

The Externalization of Mourning: Considering the “Grain” of the Voice in Three Belgian Film Elegies**

This article explores how trauma writing, combined with thoughtful voiceover work, allows the notion of the “grain” of the voice, formulated by Roland Barthes in 1972, to be highlighted in a particularly striking way in certain Belgian essay films. The research is based on three case studies, three elegies for the death of a loved one, for which three denominations of the voice are proposed here: the incantatory voice of Mary Jiménez in *Du verbe aimer* (1984), the voice in ruins in Claudio Paziienza’s *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* (2007), and the carnivalesque voice in Yaël André’s *Quand je serai dictateur* (2013). The article takes as its starting point the literature on trauma writing, then examines the concrete articulation of writing and speech in the three case studies; and it is completed with quotations from interviews conducted by the author with the three filmmakers.

Keywords

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Virtually no signs of an internalized mourning. This is the fulfillment of absolute internalization. All *judicious* societies, however, have prescribed and codified the externalization of mourning. Uneasiness of ours insofar as it denies mourning.
Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (2010, 155)

Prelude. The “grain” of the voice in Belgian film elegies

Arguably, the inexhaustible variety of voices in the global territory of the essay film, genre to which the three film elegies studied here can be assigned, as I will discuss below, subverts and fragments two principles of narrative authority. First, the multiplication of points of view fragments the monolithic narratives established vertically by power, as claimed by Annie Ernaux with regard to narratives of the self (2022, 4). Second, as pure sound materialities (pronunciations, inflections, accents), all these individualized voices also fragment what Paul Rotha called already in 1935 the “voice of God” of documentary film (1936, 166).¹ This second particularity had already been underlined by Michel Chion for certain specific cases of fictional cinema that proposed a particularly creative work of the voiceover of their authors:

Their voices, even while assuming the classical role of narrator or I-voice, break convention in flaunting their singularity, and as projected voices. Instead of speaking neutrally and pretending not to know it speaks to an auditorium, the unusual acousmètre of [Jean] Cocteau himself in *Les Enfants terribles* or [Sacha] Guitry in *Le Roman d'un tricheur* is overtly aware of its elocution, its articulation, its timbre, the distance that separates it from us. (1999, 54)

While in the early days of the essay film, in the 1950s, filmmakers left the voiceover to professionals—for example, in *Dimanche à Pékin* (Chris Marker, 1956)—, from the 1970s onwards essayists worked in most cases with their own voice, a unique and differentiated voice, with different tempos and musicalities depending on the language (Harun Farocki’s German, Naomi Kawase’s Japanese). Also with their own accents, especially when speaking foreign languages (Jonas Mekas, Werner Herzog). These are also embodied voices, where the body becomes present to denote enthusiasms or anxieties (Anne Charlotte Robertson, Ross McElwee) in an ongoing theme with variations on what Roland Barthes called in 1972 the “grain” of the voice. Barthes developed this notion in the context of the analysis of the operatic voice, referring more specifically to the *lied* or *mélodie*: “the very precise space (genre) of the encounter between a language and a voice” (1977, 181). Barthes thus focused on analyzing a certain ambiguity or duplicity of the voice: “The *grain*, the grain of the voice when the latter is in a dual posture, a dual production – of language and of music” (181). He went on to oppose the notion of *pheno-song* (what singers are taught to do, their knowledge and skills) with *geno-song* (what involuntarily makes their bodies evident as they sing). And he concluded: “The ‘grain’ is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (182).

This friction, this interference of the body in the voice, intentional or not, is rarely as evident as in the case of films whose script can

