

Avuncular Listening: *The Unsuspected*

John Mowitt

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Article abstract

This essay approaches the topic of translation through the motif of “transmutation”, Roman Jakobson’s term for a modality of translation understood to be inter-semiotic as opposed to either intra or inter-linguistic. Instead of developing transmutation as a re-wording of “adaptation” (for example, the elaboration of a novel as the screenplay for a film), this text brings transmutation into contact with “remediation”, a concept used within media studies to describe how, as McLuhan famously put it, media are always comprised of other media. More specifically, and with an eye toward the particular tension between radio and film, this text shows how remediation repeats with a difference what Raymond Williams meant by “residualism”, the survival within the cultural dominant of politically charged cultural technologies and practices from an earlier moment. Key here is the rivalrous character of this tension, that is, the fact that media that include other media typically do so by subjecting them to their own formal and narrative logics. Here is explored this dynamic through a reading of Michael Curtiz’s *The Unsuspected* from 1947, a film that narrativizes the rivalry between radio and film.

Avuncular Listening : *The Unsuspected*

John Mowitt

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

“It is the voice of the man in a box that suddenly seizes upon the listener.” - Adorno

In 1959 Roman Jakobson published, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, a paper in which he distinguished among three types of translation: rewording or intra-lingual translation; translation proper or inter-lingual translation; and, transmutation or, as he put it, “inter-semiotic translation” (Jakobson 1987: 429). In the concluding paragraphs of this paper Jakobson advanced his then scandalous thesis that poetry is un-translatable, proposing that, at best, poems can be creatively transposed. Commenting on this paper 20 years later, Jacques Derrida, in a roundtable discussion on translation, drew on Jakobson’s concept of “transmutation” to argue that its presence in Freud’s work - for example, the notion that Dora’s cough might be a “translation” of her libidinal ambivalence regarding Frau K. - contradicted any effort to align psychoanalysis with what might otherwise embody a “merely metaphorical” use of the concept of translation proper, inter-lingual translation. Although Derrida is insistent upon this - it factors into his ongoing dispute with Jacques Lacan over the concept of “the letter” - he appears content only to contradict a certain tendency in reading Freud. He does not explore the rich analytical vein opened here, and this despite the fact that by 1979 the exchange between psychoanalysis and cinema studies (the cinema being a medium intimately textured by “transmutation”) had long been underway.

This paper takes as its point of departure the assumption that thinking more carefully about “transmutation”, especially as it operates in the cinema, is worthwhile,

both as it complicates the encounter between semiotics and translation studies, and as it brings this encounter and the debate over “new media” to bear on each other. I will ground my remarks in an abridged textual analysis of Michael Curtiz’s 1947 film, *The Unsuspected* starring Claude Rains as a popular radio host. Prior to the final crane shot in which we see Rains’ character, Victor Grandison, led to prison flanked by two police officers, we witness his on-air confession (figure 1) in which he says :



Figure 1

Ladies and Gentlemen. You are about to experience something unprecedented in the history of our program, or, for that matter of radio itself. You who have followed my adventures in the half-world of crime for so many years now, you are listening to my last broadcast. [...] For a time “the unsuspected” wore his mask safely. Not for long however. Soon he found it necessary to commit two murders more, a young woman who shared his ominous secret, and her husband who began to see how enmeshed he became in his own incredible folly. Would you like to know who “the unsuspected” really is? It is I. I am “the unsuspected”. Your genial host, Victor Grandison. Goodnight.

While this confession brings resonant closure to an insistent deductive series, in effect, translating “the unsuspected”, first into “the unexpected” (the boyfriend of Victor’s first victim), and then into Grandison, it also stages radio broadcasting for the cinema, as the shifty pronouns in Victor’s avowal address both audiences. In doing so it invites one to recognize both here and throughout the film (titled, one should note, *The Unsuspected*) the presence of what David Bolter and Richard Grusin call “remediation”. Introduced in their eponymous *Remediation : Understanding New Media* (1999), this concept is defined thus :

[W]e call the representation of one medium in another *remediation*, and we will argue that remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media. What might seem at first to be an esoteric practice is so widespread that we can identify a spectrum of different ways in which digital media remediate their predecessors, a spectrum depending on the degree of perceived competition or rivalry between the new media and the old. (Bolter and Grusin 1999 : 45)

While they go on to delineate this spectrum and thus detail the strategic maneuvers available to digital media producers, they are also careful to acknowledge something fundamental, namely, that remediation is as old as *ekphrasis* (literary descriptions of visual forms) itself. In other words, although remediation seems to be consistent with the very technical logic of convergent digital platforms, it necessarily embraces

relations among pre-digital media, relations that themselves can be distributed along the spectrum from benign re-purposing, to aggressive re-contextualization and total absorption. In the passage cited above, one might argue that “aggressive re-contextualization” is rendered through the psychoanalytically charged word, “rivalry”, suggesting, as analysis typically does, that remediation involves more than mere technical procedures.

