



# The Voice in Transition

## Cinema, Contemporary Art, and Audiovisual Culture

Annalisa Pellino / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract<sup>1</sup>

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The voice in cinema has often been confused with the word, and dialogues have assumed more relevance than the modes of expression. When in 1982 Michel Chion tried to develop a theory of *sound cinema* as *talking cinema*, he started from a very simple question: 'By what incomprehensible thoughtlessness can we, in considering what after all is called the talking picture, "forget" the voice?'<sup>2</sup> After four decades, the stories and theories of cinema have not yet sufficiently developed the pivotal proposal of the French scholar in the light of the recent transformations and migrations of cinema.

Starting from this consideration, the research accounts for the so-called 'relocation of cinema'<sup>3</sup> in contemporary art and investigates the voice occurrences, framing its aesthetic and political uses in both cinema and moving image-based art practices, considering the first as an *aural model* for the analysis of the second. In particular, the research's principal aim is to affirm the voice's heuristic value for the interpretation of the relationship between image and sound, trying to overturn the 'ontological fallacy'<sup>4</sup> of cinema as a visual medium, both from the technical and epistemological point of view. Furthermore, drawing on the idea of cinema as a *mise-en-scène* of bodies, 'performance oriented medium'<sup>5</sup> and 'ventriloquism'<sup>6</sup> the voice has been considered

primarily in its materiality, as a sounding body and embodied consciousness, that lies beyond language or, at least, on the border between body and language or, by referring to Julia Kristeva, between "phenotext" (coded semiotically) and "genotext" (coded socially and physiologically).<sup>7</sup>

From a methodological point of view the dissertation assumes the *phoné's* paradoxical status between embodiment and disembodiment, sonic emission and aphonia, between the Self and the Other,<sup>8</sup> with reference to the anti-essentialist approach of the Voice Studies: they refuse to build a stable ontology or epistemology of the voice, and dismiss the idea that it can be considered as a clear identity index, rather considering it as the result of an 'enculturation' process.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the voice has been framed as a techno-cultural practice that evades gender, racial and social stereotypes. At stake there is the interaction between different aspects: the physiological qualities of the voice, its relationship with media and technologies, and its responses to the socio-cultural context, with clear consequences in terms of cinematic representation.

Hence, the first part of the dissertation examines different features that help to define the materiality of the *phoné*, which concerns not only the body, but also its prostheses, devices and media environments, trying to answer the

following questions: what exactly does this materiality consist of? How do we go beyond the idea, as fascinating as it is elusive, of 'the grain of the voice'?<sup>10</sup> Particular attention has been paid to the somatic occurrences of the voice, outlining a radical phenomenology where humanity and animality converge in the same expression — breath, hums, whispers, peeps, vocal mimicries, shouting and singing voices, and all sorts of inarticulate sounds — observable in cinema when it questions the nature–culture continuum and the female–animal sonic entanglement.<sup>11</sup> It has been the occasion to draw a map of diverse theories on voice, its cultural meanings and representations<sup>12</sup> as their technological roots, with a particular emphasis on the media–archeological approach.<sup>13</sup>

The second part of the dissertation delves into the 'topology of the voice'<sup>14</sup> and follows its *transitions* inside and outside image, text, and the cinematic dispositif, which produce a tension between narration and 'attraction',<sup>15</sup> leading to calls for a continuous reconfiguration of the relationship between gaze and listening. These passages have been considered from both historical, theoretical and practical perspectives, firstly highlighting the shift of interest of the Feminist Film Studies from gaze to listening occurred during the Eighties — that meaningfully coincides with the growing interest of Film Studies for sound; secondly, taking into consideration a 'queer aesthetic of the voice'<sup>16</sup> based on the possibility to address the voice as a form of sonic cross-dressing.

Finally, the research identifies a body of films and video-installations that invites us to re-evaluate the so-called 'audiovisual contract',<sup>17</sup> that emphasizes the materiality of the voice, and that makes use of it as an aesthetic and political gesture. Indeed, the case studies section — that challenge the stereotypes of representation and stage the issue of identity from an intersectional<sup>18</sup> point of view — has been divided into three areas which concern the geopolitics of the voice (Chantal Akerman and Lawrence Abu Hamdan), the question of the female sounding body and agency (Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe) and

vocality as a special field of articulation for non-white subjectivities (Martine Syms and Arthur Jafa).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Professor Luisella Farinotti (Università IULM, Milano) and Professor Alice Cati (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore).
- <sup>2</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, ed. and trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1 (first publ. 1982).
- <sup>3</sup> Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Rick Altman, *Introduction: Four and a Half Film Fallacies*, in *Sound Theory / Sound Practice*, ed. by Rick Altman (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), 35–45 (37).
- <sup>5</sup> Rick Altman, *General Introduction: Cinema as Event*, in *Ibidem*, 1–14 (9).
- <sup>6</sup> Rick Altman, 'Moving Lips. Cinema as Ventriloquism', *Yale French Studies*, 60.1 (Special Issue *Cinema / Sound*, ed. by Rick Altman, 1980) (New Haven: Yale University Press), 67–79.
- <sup>7</sup> Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin, *The Voice as Something More. Essays Toward Materiality* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 8; Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique: L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974).
- <sup>8</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) (first publ. 2003).
- <sup>9</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound. Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (New York: Duke University Press, 2018); *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies*, ed. by Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- <sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le grain de la voix* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981).
- <sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1975).
- <sup>12</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- <sup>13</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) (first publ. 1986); Wolfgang Ernst, *Sonic Time Machines. Explicit Sound, Sirenical Voices, and Implicit Sonicity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).
- <sup>14</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', *Yale French Studies*, 33–50.
- <sup>15</sup> Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde' in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. by Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 381–388 (first publ. 1986).
- <sup>16</sup> Juan A. Suarez, 'The Sound of Queer Experimental Film', in *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film*, ed. by Holly Rogers, Jeremy Barham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- <sup>17</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision. Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press 1994) (first publ. 1990).
- <sup>18</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', in *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, Art. 8 (1989), 7-80.