peter Capaldi).

4   Thomas J. Connelly, *Cinema of Confinement* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019). Many one-character films are one-location dramas, sometimes even restricted to a single room or even a coffin as in the case of *Buried*. But in *The Man Who Sleeps* or *Missing Link* this is not the case. Additionally, moving vehicles — like the car on the freeway in *Locke* or the ship on the Indian Ocean in *All is Lost* — complicate our understanding of what a single location means.

5   On the theatrical monodrama, see A. Dwight Culler, 'Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue', *PMLA* 90:3 (1975), 366–85.

6   Julian Hanich, 'Omission, Suggestion, Completion: Film and the Imagination of the Spectator', *Screening the Past* 43 (2018), n.p.

7   https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/movies/the-guilty-review.html, consulted 14 August 2019.

8   https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-locke-20140425-story.html, consulted 14 August 2019. Or take this IMDb entry on *The Guilty*: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6742252/reviews?sort=totalVotes&dir=desc&ratingFilter=0, consulted 14 August 2019.

9   On lateral ellipses, see Guido Kirsten, 'Die Auslassung als Wirklichkeitseffekt. Ellipsen und Lateralellipsen im Film' in *Auslassen, Andeuten, Auffüllen. Der Film und die Imagination des Zuschauers*, edited by Julian Hanich and Hans Jürgen Wulff (Munich: Fink, 2012).

10 Hanich, 'Omission', n.p.

11 Michel Chion, *Audiovision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 74.

12 The term 'medial off' is inspired by Shanyang Zhao's term 'medial co-presence', which I have adopted into my tripartite distinction between immediate, mediate and medial co-presence in the cinema. See Julian Hanich, *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 279–80.

13 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 64.

14 Friedrich Knilli, *Das Hörspiel in der Vorstellung der Hörer: Selbstbeobachtungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006), 40–1.

15 Anežka Kuzmičová, 'Audiobooks and Print Narrative: Similarities in Text Experience' in *Audionarratology: Interfaces of Sound and Narrative*, edited by Jarmila Mildorf and Till Kinzel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 217–37 (224).

16 What I sketch here are idealized readers and listeners: someone driving a car while listening to a radio drama does not have this possibility; and a reader trying to concentrate on a book while sitting in a crowded subway might find it difficult to imagine the narrative world.

17 Kuzmičová, 'Audiobooks and Print Narrative', 221.

18 Rossana De Beni and Angelica Moeè, 'Presentation Modality Effects in Studying Passages: Are Mental Images Always Effective?', *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 17:3 (2003), 309–24 (311).

19 At some point in *Krapp's Last Tape* the eponymous character even hugs the tape recorder he listens to and lays his head on it, as if to focus even more intensely.

20 Rachel Sherwood and Joel Pearson, 'Closing the Mind's Eye: Incoming Luminance Signals Disrupt Visual Imagery', *PLoS ONE* 5:12 (2010).

21 See Julian Hanich, 'Suggestive Verbalizations in Film: On Character Speech and Sensory Imagination', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (forthcoming).

22 Emily T. Troscianko, 'Reading Imaginatively: The Imagination in Cognitive Science and Cognitive Literary Studies', *Journal of Literary Semantics* 42:2 (2013), 181–98 (188). See also Anežka Kuzmičová, *Mental Imagery in the Experience of Literary Narrative: Views from Embodied Cognition* (Dissertation. Stockholm University, 2013), 74.

23 Thor Grünbaum, 'Action between Plot and Discourse', *Semiotica* 165:1/4 (2007), 295–314.

24 Anežka Kuzmičová, 'Presence in the Reading of Literary Narrative: A Case for Motor Enactment', *Semiotica* 189:1/4 (2012), 23–48 (31).

25 Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd edition (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 170.

26 Quoted in Troscianko, 'Reading Imaginatively', 186.

27 Troscianko, 'Reading Imaginatively', 186.

28 On de-acousmatization, see Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 130–1.

29 Rudolf Arnheim: *Radio* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), 112.

30 Michel Chion, *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 114.

31 Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 114.

32 Arnheim, *Radio*, 95.

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