THE 'PRE-VERBAL' LANGUAGE
OF THE SILENT CINEMA

Film is said to be 'a visual medium,' but there is more to it than that. 'Visual' can mean merely 'pictorial,' as a painting or still photograph is pictorial. The qualities of light and shade, color, pattern and shape — all the dimensions of pictorial art — are, however, less important in film than its special dimension: time.

Film is dynamic. Movement is not merely the illusion of continuous action on the screen, it is the dynamics of the mind's eye and ear, the perception of swift interaction — action and reaction, cause-and-effect as perceived by the brain.

In short: dramatic action.

D. W. Griffith said: "The camera can photograph thought." This was the extraordinary discovery made by the pioneers of the Silent Era.

The Silent Cinema relied on musical accompaniment, of course. And most movies of the period felt it necessary to employ title cards: the number of filmmakers who were able to make a full length drama without a single title card were very few. But the genius of the early cinema was that it not only used the words of the title cards, 'visible words' as rarely as possible: it used them as an addition to the visuals which were often fully self-explanatory without any words.

The verbal component was an extension of the visible behaviour, not a substitute for it. Hence, our slogan: "Movies show—and then tell!"

What D. W. Griffith did not say is that the camera can photograph thought in two different senses. Firstly, it's obvious that the camera, especially when shooting in a close-up, can record those barely perceptible and often unconscious 'shadow movements' of the face and the eyes which 'betray' unspoken feeling and thought. In this sense, the camera photographs the thoughts of the actor. But secondly, by the choice of camera angle, the shot size, the movement of camera and above all by the juxtaposition of shots that is possible in editing, film can communicate the thoughts of the director — about the actor and situations.

Charles Chaplin, an English music hall pantomimist who emigrated first to New York and then to California, was quite soon recognized as one of the figures who helped establish the new industry of the movies as a world-wide influence. Movies could speak to the common folk of the world in a language that knew no national boundaries. It was a little later that Chaplin was recognized, not only as a great clown, but as one of those directors who helped create the forms that we are studying here, the 'pre-verbal' grammar of the cinema.

The last few shots in City Lights are an example. There are three title cards: one of one word, one of four words, one of five. There are ten cuts: but these are probably only five shots, five different camera set-ups.

The lettered words — the equivalent of what might now be dialogue on the sound track — are not only very few: if you study them, you will see that they are not really essential to the meaning of the scene. The action-and-reaction of the
close-ups and close-shots very clearly spells out the sense of the scene. This is not to say that words don't have value. Bald and elementary as they are, the last title card is not all that bad a line because it has meaning at more than one level. What is significant, however, is that words (dialogue) are not used to convey the sense of the scene -- the action is absolutely comprehensible without them - rather, the words are an adjunct to the visible action, an extra emphasis or an added embellishment of the meaning.

The Situation:
The story (as I remember) is something like this:

The Tramp has a ludicrous relationship with an eccentric millionaire who is a drunk. When under the influence, the millionaire becomes a great friend of the down-and-out tramp: sobered, he forgets their escapades and repudiates the Tramp entirely.

The Tramp also falls in love with a blind girl who sells flowers in the street. She, because she cannot see him, mistakenly assumes that the Tramp must be as wealthy as his millionaire friend. The Tramp conceives the idea that he can borrow from the millionaire money that will pay for an operation that will return the sight of the girl that he loves.

Unfortunately, the millionaire is at this point the victim of a robbery. The Tramp is accused of the crime. While the girl goes to the hospital, he goes to jail.

Long afterwards, released from prison, the Tramp returns to the place where he met the girl. He discovers that she is now established as the owner of what appears to be a successful florist's shop. He loiters outside, in order to watch his beloved. Noticing the strange little figure, the girl assumes that he is a beggar. She takes some money from the till, goes to offer it to him. Hideously embarrassed, he tries to make a retreat. But the girl, offering him a flower along with the money, takes hold of his hand -- and the touch reveals to her the truth.

The shots at this point are:

1. **CLOSE TWO SHOT.** As she takes his hand in hers, the Girl recognizes the touch she knows.