be attributed to trauma writing, as is the case in the three film elegies I will study here. Because, as I will develop in relation to the proposed case studies, the unusualness of these voiceover readings is already foreseen in the unusualness of their writing. These scripts, written in a state of mourning, visibly in the midst of palpable pain or even guilt, are key to the fact that the voiceovers come to us from a place radically alien to that of the classical voice of the traditional documentary. And this happens in a creative context such as the Belgian one, where filmmakers could be said to be especially aware of the materiality, polysemies and possibilities of words. Firstly, because they live immersed in a plurality of languages in permanent cultural and political dispute (French, Flemish and German, with a large presence of English in Brussels). Secondly, because their film tradition presents some decisive explorations of the work of the voice, and in particular of the relationship between writing and voice. For example, the extraordinary creative work in the seminal short film *Met Dieric Bouts* (André Delvaux, 1975), a portrait of the painter Dieric Bouts narrated in Flemish: a film that sketches, rejects or rhythmically repeats various possibilities of narration, of filming, of pronunciation.² Chantal Akerman's unusual choice to read her mother's letters in *News from Home* (1977) also seems to be a thoughtful reflection on this operation of transferring the written word to the spoken word: here it is a dispassionate operation that makes her mother's written, emotional and worried words a uniform, continuous matter that places the weight on the sound substance rather than on its meaning.³ Akerman herself, perhaps the filmmaker who has most investigated the possibilities of the voice in Belgian cinema, had already begun her first short film *Saute ma ville* (1968) by replacing baroque music with hummed music, or consciously played with the spoken adaptation of her written text in the short film *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (1984), envisaging a theatrical rhythmic musicality in words and gestures. For his part, filmmaker Eric Pauwels devotes the final section of *Les rives du fleuve* (1991) to think about this interval through an actress reading an excerpt from *Juliette ou les prospérités du vice* (1801) by the Marquis de Sade. The actress is directed in the way she reads in order to give the text a specific, shocking effect. We see an actor directing the reading, giving instructions to the woman, but we also hear Pauwels' voice reflecting on the result: "What makes the text extremely violent, especially when you read it, is the consciousness of the reading."

Within these coordinates of reflection on the voice, Belgian elegies are presented in two almost opposite forms. On the one hand, as exemplified by films such as *Mort à Vignole* (Olivier Smolders, 1999) or *La deuxième nuit* (Eric Pauwels, 2016), with ordered and roughly chronological narrations of events, with a voice that we perceive as pained but controlled, without ruptures or obsessive repetitions. On the other hand, as we will see in the case studies analyzed, another option slips towards the border of the uncontrollable. Then, written language and the voice with it, move towards altered states of expression. This second voice, written and spoken, is the one that I understand as derived from trauma writing.

The term film elegy has been used by filmmakers and theorists to refer to films that are very diverse formally, from the series of works

explicitly entitled “elegies” by Aleksandr Sokurov to the self-portrait *JLG/JLG* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1995), called “elegy” by Nora Alter (2000, 88). Sokurov’s own series presents a wide formal range, where we find, on the one hand, films explicitly dedicated to people dear to him who have just passed away, such as Andrei Tarkovsky (*Moscow Elegy* [*Moskóvskaya elegiya*], 1988) or the protagonist of *Maria* (*Peasant Elegy*) (*Mariya*, 1988), being essay elegy films guided by a voiceover. But at the same time, the series includes pieces with or without voiceover that are closer to poetry or experimental cinema, perhaps alluding to political changes or the loss of values, such as *Simple Elegy* (*Prostaya elegiya*, 1990) or *Oriental Elegy* (*Vostochnaya elegiya*, 1996), as well as essay films not associated with the death of a loved one, such as *Elegy of the Journey* (*Elegiya dorogi*, 2002). I propose to limit this denomination to films explicitly focused on mourning for a loved one, as follows from the definition of “elegy” in the Oxford dictionary: “A song or poem of lamentation, esp. for the dead; a memorial poem.” International cinema includes examples such as *Lightning Over Water* (Wim Wenders and Nicholas Ray, 1980), about the last days of filmmaker Nicholas Ray; *Mourir à trente ans* (Romain Goupil, 1982), about the suicide of a close friend; *Karin’s Face* (*Karins ansikte*, Ingmar Bergman, 1984), made after the death of the filmmaker’s mother; *Jacquot de Nantes* (Agnès Varda, 1991), about Jacques Demy, or *Irène* (Alain Cavalier, 2009), a portrait of the filmmaker’s previous wife, who died traumatically some years earlier. This filmic form, as can be deduced from the examples cited, is multiform: Bergman’s short film is a succession of photographic portraits of his mother, spanning a lifetime; *Jacquot de Nantes* is a hybrid project between essay and fictional biopic, begun by Demy as an autobiography and completed after his death by his widow Agnès Varda as an elegy; *Mourir à trente ans* and *Irène* are essay films guided by a voiceover. In the case of the Belgian elegies, the form undoubtedly tends towards the essay film narrated with voiceover, but within it, the filmmakers find multiple nuances, as we will see in the analysis of the three case studies. And while not every essay film has to be autobiographical, in the case of these Belgian elegies there is a very clear choice of different degrees of autobiography.⁴ These can span from the maximum literalness, constructing a portrait of a whole life of the disappeared loved one, where incidentally the filmmaker’s own whole life is given account of, as in *La deuxième nuit* (Eric Pauwels, 2016), to the maximum masking, as we will see in *Quand je serai dictateur* (Yaël André, 2013).