This is a point underscored by Charles Acland in his introduction to *Residual Media* (2007) where he reminds us of the pertinence of the work of Raymond Williams to the debate over the new media. In essence, what Williams contributes to this debate (and to the logic of remediation) is his signature concept of “the residual” a concept expressly designed to grasp the temporal, and ultimately political, intricacy of what Marxism has long referred to as the “super-structure”. Contrasted to both the “emergent” and the “dominant”, the residual designates those institutions or practices that, despite being otherwise superseded or displaced by the dominant, remain active in, and occasionally against, the dominant. For example, the institution of the monarchy within a parliamentary democracy. While elsewhere I have proposed that the concept of the residual is underdeveloped in Williams (Mowitt 2011), what it nevertheless brings to the remediation debate (above and beyond its complication of “the new” in new media) is a political valence or tonality whereby the representation of one medium within another can be understood as an “interested” and thus contentious representation. In effect, what residualism allows one to hear in translation as transmutation is the oft-cited quip, “*traduttore, traditore*” where the rivalry evoked by Bolter and Grusin takes form as betrayal, even treason.

To clarify what analytical value might be attached to this insight, I'll not attempt to work out its implications for the concept of new media, media thought by many to be precisely grounded in various forms and strategies of remediation and the dynamics of convergence. Instead, my contribution to this conversation will be oblique, that is, what I want to work out here is way of thinking about the form and content of residual media as the former operate within the statement and enunciation of a particular representational and figural practice, in this case, a film, Curtiz's *The Unsuspected*.

But there is more. As I have established, at the core of this film stands the relation between radio and the cinema. Historically of course, this relation bears on the emergence in the twenties of “the talkie”, the sound film, a fraught development if there ever was one, one perhaps nowhere more vividly depicted than in the “collaboration” of Nora Desmond and Joe Gillis in Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.* Oddly, this historical development has itself become residual in that during the last decades of the 20th century, within the animated precincts of cinema studies and film theory, the problem of sound began to be acutely felt. Almost as though the entire pre-history of the cinema (from 1895 to 1927) was insistently asserting its dominance, the image - whether as the object of semiotic (Metz) or philosophic (Deleuze) attention - has focused theoretical work in cinema studies. With the triumph of television in the fifties, this tendency simply folded into the dominant, generating in turn an alternative residualism : not sound *per se*, but sound as a theoretical problem. What these scant, but vital observations suggest is that part of remediation should involve the way film theoretical problematics, as it were, represent, or frame one another. In other words,

it is not just that any given sound film remediates silent film, or re-presents itself in a technological echo, say, television, but that problematics engaging the difference between sounds and images are themselves caught up in this remediation, this rivalrous residualism.

As there are many ways to broach the question of sound in the cinema, or even sound in general, I will propose that here we direct attention to the titular motif of listening and treat it as the practice, the event through which the residual status of radio is framed and animated in Curtiz's film. To prick our ears it seems useful to turn to the rich theoretical discussion of listening that appears in Michel Chion's germinal *Audio-Vision*.

In chapter two Chion lays out what he calls "three modes of listening", modes differentiated in terms of their objects. He names them (or at least they are so named by his English translator) "causal", "semantic" and "reduced". The first of these, causal listening, is the most common. The objet of this listening is the cause or source of the sound in question. Chion's discussion of causal listening immediately references the problem of the "acousmatic", that is, the matter of whether a sound's cause falls within the visual field of the frame or not, and it is this complication of causal listening that renders it "the most easily influenced and deceptive mode of listening" (Chion 1994 : 26). The semantic mode of listening takes as its object the codes by which messages are produced. For example, the language one must understand to follow spoken dialogue. Put differently, semantic listening listens for meaning. Chion emphasizes that because semantic listening engages language directly, it has profited from the enduring attempt to bring linguistics and the cinema into contact. In short, while it is the most complex mode of listening, it is also the best studied.

By contrast, reduced listening not only creates its own object, but in attending to the "sound itself" it avoids (and is in *that* sense "reduced") treating sound as a vehicle for something else, whether its source or its meaning. In a sense, reduced listening - which Chion, like the acousmatic itself, borrows from Pierre Schaeffer - creates sound as an icon, that is, neither index (of its source), nor symbol (of its meaning). Aware that reduced listening is hardly familiar, Chion goes on to both accent our resistance to it, and specify its analytical value : "it disrupts established lazy habits, and opens up a world of previously unimagined questions for those who try it" (1994 : 30). It "opens up our ears" (*Ibid.* : 31). Although he does not draw this conclusion himself, the value of reduced listening derives from the way it joins listening and its object, the way it allows us to listen to listening as put to work in the cinema.

To further tease out the importance of reduced listening it seems crucial to hear behind Chion's three modes, Roland Barthes' and Roland Havas' three types (*types*) of listening. The first two types are given names: the alert (attuned to indices) and the decipherment (attuned to signs). They anticipate directly what Chion calls causal and semantic listening. The third type discussed by Barthes and Havas appears to resist naming altogether. None is given, and instead the third type is evoked by designating as its object the Lacanian concept of "signifying" (*signifiance*). As such, this type of listening refers to what Theodor Reik called the "third ear", that is, the organ or instrument by which the hovering attention of the analyst sifts the discourse of the

analyzed for traces of the unconscious. By situating this listening in the space of the transference, Barthes and Havas direct it at the differing deferment between two utterances: "I am listening" and "listen to me" (Barthes and Havas 1985 : 246). If, as the pronouns imply, this listening listens to the shift, the play that articulates the listener as both subject and object, then not only does it "open our ears" but it puts a rather different spin on our resistance to reduced listening. Neither a resistance to novelty nor a resistance to analysis, reduced or transferential listening, in its attunement to the crisis of splitting, of being in, or listening from, two places at once, provokes a resistance indexed to the structural displacement of the speaking subject. Not throwing one's voice, but listening to oneself from the place of the other.