2. **DETAIL.** Starting on the hand, tilting up as the Girl touches the Tramp's shoulder.
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CLOSE UP SHOT over his shoulder. The Girl reacts. Her expression is one of disillusion

TITLE CARD

YOU!

C.U. THE TRAMP. Semi-profile. The Tramp nods assent, a small, shy gesture.

RESUME CLOSE TWO SHOT
Disappointment and dismay are still in the face of the Girl.

YOU CAN SEE NOW.

TITLE CARD

RESUME C.U. TRAMP
Semi-profile. With his finger he indicates his eye, saying to her

HE CONTINUES TO LOOK AT THE GIRL...

RESUME C.U. TRAMP

THE GIRL is in a state of considerable emotion on the edge of tears...

"YES, I CAN SEE NOW".

TITLE CARD

RESUME CLOSE TWO SHOT
Studying him, the Girl manages a smile. She is seeing him through new eyes...

CLOSEUP OF THE TRAMP
There is nothing in his expression but pleasure that the girl he loves can now see.
Critics have made a point that is worth examination in the detail of this scene in 'City Lights.' It has been, for many audiences, a great tear-jerker. But its effect may be due to some subtleties within the action-and-reaction which are not at once evident. In shot 6, the GIRL'S reaction is one of very brutal disappointment: obviously she has been nurturing the belief that the man to whom she owes so much -- and who must surely one day return to claim her as a love -- must be as handsome as he is noble. This moment is the utter collapse of her dreams and hopes. As we cut to his reaction shot, we might reasonably expect that the Tramp would be reacting with some pain to this evidence that the girl finds him an undignified and ignominious figure. But he isn't. The Tramp -- we now realize -- was quite prepared for her disillusionment. He knew it would be like this, and was prepared for it. All that matters to him is that the girl can see.

In shot 10 and 12, it is to this that she is reacting, realizing that -- even in spite of what she might have expected to be an unforgivable reaction on her part -- the little man feels no bitterness. And it is with new admiration that she -- and we -- shift back to the last close-up of the Tramp, a little more frontal and little closer than the close-ups that have preceded.

Chaplin was, needless to say, an expert in adding strong doses of sentiment to his slapstick. (There are some who prefer Buster Keaton because his comedy is more 'classic', less prone to sentimentality.) But the best of Chaplin is redeemed by irony. He contrives situations which provoke us to feel pity: but he avoids letting the clown protagonist feel any vestige of self-pity. Much of the richest comedy in the very early Chaplin slapstick derives from the fact that as we are beginning to feel sympathy for the humiliation of the destitute vagrant, the Tramp reacts briskly with swift ingenuity and sometimes very ruthless cunning.

The coming of the Talkies, was felt by many to be a backward step. Critics and theorists felt that film would become a means of recording 'theater.' They agreed that it would lose its character as a medium in its own right. For a time this seemed true. Since then, however, it has been recognised that sound film isn't 'canned theater.' If film is at its best when photographing thought, the impulses, often unspoken, which are the 'subtext' of what people say, it's still true that speaking aloud is a form of action, the act of 'externalising' a thought or feeling. Cinema can record not only 'vocal action' but the impulse that precedes it and the reactions that follow.

A healthy exercise for the novice film director is to take a scene from a stage play and make a draft of the way that it might be directed if Talkies had not yet been invented. Directors of the silent cinema often did try to make movies out of material that had been presented in the popular stage of the period -- with varying degrees of success. But consider how you would go about making a silent film out of a modern play.

To illustrate, let us take the below short scene from Tennessee Williams play, 'Streetcar Named Desire.'
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It is six o'clock the following evening. Blanche is bathing. Stella is completing her toilette. Blanche's dress, a flowered print, is laid out on Stella's bed.

Stanley enters the kitchen from outside, leaving the door open on the perpetual "blue piano" around the corner.

STANLEY: What's all this monkey doings?