These film elegies are dedicated to thinking about and facilitating the journey of mourning through the creation of a work in the form of a film. In these films, questions such as the management of the images of the disappeared loved ones are worked on from different intertwined levels: the acceptance of their disappearance, disbelief, pain, guilt. Depending on the stage of such a journey, taken either as a recent and living event, or as a memory of the past not yet emotionally closed, it can be said that the “grain” of the voice vibrates in different ways. Also that the writing achieves less or more coherence in the search for clarity, linking with what has been analyzed in the abundant literature related to the writing of trauma, which debates between the possibility and the impossibility of such writing, between its fictional imposture and its beneficial

effects. In her article on the utilities of trauma writing, Patricia San José Rico draws an updated overview of the main opinions on this issue, concluding on the verifiable usefulness of this type of writing for its authors. She contrasts the position of those who think that trauma is irretrievable within a linear narrative with that of those who confirm the beneficial effects of such experimentation. An example of the former is Jenny Edkins' opinion: "Trauma [...] cannot be verbalised. It is outside the realm of language, and to bring it back into that realm by talking about it, by presenting it in a linear narrative, is to destroy its truth"⁵ (quoted in San José Rico 2017, 25). An example of the latter would be the method of "writing as a cure," whereby the patient has to write down his or her traumatic memory, preserving its accidents: "Coherence is expected to be achieved sooner or later through writing, but not in writing. Such coherence is the ultimate goal towards the patient's cure, but writing –that inevitably incoherent writing that is produced in the meantime– is the means to achieve it" (San José Rico 2017, 26).

This finds resonances of the utmost interest when compared with the context of the Belgian film elegy. From the 1980s onwards, the repeated presence of elegy in Belgian cinema is striking: refusing the usual suggestion of evasion, of letting time work, Belgian filmmakers seem determined to place the trauma of the loss of a loved one at the absolute center of their aesthetic concerns, making films that question their private pain, making it public. A whole list of filmmakers such as Mary Jiménez, Olivier Smolders, Eric Pauwels, Claudio Paziienza, Yaël André or Clémence Hébert, all part of the Belgian production context, have explored this film elegy form. An attentive look at the international map, seems in fact to suggest that nowhere else have so many examples of film elegies been produced as in Belgium.

Among this series of cinematic experiments, I propose here an approach to three case studies that consider elegy through experimentation with form, and particularly with the written and spoken voice. The voice I trace here is a traumatic voice: it is the result of a painful state, of the loss of a very close loved one (in two of the three case studies, in violent and unexpected ways), which is managed in three different ways, with three different and complementary voices.

1. The incantatory voice of Mary Jiménez in *Du verbe aimer*

Twelve years old. I'm still top of the class, but my mother tells me I'm in trouble. Twelve years old. My mother tells me about Freud. Freud was an adult. He discovered the unconscious. If we have a desire, or a fear, the unconscious knows about it, and hides it. I'm twelve years old, the world of adults is still wonderful. My mother wants me to do psychoanalysis. I accept. I would like to discover what is in my unconscious.