At the risk of appearing to pull a rabbit out of my hat, it seems crucial here to point out that remediation is, at one level, precisely this structure of being in two places at once. If a radio broadcast is depicted in a film, the transmission (the speech, the noise, the music, etc.) is both "on" the radio, and "in" the film. If, as Acland has insisted, remediation must countenance the residual dynamic of its functioning, a dynamic that foregrounds the rivalrous tension between a dominant medium and those media it has displaced, then Chion, Barthes and Havas are urging us to treat this rivalry as active *within* the listening solicited by various media. Moreover, and this is the crucial point, residualism may find its defining acoustic expression in the problem of reduced, or transferential listening, in the splitting contained in the meta-critical gesture of listening to listening. Put differently, listening to listening may impose itself on our attention, whether hovering or not, with unique, even telling force in and around those residual media addressed to our ears.

Although made only five years after the Oscar decorated *Casablanca* (also featuring Claude Rains), *The Unsuspected* is a largely neglected film of Curtiz' corpus. When reviewed in *Variety* (31 December 1947) it was opined that its "plot workings are not as clear as they could have been". Thus, a brief summary of its story line seems called for. In the film Rains plays Victor Grandison, the "genial host" of a radio mystery program sponsored by United Motors. He is also the uncle and guardian of Matilda Frazier and Althea Frazier Keane, the daughters of his sister (I am assuming that although *née* Grandison she became Frazier through marriage) who has passed away leaving a house so big its "closets echo", and a considerable estate bequeathed to Matilda whose portrait hangs in the living room, and who has, we are later told, perished in a shipwreck off the coast of Latin America. Also living in the Frazier/Grandison home is Althea's husband, Oliver Keane, who was originally to be Matilda's husband (he painted her portrait), but who was betrayed by Victor and Althea, aware that her marriage would effectively cut them off from her inheritance. Also present although not necessarily in residence are Jane Moynihan, Victor's producer; Rosalyn Wright, Victor's secretary; Kent, the butler and Press, a handyman employed by Victor.

As the plot unwinds we first witness the murder of Victor's secretary, Rosalyn Wright. Although the scene is lit and shot so as to conceal carefully the identity of the murderer, an important narrative gap opens when the film audience is actually shown his reflection in the glossy surface of Rosalyn's desk. It is Victor, a character to whom the audience has not yet been introduced. He is shown attempting to restage the murder as a suicide.

This sequence is followed by one shot in the broadcast studio of radio station WMCB (an acronymic anagram of Warner Michael Curtiz Brothers). Here we are introduced to Victor our “genial host” who begins the broadcast that concludes with the confession cited earlier. He tells everyone (film and radio audience alike) about a murder concealed as a suicide and chillingly warns of the masked, ubiquitous presence of “the unsuspected”. In a brief segment, Jane Moynihan, Victor’s producer, reads from a trade publication about Rosalyn’s murder, a story that provides Victor with an alibi: he was “doing his weekly mystery broadcast in his New York studio at the time of her death”.

A decisive montage sequence (to which I’ll return) establishes the approach by train of Steven Howard, Rosalyn Wright’s boyfriend, who arrives as an “unexpected” guest at a birthday party for Victor being held at Matilda/Victor’s home. He imposes himself upon Althea giving her to believe that he and Matilda had married immediately prior to her fateful voyage. Stunned, Althea allows him to stay until Victor arrives. Steve then shares his fateful news with Victor who has Donovan, a detective present at the party, check out Steve’s story. Victor invites Steve to stay.

During the party we are introduced to Oliver, Althea’s husband, who has become an inconsolable drunk in the wake of his failed attempt to marry Matilda. They are obviously estranged; indeed almost immediately Althea begins to seduce Steve. This development breaks off when Victor receives a telegram from Matilda, saying that she is alive and returning home shortly. Steve (doubtless panicked) arranges to retrieve her from the airport, and hatches his scheme to convince her that she is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and cannot therefore remember their wedding. Although suspicious, Matilda – who is clearly attracted to him – warily succumbs to his carefully assembled illusion.

Matilda’s return deeply alienates Althea who drunkenly begins to divulge secrets to the inquisitive Steve. Victor in fact overhears her tell Steve that she was speaking with Rosalyn when her death (thus murder and not suicide) occurred – a conclusion already arrived at by Donovan as a result of some careful detective work. Victor then confronts Althea and shoots her but not before secretly recording a spat between her and Oliver that he then plays back in order to incriminate Oliver in Althea’s murder. It is in the exchange with Althea that we learn Victor’s motive in killing Rosalyn. Apparently, he had been embezzling funds from Matilda’s inheritance to support his own expensive habits and Rosalyn noticed. It is also in this sequence that Steve witnesses Victor stashing the recording of the manipulated spat between Althea and Oliver. Oliver is subsequently killed in a car crash orchestrated by Victor who has slashed his brake lines. Because Victor has also planted the gun he used to shoot Althea in Oliver’s overcoat prior to his departure, the police conclude through a ballistics test that Oliver is the murderer. This is the second of the “two murders more” that Victor confesses to in his last broadcast.