STELLA: Oh, Stan (She jumps up and kisses him which he accepts with lordly composure) I'm taking Blanche to Galatoire's for supper and then to a show, because it's your poker night.

STANLEY: How about my supper, huh? I'm not going to no Galatoire's for supper!

STELLA: I put you a cold plate on ice.

STANLEY: Well, isn't that just dandy!

STELLA: I'm going to try to keep Blanche out till the party breaks up because I don't know how she would take it. So we'll go to one of the little places in the Quarter afterwards and you'd better give me some money.

STANLEY: Where is she?

STELLA: She's soaking in a hot tub to quiet her nerves. She's terribly upset.

STANLEY: Over what?

STELLA: She's been through such an ordeal.

STANLEY: Yeah?

STELLA: Stan, we've - lost Belle Reve!

STANLEY: The place in the country?

STELLA: Yes.

STANLEY: How?

STELLA (vaguely): Oh, it had to be - sacrificed or something. (There is a pause while Stanley considers. Stella is changing into her dress). When she comes in be sure to say something nice about her appearance. And, oh! Don't mention the baby. I haven't said anything yet, I'm waiting until she gets in a quieter condition.

STANLEY: (ominously) So?

STELLA: And try to understand her and be nice to her, Stan.

BLANCHE: (singing in the bathroom) "From the land of the sky blue water, they brought a captive maid!"
STELLA: She wasn't expecting to find us in such a small place. You see I'd tried to gloss things over a little in my letters.

STANLEY: So?

STELLA: And admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful. That's important with Blanche. Her little weakness!

STANLEY: Yeah, I get the idea. Now let's skip back a little to where you said the country place was disposed of.

STELLA: Oh! -yes... .

STANLEY: How about that? Let's have a few more details on that subject.

STELLA: It's best not to talk much about it until she's calmed down.

STANLEY: So that's the deal, huh? Sister Blanche cannot be annoyed with business details right now!

STELLA: You saw how she was last night.

STANLEY: Uh-hum - I saw how she was. Now let's have a gander at the bill of sale.

STELLA: I haven't seen any.

STANLEY: She didn't show you no papers, no deed of sale or nothing like that, huh?

STELLA: It seems like it wasn't sold.

STANLEY: Well, what in hell was it then, give away? To charity?

STELLA: Shh! She'll hear you.

STANLEY: I don't care if she hears me. Let's see the papers!

STELLA: There weren't any papers, she didn't show any papers, I don't care about papers.

STANLEY: Have you ever heard of the Napoleonic code?

STELLA: No, Stanley, I haven't heard of the Napoleonic code and if I have, I don't see what it -

STANLEY: Let me enlighten you on a point or two, baby.

STELLA: Yes?

STANLEY: In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic Code according to what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa. For instance if I had a piece of property, or you had a piece of property -

STELLA: My head is swimming!
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STANLEY: All right. I'll wait till she gets through soaking in a hot tub and then I'll inquire if she is acquainted with the Napoleonic Code. It looks to me like you have been swindled under the Napoleonic code I'm swindled too. And I don't like to be swindled.

STELLA: There's plenty of time to ask her questions later but if you do now she'll go to pieces again. I don't understand what happened to Belle Reve but you don't know how ridiculous you are being when you suggest that my sister or I or anyone of our family could have perpetrated a swindle on anyone else.

STANLEY: Then where's the money if the place was sold?

STELLA: Not sold - lost, lost! (He stalks into bedroom, and she follows him) Stanley! (He pulls open the wardrobe trunk standing in middle of room - and jerks out an armful of dresses).

STANLEY: Open your eyes to this stuff! You think she got them out of a teacher's pay?

STELLA: Hush!

STANLEY: Look at these feathers and furs that she come here to preen herself in! What's this here? A solid-gold dress, I believe! And this one! What is these here? Fox-pieces! (He blows on them.) Genuine fox fur-pieces, a half a mile long! Where are your fox-pieces, Stella? Bushy snow-white ones, no less! Where are your white fox pieces.

STELLA: Those are inexpensive summer furs that Blanche has had s long time.