Mary Jiménez, *Du verbe aimer* (1984)

The explicit autobiographical production of the Peruvian-Belgian Mary Jiménez, the first Peruvian filmmaker to deliberately undertake a documentary of the self (Bustamante 2018, 26), takes the form of three films that link reflections and characters. With the first, *Du verbe aimer* (*On the Verb To Love*, 1984), Jiménez anticipates what Paola Lagos Labbé calls the "definitive irruption and a sustained and systematic production of autobiographies, intimate and personal diaries" (2011, 63) of the 1990s. *Loco Lucho* (1998) and *Face Deal* (2014) complete the trilogy. In *Du verbe aimer*, Jiménez traces an impressionistic autobiography to think about the central absence of her life, the absence of love from her mother, for whom she strives to the point of risking her own life to obtain affection, without success. For her she strives to get the best marks in class; for her she studies architecture; for her she undergoes psychoanalytic therapy and even electroshocks, but she never achieves the love she desires with such violence. The last attempt is to escape to the other side of the world, to Belgium, to study cinema and make films to gain her admiration. But on the eve of the first day of filming, her mother dies in a spectacular accident: a domestic gas explosion. The absence of affection is then compounded by the guilt of having been absent during the wake and funeral. Jiménez, already a film professional after studying in Brussels at the prestigious Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle (INSAS), realizes that the main power of film is to fill in the gaps of a chaotic reality through images and stories. She then designs a film project that culminates in the fictional staging, in the form of a simulacrum, of the ritual of vigil that is missing from her memory. In effect, this ends the traumatic exploration of memory in which the film consists, and Jiménez can then affirm: "From now on, when I think of the pain of the lack of my mother's love, I will see the images in this film." (Fig. 1)

In a context of cinematographic pedagogy in the early days of INSAS marked by the influence of Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras, Mary Jiménez's cinema crystallizes in an expressive form in which the accidents and reliefs of traumatic memory will preside in a resounding way over the filmmaker's filmography. This memory, as a key to thematic reading, will entail necessary aesthetic implications: psychoanalytic self-exploration breaks chronology to proceed in a spiral, by groping, by invocation, bringing to the surface painful memories hidden through echoes, metaphors, disturbing duplicities. This could be linked to the assimilations between traumatic writing and modernist aesthetic ruptures that have been highlighted by leading authors in the field such as Dominick LaCapra (2005, 47) or Roger Luckhurst (2008, 90). And this script of tentative phrases will be embodied in the film through the voice of the filmmaker herself. Jacqueline Aubenas describes this voice as follows: "*Du verbe aimer* is first and foremost a voice, the director's voice, a muted, all-encompassing voice that goes beyond the function of a traditional voiceover: it is not a simple link, ensuring that the narrative runs smoothly between two sequences [...]. This voice does not make us the addressee but the witness to an enchantment" (2013, 140). And about the "tone" of this voice: "Words that give an impression of immediacy, of discovery, of revealing trial and error, words that do not shy away from repetition, choppy words or phrases, or 'obsessive' repetition, but adopt an incantatory, inspired, melodic tone" (2013, 143). (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1: *Du verbe aimer* (Mary Jiménez, 1984).



Fig. 2: *Du verbe aimer* (Mary Jiménez, 1984).

One could relate these meta-reflexive writing and rhythmic voice effects to contemporary examples such as *Reassemblage. From the Firelight to the Screen* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982) or Jean-Luc Godard’s essayistic production culminating in *Lettre à Freddy Buache* (1982). One could also relate them to a decisive previous example, that of Philippe Sollers’ text cut and repeated in rhythmic permutations in Jean-Daniel Pollet’s *Méditerranée* (1963). But the voice in *Du verbe aimer* is also a fully embodied voice that shows its scars. As we watch the images of the Peruvian sanatorium where the filmmaker received electroshocks, we hear the voice of the woman who received them, who survived them, who still bears the scars of them in her body, in her memory and in her voice. It is difficult to get closer to the notion of the “grain” of the voice than in this film by Mary Jiménez, traversed by the experience of trauma. It encompasses not only the loss of the mother, but all the violence that preceded it, and which needed an escape route in the realm of the symbolic, but also in the corporeal. Because at the very heart of the film, in its approach and concrete objective, there is a bodily need: the need to make the blocked tears come to the surface. In May 2023, I interviewed Mary Jiménez in Brussels; she explained to me her experience of the distance between the understanding of the traumatic event by the mind and the body, and its final integration into the film:

I was in Belgium when a telegram arrived announcing her death and, as I was shooting a film at INSAS, I felt nothing. Two months later, I burnt my foot when I got into a bath that was too hot and the knowledge that my mother had died (she burnt to death) overwhelmed me. I realized she was dead [...] I had a lot of problems, hallucinations... And I thought I should deal with the pain and do a shot of me crying. When it came to editing, people wanted me to cut that shot because it’s too much, it’s pitiful, a filmmaker crying like that in front of the camera. But Hadelin Trignon, a brilliant teacher and great cinephile, encouraged me to see my proposal through to the end.⁶