Victor’s mask falls entirely as he realizes that Steve and Matilda, though not married, have aligned against him. He attempts to poison the latter after tricking her into writing her own “suicide note”, and he summons Press to kill Steve once he discovers that Steve knows exactly how he incriminated Oliver in the shooting of Althea. In an earlier, tense conversation with Matilda, Steve also reveals that he has

exposed Victor's alibi regarding Rosalyn's death. A recording of the evening's broadcast reveals that Victor had plenty of time to do the job. Here the film audience's knowledge synchs up what is known in the diegesis. As the plot winds down, the police arrive in time to save both Matilda and Steve and all (including Jane and Donovan) assemble at the radio broadcast studio to witness Victor's confession "live". Here the definitive translation of the "unexpected" into the "unsuspected" takes place, and Victor moves from a big house to *the* big house.

As this summary only begins to suggest Curtiz's film is a riot of remediation. The story makes essential use of the following : portraits, telephones, radio (including two way radio), telegrams, handwriting, print journalism, photography, phonography, microscopes, and, of course, the cinema itself. By calling this use essential I mean to emphasize that these technologies are not merely sprinkled into the story. Consider two examples.

First, the decisive plot twist establishing that Matilda is alive is achieved by remediating her portrait (figures 2 & 3).



Figures 2 & 3



Clearly, the *tableau vivant* effect is meant to underscore the shift from the technology of portraiture, to that of the cinema. It is the film that resurrects the dead heiress. Indeed, at an earlier moment Steve, eager to establish that he will make no claim upon the estate, asks to have Matilda's portrait as his "share" of the estate.

Second, Victor's alibi is secured within the diegesis - and note here that the film audience has already seen all that it needs to see to solve the case - through a brief obituary that appears in a trade publication titled, *Radio : Semi-Weekly* (figure 4).



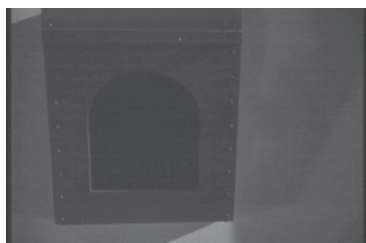
Figure 4

As Jane Moynihan reads the text aloud, we are shown a full-screen close-up of a

magazine cover that while ostensibly a print supplement to radio broadcasting, is in fact advertizing television, as it were, the technological sublation of the cinema. The “slogan”, “See! Hear! Television Here!” precisely through the homonymic condensation of the two here/hear marks this brief moment as what Freud might call “the navel” of the film. The question of where “here” is (and therefore where Victor was) is decisively linked to the relation between seeing and hearing as mediated by rivalrous audio-visual technologies. Indeed, for the otherwise privileged film audience, the question of “here-ing” resonates within its own epistemology of perception : did it see what it thought it saw? This voice, Jane’s, tells it, no.

As these examples suffice to demonstrate, remediation is woven tightly into the plot, not only serving to effect its development, but more importantly to effect a transmutation whereby plot motifs resound as the very content of remediation. Thus, the residualism of radio vis-à-vis the cinema, the rivalry between them, translates (as Jakobson would have it, inter-semiotically) the rivalry between Victor and Steve over Matilda. It is precisely by *listening* to Victor’s alibi - the recording of the broadcast reported on in the *Radio : Semi-Weekly*, and discovering the need to do so by *watching* Victor stash the recording of the fatal “quarrel” between Oliver and Althea in his sound proof office - that Steve manages to pry Matilda loose from Victor, her “guardian”. The film’s “happy ending” (the marriage of Steve and Matilda) would otherwise be blocked. Indeed it is the very proximity between Victor and the radio that cues us to the urgency of listening, of listening, specifically, to the way the film listens to radio, that prompts one to consider the way “modes or types” of listening articulate the plot of *The Unsuspected*.

Early in the film there is a truly remarkable sequence of shots that bears directly on this issue. It occurs toward the end of the first scene in the studios of WMCB as Victor is narrating “Suicide”. The sequence begins by panning right from the podium where Victor is speaking into the microphone, to a loudspeaker mounted in the corner of the studio.



Figures 5 & 6



Here, his voice is in playback mode, that is, the radio voice is shown traveling in a supersonically tight circuit between one place, Victor’s microphone, and another, his monitor. The pan fixes on the loudspeaker and then zooms into its grill cloth, plunging the visual space of the screen into blackness. Here, there is nothing to see, everything to hear. In the next shot, out this blackness rushes an oncoming train, its whistle blaring, its headlamp glowing (figures 5 & 6).

Victor's narration yields. As the train hurtles past, a series of overlap dissolves move us on board the train to a portable radio in Steve's compartment, where Steve is shown listening to Victor's voice while nervously lighting a cigarette (figure 7).