STANLEY: I got an acquaintance who deals in this sort of merchandise. I'll have him in here to appraise it. I'm willing to bet you there's thousands of dollars invested in this stuff here.

STELLA: Don't be such an idiot, Stanley! (He lashes the furs to the daybed. Then he jerks open small drawer in the trunk and pulls up a fist-full of costume jewelry.)

STANLEY: And what have we here? The treasure chest of a pirate!

STELLA: Oh, Stanley!

STANLEY: Pearls! Ropes of them! What is this sister of yours, a deep-sea diver? Bracelets of solid gold, too! Where are your pearls and gold bracelets?
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STELLA: Shh! Be still, Stanley!

STANLEY: And diamonds! A crown for an empress!

STELLA: A rhinestone tiara she wore to a costume ball.

STANLEY: What's rhinestone?

STELLA: Next door to glass.

STANLEY: Are you kidding? I have an acquaintance who works in a jewelry store. I'll have him in here to make an appraisal of this. Here's your plantation, or what was left of it, here!

STELLA: You have no idea how stupid and horrid you're being! Now close that trunk before she comes out of the bathroom! (He kicks the trunk partly closed and sits on the kitchen table.)

STANLEY: The Kowalskis and the DuBois have different notions.

STELLA: (angrily) Indeed they have, thank heavens - I'm going outside. (She snatches up her white hat and gloves and crosses to the outside door) You come out with me while Blanche is getting dressed.

STANLEY: Since when do you give me orders?

STELLA: Are you going to stay here and insult her?

STANLEY: You're damn tootin' I'm going to stay here. (Stella goes out to the porch. Blanche comes out of the bathroom in a red satin robe.)

* * * * *

This brief scene from Williams' play has something like nine hundred words of dialogue. If you were asked to rewrite so that the basic action was plain in silent-movie technique, how many words would you need in how many title cards?

1) **TITLE CARD**

* * * * * * * * * * * * *
* Stella wonders how to break*
* the bad news to Stanley *
* * * * * * * * * * * * *

2) **CLOSE SHOT STELLA**

Preparing to go out, she is in a dressing gown. Searching in a drawer her eye falls on a framed photograph that sits on the dresser.

3) **DETAIL**

It is a photograph of a Southern mansion in Summer sunlight. Stella and Blanche, both considerably younger, are seen posed on the front porch.
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4) CLOSE UP OF STELLA
   Sadness in her eyes. She sets the photo on the mantelpiece, locks off towards ...

5) INTERIOR BATHROOM
   Blanche is running herself a bath. She pours into it some bath salts, makes a face as she discovers that this is the last of them, turns to preen before the mirror.

6) RESUME STELLA
   She checks the time on a cheap clock on the mantel piece, hurries into the kitchen as she starts to prepare Stanley's supper plate.

Dissolve to:

7) EXTERIOR STREET
   Stanley in work clothes has stopped to chat with a couple of cronies. He eyes a couple of girls that pass, then bids goodbye to his pals as he starts off home, carrying his lunch box and newspaper.

8) RESUME INTERIOR OF THE KOWALSKI APARTMENT
   Stella brings the cold plate to put into the fridge, crosses to the other room, glances at the door...

9) INTERIOR BATHROOM
   Blanche is luxuriating in the tub, relaxed and self-indulgent, singing to herself.

10) RESUME STELLA
    Affectionately, she goes to tap on the bathroom door, miming to the wrist watch as she puts it on that it is time that Blanche was ready. Stella also takes a couple of theater tickets from an envelope and sets them on the mantelpiece. She returns to her dressing room, picking up a dress from the cupboard and carrying it to the bed. Already laid out on the bed is the gown that Stella will wear.

11) DETAIL OF THE DRESSES
    Stella's hand moves from her own dress to the richer fabric of her sister's gown.

12) CLOSE UP OF STELLA
    A twinge of envy. But she dismisses it. Then she reacts to ...

13) EXTERIOR KOWALSKI APARTMENT
    Stanley coming up the steps.

14) RESUME INTERIOR
    Stella, having heard his footsteps, hurries to the door and opens it before his key is in the lock. She embraces him at once. Complacent, he kisses her, pats her behind, moves directly to the refrigerator to collect a can of beer and comes back again, his eye falling on the trunk on which lie more of Blanche's wardrobe. He turns to address an enquire to Stella. Answering, she picks the theater tickets from the mantelpiece, hands them to him...
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15) TITLE CARD

* * * * * * * * * * * *
* I'm taking Blanche out to the *
* theater and some supper because *
* it's your poker night. *

* * * * * * * * * * * *

16) RESUME STANLEY AND STELLA

Stella kisses him with affection. She also mimes that she wants money from him. Unenthusiastic, Stanley extracts some bills from his pocket. Stella takes them, returns some of them to him before she retrieves the tickets, puts them in her bag and goes off to the kitchen again.

17) INTERIOR BATHROOM

Blanche, still in the tub, hears the voices in the other room. She listens, frowns, but sinks back into the bathtub.

18) RESUME STANLEY AND STELLA

Stanley has fetched himself another beer from the refrigerator. Stella takes the can from him, pours the beer in the glass, tidies away the beer can while Stanley eats. She returns to the mantelpiece...

19) CLOSER ANGLE

Stella looking at the photograph of Belle Reve.

20) CLOSE SHOT STANLEY

Finishing his meal, he glances at Stella, noting her mood. He gets up to go to her ...

21) MEDIUM SHOT, STELLA AND STANLEY

Stanley joins her, puts his hand on her shoulder, asking her what's wrong. She doesn't answer for a moment, shakes her head, leans against him. As he tries to comfort her, she manages to tell him:

22) TITLE CARD

* * * * * * * * * * * *
* "We've lost Belle Reve. It had to be sacrificed.... *

23) RESUME STELLA AND STANLEY

Stanley reacts. He questions Stella directly. Defensive, she separates from him, moves away. He follows her, challenging her and making gestures towards the bathroom door. Stella is trying to get him to lower his voice, pleading with him.

24) INTERIOR BATHROOM

Out of the tub and swathed in a bathtowel, Blanche is before the mirror again. She hears the voices in the next room, moves to the door to listen.

25) RESUME STANLEY AND STELLA

Stanley, now coldly angry, is searching again in Blanche's trunk while Stella pleads with him.

26) TITLE CARD

* * * * * * * * * * * *
* I don't know what happened! *
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27) STANLEY AND STELLA
They are in heated argument. In
spite of Stella's pleas, Stanley
goes to the door of the bathroom,
pounds on it.

28) INTERCUT BLANCHE
Listening to Stanley's voice, she
retorts something, clearly
offended. Ruffled, she continues
her makeup at the mirror, but is
obviously distressed...

29) STELLA
She is angry now at Stanley.

30) TITLE CARD
* * * * * * * * * * * * * *
* You're being ridiculous! *
* How dare you suggest that *
* my sister or I or anyone else of our family could *
* have perpetrated a swindle! *
* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

31) STANLEY AND STELLA
Stanley turns on Stella.

32) TITLE CARD
* * * * * * * * * * * * * *
* In this state what belongs to the husband and vice versa. *
* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

33) STANLEY:
He seizes the jewelry from the box
that he has taken out of Blanche's trunk, waving it in Stella's face.

34) TITLE CARD
* * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Where's your plantation - or what was left of it!
* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The silent version uses six title cards and eighty words.

Is it as effective? Obviously not. It's arguable that the story still makes sense. If the acting performances were good (and many actors of the silent era were quite brilliant even if they look very dated to contemporary eyes) the scene might work as well as many silent films do.

The intention of this exercise was not to prove that dialogue is unnecessary. Indeed, the reverse. By exploring how 'Film grammar' without speech can communicate most of the bare essentials of the narrative, we can isolate how much extra is added by the quality of the dialogue and then by the performance.