Figure 7



As in the case of the examples adduced earlier, the broadcasting of the voice, its emission and dispersion, finds its transmuted articulation in the very enunciation of the overlap dissolve. The film is not simply showing people listening to Victor's listening (the playback loop), it is simulating the very experience of radio listening (of what Sartre called "seriality") *on film*.

As Steve's train pulls into the station (presumably at Croton, New York), the lap dissolves transport the audience into a room at the Peekskill Hotel (*nomen est omen*), where we see Press (a handyman employed by Victor whose own name echoes oddly in a later line, "You know Victor and the Press") listening to Victor's broadcast on a radio on his bedside table (figure 8).

Figure 8



We later learn that Press has here been interpellated by Victor's voice, believing himself to have been called out as "the unsuspected". Indeed, Press, a bit like Freud's patient Schreber, perceives himself to be the immediate and sole addressee of Victor's radio program. Yet another overlap dissolve transports us from the hotel room to the Grandison estate, where Donovan is shown rifling Victor's mail while listening to the broadcast on a desk radio in Victor's study (figure 9).

Figure 9



Here the supersonic playback loop fuses Victor's two places : his home and his studio. The radio, indeed Victor's voice, resonates in both places at once, and the motif of what I have called "here-ing" has been given to us in acoustic profile.

Once in the home, the radio voice is no longer transferred through the device of the overlap dissolve. It travels from room to room through cuts, as if to herald or otherwise mark the silent core of the house, Victor's soundproof study. First, the voice travels to the bar where Oliver and Kent (the butler) are shown listening to Victor (figure 10), and next to the living room where Althea and the other birthday party guests await Victor's entry into the visual field, his arrival at the party. Althea stands up and turns off a radio sitting on the living room table, saying, "Victor is the only man I know who can turn my blood to ice-water"(figure 11).



Figures 10 & 11



The sound bridge tying all of these shots together is Victor's narration of "Suicide", a story whose details are far from insignificant both in terms of their content, but also in terms of their plot function in that they both trigger the confession with which the film concludes, and they dissolve, or even pre-solve the murders that consume everyone's attention. Although too long to cite in its entirety, here are pertinent moments of the opening radio broadcast :

Tonight I bring you from the files of the nation's unsolved crimes, the story of one of the most brutal, yet cunningly conceived murders ever committed, a murder of rare delicacy and wondrous ease that was called "Suicide". Yes, suicide the policed called it, yet the murderer walks among us free. [. . .] Yes, The Unsuspected is anywhere, everywhere, so be on your guard. He might be the man who calls you "friend", who visits frequently at your home. He might even be someone who comes often to my own home, and while I pride myself on being an amateur detective, even I might easily be fooled. And yet his day of reckoning must come. He is tormented by fear that someday he will make one false move, one slip that will betray him. And when he does, the lightening of justice will strike The Unsuspected.

Prefaced by the tag line, "Grandison speaking", this material, concentrating as it does on both a murder cunningly disguised as a suicide and on the "unsuspected" circulating everywhere undetected, is essentially a confession. As such it organizes the entire plot around a principle dear to the Frankfurt School, "*Einmal ist keinmal*" (once is never), and does so by operating a discrepancy, a separation between listening and watching, a discrepancy that is re-solved in Victor's second confession when the image of his "speaking" synchs with our listening. In effect, the mystery of the acousmatic is contained, is re-framed, such that the menace posed by radio - recall that Victor's confession appeals to the notion that it is "unprecedented" *for radio*

itself - is subjected to a properly cinematic articulation of watching and listening (figure 12). In the final shot he says nothing as we *watch* him being led to prison. The final thematic swell of Waxman's score falls in step with the film's conclusion. We are watching and listening to "the end", perhaps even the end, or limit of radio itself.

Figure 12



This doubling, or even mirroring, as has been noted, is set in motion almost immediately when we see Victor's face reflected in the desktop at the crime scene (figure 13).

Figure 13



In a sense, the plot is plotted along variations of this shot with decisive instances occurring first at the crime scene when Donovan has figured out that Rosalyn could not have killed herself (figure 14), and then when Victor, who "detests scenes not of my own making", is reflected on the surface of his recording disk while staging Oliver's murder of Althea (figure 15).



Figures 14 & 15

In this last instance, we are again presented with the problem of “here-ing”, in that the shot stacks the here of Victor’s presence with the here, the means of his absence, with the means by which he can throw his voice and, in effect, be in two places at once. That Steve soon thereafter witnesses Victor’s “here-ing” mechanism and realizes that he must listen to Victor’s broadcast differently, would appear to be the transmutation in the plot of these very shots. In effect, the two studio scenes, the two confessions, are massively temporalized iterations of the shots in which Victor both is and is not “in” or “at” the scene of the crime. It is not, I should think, irrelevant that what exposes Rosalyn’s “suicide” as a murder, is a phone call – that is, a telephonic, point to point, as opposed to a radiophonic transmission – the very secret divvied by Althea and Victor, indeed the one that obliges him to frame Oliver for her murder. Again, the dynamics of remediation transmuted into plot. Telephone as rival precursor to radio and the bearer of its message eliminated as a result.