Tennessee Williams writes superb dialogue. He has an impeccable 'ear' for spoken language. Indeed the scene would still work quite well if a reverse experiment was tried. The scene would be produced quite as effectively as a radio-play.

The major value of the vocal performance, I would say, was the richness it adds to character. Study the different speech rhythms in the lines of Stanley and Stella's. Stanley Kowalski's language has a rich vulgarity, an earthiness, which contrasts with the speech
of his better educated wife. In the hands of actors like Marlon Brando and Kim Stanley, this added a complete new dimension to the conflict of character. By phrasing, by intonation, pitch of voice and the timing of the lines, the actors communicate with subtlety and feeling. This is what is obviously lost in the silent version and is the reason that silent films, effective as they still are, have a somewhat two-dimensional and primitive quality.

I proposed the experiment for a slightly different reason. As I see it, the taste of the film director who has been given a stage play to adapt to the screen is to translate the material to the new medium, by exploring the extent to which it can be presented in 'pure' film. The essence of 'film grammar' is that it is 'pre-verbal' - it can tell stories in movement, in actions and reactions and in the choice of screen sizes and the juxtaposition of editing.

Every director has his or her own method. I offer my own system only as a personal example. My approach is always to study the text of the written script very carefully, reading and re-reading it till I know it 'by heart.' But, in this process, I begin to feel the behavior of characters in a way that leads me to think of their impulses more than their words. Once I have absorbed the scene in this fashion, I lay the text of the scene aside; I forget it - while I use my imagination to visualise the scene.

In effect, I 'reconceive' the scene 'non-verbally.'

This often involves a search for 'business' and props. The real taste of the director boils down to helping the actors find things to do which reveal thoughts and feelings - regardless of what they say.

Williams is a 'word man.' But the strange thing is that, as a dramatist, he has also provided in the stage play a useful number of the kind of props that the actors need for performance.

1) "Blanche is bathing"
The 'hot tub' is a first class prop with which to dramatise the character of Blanche, her vanity, her self-indulgence and extravagance.

2) "Stella is completing her toilette"
An opportunity for contrast in the circumstances of the sisters.

3) The 'cold plate on ice.'
Stella's domesticity, her concern for Stanley. His resentment at the 'supper at Galatoires.'

4) "You'd better give me some money"
Stella's dependence on Stanley and his 'Lordly' generosity. His materialistic and selfish attitudes.

5) 'Belle Reve,' the property left to both Blanche and Stella and the absence of a 'Bill of Sale.' Stanley's materialism again.
6) 'Blanche's trunk and its contents'  
The 'solid-gold dress. The fox-pieces and 'the rhinestone tiara,'  
Evidence of Blanche's pathetic pretension to elegance, of her  
vanity and extravagance.  
Provocation to Stanley in his  
jealousy and class-conscious  
resentment.

As a director, one's task is already  
half-done by the dramatist who has been  
thinking in 'behavioral' as well as in  
literary/verbal terms. All that the  
director has to do is start from these  
material elements to reconstruct the  
situation within the medium of film.

Having done so, the director will  
very quickly isolate those lines of  
dialogue that are absolutely essential  
to the comprehension of the story.  
These are the ones that, in a silent  
film, would be title cards. In a sound-  
film version, they become the lines  
that are likely to be shot in a close-up,  
lip synch and full-face, so that they  
have emphasis.

In planning the camera coverage the  
director will then use the camera angles  
and the editing pattern to communicate  
the 'silent' action - and then use the  
Williams dialogue for its 'extra' values,  
its special capacity to provide richness  
and color to a scene that already 'makes  
sense' in cinematic terms.

This may sometimes result in some  
shortening of the dialogue, elimination  
of words that are not really required  
because the performances, actions and  
behavior of the characters already make  
the same point.

More often, it has the result that  
the remaining dialogue becomes itself  
'cinematic' and more 'natural' because  
it seems to come as an unself-conscious  
and unprompted extension of the  
things that are happening. Film is  
'talking' not because there are a lot  
of words: it is 'talking' when the words  
are left to supply all of the information  
because the action and the performances  
are failing to do their part of the job.