Although I have stressed that Steve discovers the need to listen to Victor’s voice differently – in effect, he needs to time it and compare that against Victor’s alibi (from the Latin for “other”, *alius*, “where”, *ubi*) – the problem of the modes or types of listening at issue here remains as yet undeveloped. To pursue this it seems important to think more carefully about what it means for Victor to characterize his confession as “unprecedented”, not simply for his broadcast, but for radio itself. This implies that more direct consideration of the “radio voice” is in order.

In the late thirties, thus shortly before the release of *The Unsuspected*, while employed by the Princeton Radio Research Project, Theodor Adorno wrote a number of memoranda and studies on radio. One, titled “The Radio Voice” contains many invaluable insights into what is at issue in Curtiz’s film, but two specific elaborations of what Adorno calls his “physiognomic” approach bear repeating in this context. First, in characterizing the radio voice as such Adorno writes :

Radio has its own voice inasmuch as it functions as a filter for every sound. Due to the comprehensiveness of its operations as a filter, it gains a certain autonomy in the ear of the listener; even the adult experiences the radio voice rudimentarily, like the child who personifies radio as an aunt or uncle of his. It is the physiognomics of this radio voice which [sic] provides the key for an understanding of how the expression of radio tends to become a model for its social significance. (Adorno 2008 : 371)

Then earlier, in a somewhat more hyperbolic characterization of radio’s filtering operation (and note here that Adorno is keenly interested in the way radio listens *for*, that is, in the place of, the listener), he writes with regard to music broadcasting :

Whatever the extra-musical factors account for: the illusion of closeness, which may well include them, the over amplified noises by which the radio set approaches its owner-victim, undoubtedly plays a major part in immediate radio phenomena. [...] If the radio sound appears to approach one bodily, as it were, at the same time it seems also as if what approaches one were not quite this sound itself but something like its own shadow, or its mirrored reflection. (Adorno 2008 : 347-48)

As Adorno’s title makes clear he is working here to think something like the social ontology of the radio. Setting aside the question of his predilection for the voice (it follows from his commitment to physiognomy), these passages urge us to shift our attention away from the voices or sounds we hear on radio, to the voice that *is* the

radio. This is a voice that is, as it were, inside our heads, or at least in our ears, and as such it seems to hail listeners as “owner-victims” (here Adorno is trying to grasp the sense in which radio, once on, blares into domestic space) addressed by relatives who are not our parents (specifically, “aunts and uncles”, and thus figures who are “familiar” but strangely so). It is worth noting that this formulation of Adorno’s repeats that of Walter Benjamin’s who in “Reflections on Radio” characterized the radio as a visitor to one’s home who can either be welcomed in or turned away. Perhaps because Benjamin is eager to think the difference between radio and the book (yet another iteration of the question of residualism), he does not address what happens to sound when radio is conceived as a visitor, and for this reason it seems urgent to emphasize that Adorno does. Specifically, he draws attention to the way a voice that approaches us bodily renders sound spectral, shadow-like, or, to pick up another motif crucial to *The Unsuspected*, mirror like.

Perhaps then what is unprecedented about Victor’s confession is precisely the way it invites what I have called “avuncular listening”, that is, a mode of listening that listens to the radio voice as such, that hears not only the victimizing approach of the uncle, but that listens for the rivalrous circuit of watching listening from within a film itself designated as “the unsuspected”.

A last detour will clarify why such listening deserves the epithet “avuncular”. Earlier I emphasized the rivalry between Steve and Victor over Matilda. Indeed much of the drama of the plot centers around the question of whether Matilda will accept Steve’s characterizations of Victor and save herself. Ultimately, of course, she does, but what must not be neglected is the fact that this development traces a movement from a concocted marriage to Steve (his ruse for investigating Rosalyn’s suicide/murder) to Victor’s bestowal of blessings when Matilda announces her intent to marry Steve. Between these points we are presented with an unsettling verbal intimacy between Matilda and Victor. I say unsettling because Bess Meredyth’s script (married at the time to Curtiz) deftly exploits the convergence between what Adorno would call “baby talk”, and “words of love”. Not only does Matilda constantly refer to Victor as “Grandy”, but when she tells him of her love for Steve, Victor replies, “I’m going to be left all alone with my memories, darling, of your sweetness and your tender affection for me”, as if gallantly yielding to another suitor.

If I stress this it is because the plot of *The Unsuspected* orbits tightly around the exchange of a woman and as such evokes directly the drama of kinship and what in one of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ earliest papers he refers to, following Radcliffe-Brown as the “avunculate”. This difficult and much debated concept seeks to illuminate the anthropological status of the “maternal uncle”. It is deployed by Lévi-Strauss as a way to explore the tension in Radcliffe-Brown between two systems : the system of terminology and the system of attitudes. In particular, Lévi-Strauss is keen to resolve a difficulty he teases out of his colleague’s treatment of the maternal uncle in the system of attitudes. Fully tracing this discussion falls outside the scope of this study, but it is certainly worth emphasizing that Lévi-Strauss uses it to establish the analytic superiority of what came to be called structural anthropology. He writes :

Thus we see that in order to understand the avunculate we must treat it as one relationship within a system, while the system itself must be considered as a whole in order to grasp its

structure. This structure rests upon four terms (brother, sister, father, son), which are linked by two pairs of correlative oppositions in such a way that in each of the two generations there is always a positive and a negative one. Now what is the nature of this structure, and what is its function? The answer is as follows: This structure is the most elementary form of kinship that can exist. It is, properly speaking, *the unit of kinship*. (Lévi-Strauss 1967 : 43, emphasis in original)

The book that established Lévi-Strauss as the preeminent French anthropologist of his generation, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), is here being heralded, and in the same breath the avunculate is characterized as the elementary unit of kinship. Crucial to his approach was precisely the idea that social groups, families, formed alliances through gift exchanges involving women. Famously refusing the notion that such exchanges were organized by the taboo on incest, Lévi-Strauss stressed that such alliances were produced by the desire to be included within them, rather than anxiety about violating their strictures. In this he established the template of Foucault's concept of productive power. What Radcliffe-Brown had struggled with is the seemingly contradictory and therefore irrational situation of the maternal uncle, the brother of the bride, a figure who could be both respected and feared. By situating this figure in a more capacious account of structure, Lévi-Strauss rendered the contradiction merely apparent, an expression of the subtle diachronic structure of gift exchanges.

Although much of the anthropological conversation focuses around the relation between the maternal uncle and the nephew, the niece is hardly ignored. Indeed, 30 years later when Lévi-Strauss responded to criticism of his earlier study he made a point of underscoring the important status of the niece in thinking the power of the maternal uncle, power that might well express itself in undertaking to care for the sister's daughter and thus securing his right to profit from her later exchange. Surely the convergence between this discussion and *The Unsuspected* will now come as no surprise. What stands at the core of the anechoic study in the Grandison estate is the contradictory figure of the maternal uncle: will he facilitate the exchange of his sister's daughter, or, will he not only hoard her – with all the incestuous overtones this implies – but even kill her? I think this helps us understand the oddly amorous discourse exchanged between Victor and Matilda, as well as Victor's shock upon hearing from Steve that he was Matilda's husband. As is made clear in the conversation regarding Matilda's portrait, Matilda's "market value" is of paramount concern to Victor, and he is clearly relieved that Steve has no interest in her estate. Not only does he grant Steve's request to have the portrait, but he invites him to spend the evening in his home. This, however, is when Matilda is still presumed dead, when the question of her being exchanged is effectively moot. When she is discovered alive, all bets are off.

Earlier, in tracking the important articulations of plot and remediation, I noted the important tension between the portrait and the close up of Matilda on her return flight from Brazil. Setting aside the otherwise serendipitous fact that Lévi-Strauss' field work began in Brazil, what the avunculate now illuminates about the portrait is that it is a sign, a sign that replaces the body of a woman in what is an otherwise failed or misguided kinship exchange. Moreover, it is a sign later transmuted into another, one not *in* the film but *as* the film (the close up). As such, it urges one to recognize

as part of the contradictory figure of the maternal uncle, both the exchange of signs and the rivalrous residualism of the media effecting this exchange. If it makes sense to attend to the film through what I have called avuncular listening, that is, a listening to the radio voice attuned to its sounding of the victimizing uncle, then the exchange of signs that matters most is the exchange of signs that give themselves to be heard, and especially those that give themselves, as if marked by a certain misgiving, to be misheard.

Certainly, the film solicits and makes extensive use of the interplay between what Chion calls causal and semantic listening. The sequence, traced earlier, in which we move from Victor at his studio microphone, to Althea and her guests at the party invites both modes : we are shown the cause of the sound of the radio broadcast (both the voice and the music are intensely diegetic even when “off screen”), and as the sound travels, we watch individuals interpret the significance of Victor’s words. Indeed, one of the remarkable effects of this sequence is that it invites the spectator to consider each character in the series – Steve, Press, Donovan (“someone who comes often to my own home”), Oliver and Althea (her gesture of turning off the radio is followed by the line from a party guest, “any one of us could be the murderer”) – an answer to the question : who is *The Unsuspected*? But let us not forget that “we” actually already know who *The Unsuspected* is. In this sense, what happens here is that an epistemological question arises, one prompted by the conflict between what we have seen and what we have heard, a question that posits within the relation between causal and semantic listening a space of reduced listening. That is, what the audio-visual rivalry prompts is a listening to listening, a listening for what is neither causal nor semantic. While it is true that this listening is not reduced in the sense of attending to the sounding of a sound, it certainly “opens one’s ears”, or, in a more psychoanalytical register, it provokes us to listen with the ear of the Other. Indeed, if it makes sense to contrast “reduced” and avuncular listening it is in order to pose the problem of “reduced listening” as one that resonates expressly within the cinema, or more particularly within a film that not only remedies the techniques of listening (Sterne’s “audile techniques”), but that gives its spectators sonic signs it also, in a certain sense, mis-gives, or seeks to withhold.

Earlier, I proposed that we think of this sequence as a transmutation, an inter-semiotic translation, of the seriality of radio listening. This means attending here to the way the break out of reduced listening is indexed to radio, to the radio voice as rendered not simply in Grandison’s speaking, but as Grandison’s speaking (radio voice as an uncle approaching, bodily, his victims). Because the film spectator knows that this voice – the voice belonging to the face on the desk top and at the studio microphone – is operating, in at least two ways, as an alibi (being in two places at once), radio is shown to be culpable for a crime that the cinema has to solve. Radiophonic here-ing must be listened to differently, its time measured, so as to re-synch Grandison and his speaking, his victimizing. What is thus unprecedented is more than the confession of a murder over radio, or even the Oedipal convergence of the amateur detective and the murderer, but the settling of accounts within film of its relation to sound, to the residual technology of radio as it radiates across the screen.

In what sense then does *The Unsuspected* also stage what earlier I referred to as

the rivalry between contending problematics or paradigms within cinema studies? Here it seems crucial to consider more carefully the oft-repeated fact that the film (like the novel from which it is rather loosely derived) also answers to the question : who is the Unsuspected? Indeed, in the opening credit sequence we witness, “under” the introduction of the basic melodic theme (C-B-A flat-F-B-C), a pair of gloved hands rifling through a stack of scripts, settling finally upon one titled “*The Unsuspected*”.

Figure 16



Through the enunciative gesture of the close up, this “Couriered” title transmutes into the title of the film in which this very series of shots appears. Explicitly then as part of the stated subject matter of the film, appears the all too familiar remediation of adaptation - from novel, to screenplay, to shooting script to finished film. In the unfolding of the plot, adaptation is obliged, however implicitly, to brush up against what in this film is a highly charged question, namely, is the film faithful to the novel, or put differently is the copy faithful to the original? I would suggest that because the title sequence is framed as a scene of criminality - why the black gloves, the very type of glove we later see Victor use to cover his tracks? - the rich theoretical problem of how one is to think the remediated relation between sights and sounds is, as it were, released within the film. In fact, it takes on an urgency within the film that strips it of mere academic, that is, idle, interest. However melodramatically it becomes a matter of life and death. The fact that Curtiz - a director known for his obsessive, even abusive attention to detail - knew nothing about what we might call the current sonic boom within cinema studies is no excuse for ignoring the challenges posed to the latter by his film. At the very least, one is hard pressed by *The Unsuspected* to provide an alibi for a form of inattention that is so frontally assaulted in the spectator's experience. After all, the film and the “hermeneutics of suspicion” of which it is made, states and enunciates that it is approaching us bodily, bearing the mercurial message, “I have not perished in seeing, I am here-ing”. Or is it the other way around?

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Abstract

This essay approaches the topic of translation through the motif of "transmutation", Roman Jakobson's term for a modality of translation understood to be inter-semiotic as opposed to either intra or inter-linguistic. Instead of developing transmutation as a re-wording of "adaptation" (for example, the elaboration of a novel as the screenplay for a film), this text brings transmutation into contact with "remediation", a concept used within media studies to describe how, as McLuhan famously put it, media are always comprised of other media. More specifically, and with an eye toward the particular tension between radio and film, this text shows how remediation repeats with a difference what Raymond Williams meant by "residualism", the survival within the cultural dominant of politically charged cultural technologies and practices from an earlier moment. Key here is the rivalrous character of this tension, that is, the fact that media that include other media typically do so by subjecting them to their own formal and narrative logics. Here is explored this dynamic through a reading of Michael Curtiz's *The Unsuspected* from 1947, a film that narrativizes the rivalry between radio and film.

Résumé

Cet article aborde la question de la traduction sous l'angle de la notion de "transmutation", terme qu'emploie Roman Jakobson pour désigner la traduction de type intersémiotique par opposition à la traduction intra- ou interlinguale. Au lieu d'aborder la transmutation comme synonyme de l'adaptation (par exemple, comme la transposition d'un roman au grand écran), le présent article met la transmutation en relation avec la "remédiation", concept des études médiatiques servant à décrire, tel que souligné par MacLuhan, le fait qu'un média est toujours composé d'autres médias. Plus particulièrement, ce texte s'intéresse à la tension spécifique entre la radio et le cinéma afin de montrer que la remédiation est une répétition modulée de ce que Raymond Williams a appelé le "résidualisme", ou la survivance, au sein d'une dominante culturelle, de technologies et de pratiques culturelles antérieures à forte teneur politique. Ce qui est central ici, c'est la rivalité inhérente à cette tension, c'est-à-dire le fait que les médias qui incluent d'autres médias le font habituellement en assujettissant ces derniers à leur propre logique formelle et narrative. Cette dynamique est explorée par l'entremise d'une lecture du film *The Unsuspected* de Michael Curtiz (1947) où se joue la tension entre la radio et le cinéma.

JOHN MOWITT is Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. He currently holds the Imagine Fund Chair in Arts and Humanities and is the author of numerous texts on the topics of culture, theory and politics. His most recent book, *Radio : Essays in Bad Reception*, is to appear from the University of California Press. He is also a senior co-editor of the journal, *Cultural Critique*, a leading Anglophone academic publication in the field of cultural studies and critical theory. In 2008 he collaborated with the composer Jarrod Fowler to transmute his book, *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking*, from a printed to a sonic text/performance.