The shot of the filmmaker weeping appears halfway through the film, at minute 49. She has just dared, at last, to unwrap her mother’s rings that her sister gave her after her death, and in which Jiménez only imagined her absent fingers. Putting the voice in suspense, this shot conveys the pain with the body. It is a sort of complementary certificate to the final simulacrum of burial: it attests, in the space of the film (which will replace memory), to the tears that should have fallen, but did not fall, at the moment of the mother’s death. (Fig. 3) In contrast to the silent tears of Anna Karina in *Vivre sa vie* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962), echoing the silent tears of Maria Falconetti in *La passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928), Mary Jiménez’s sobbing is recorded here with synchronous sound; this distances it from abstraction and reinforces the bodily element, while bringing greater complexity to the work of the voice in the film, introducing new nuances, moans, vibrations. A decisive film in the history of Belgian non-fiction cinema, *Du verbe aimer* inaugurates a whole autochthonous line of film elegy, which will continue in very different ways depending on the personalities of its authors, in a creative conversation that continues to develop to this day, with such singular examples as those in the following two sections.



Fig. 3: *Du verbe aimer* (Mary Jiménez, 1984).

2. The voice in ruins in Claudio Papienza's *Scènes de chasse au sanglier*

You say: "What happened to your alphabet prior to the pictures?" [...]

You say: "The deaths of your loved ones have contaminated all the pictures." [...]

You say: "Insult all those pictures that have made death so familiar:"

Claudio Papienza, *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* (2007)

The decisive turning point in the filmography of the Italian-Belgian Claudio Papienza comes with the death of his parents. He has dedicated a film elegy to each of them, two experimental reflections on disappearance, and on the relationship between cinema and death. Beyond the author himself, who always guides the plots of his essays with his presence and usually also with his voice, the two central characters in Claudio Papienza's films had been, until then, his parents. We meet them for the first time in the prelude to *Tableau avec chutes* (1997), where a second-person voiceover, which is not yet the filmmaker's recognizable French voiceover with an Italian accent, introduces them as follows: "You are here. Like your parents, you have been here for thirty-three years. Your mother wanted to go back to Italy as soon as you arrived at Hasselt station. Your father, more stubborn, decided that you would stay. You are here. Like your father, you are here." With this presentation, with this "you are here, like your parents," whom we see inside their car, looking at us, the filmmaker establishes a statement, reaffirms the anchoring of his point of view in this incarnated and subjective gaze. It is a gaze conscious of his origins, which indissolubly links his lucid, refined, creative vision of the world, shaped by his Sociology studies, to the vision of the world of his parents, Carlo and Gina, humble Italian immigrants with little interest in high culture. Having affirmed this gaze, sole and triple, the filmmaker will take the necessary time to cross-check with the parents every intuition, every statement received in books or interviews with experts, in this and the following films. It is as if Papienza would not trust the limitations and traps of vision, nor the limitations and traps of culture, and wanted to make sure that every discovery has been elucidated by the gaze of the parents. The parents, then, will be the point of reference that will bring abstractions down to earth, forcing an explanation or a remodelling of each idea that will make it effectively accessible to the yardstick chosen to measure everything.

The film *Tableau avec chutes* proposed a sociological approach to *Landscape with the fall of Icarus* (1554–1555), the mysterious painting by Brueghel the Elder kept in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. His following films, commissions turned into author films, would be devoted to the history of beer—*Esprit de bière* (2000)—and that of money—*L'argent raconté aux enfants et à leurs parents* (2002)—, but would always have their parents at the absolute center as guarantors of the balance of the gaze. It can be understood, then, the radical gap that opens up with the disappearance of both, who died within a few years of each other, in the first decade of the 2000s. Perhaps the central sequence of all his films, the lake sequence in *Esprit de bière*, is in fact dedicated to explain this centrality of his father in his cinema: Claudio enters

a lake with his father and in the middle of the lake he reads him a text that explains it explicitly. In later works, the death of the parents produces a series of shock waves that structurally alter the filmmaker’s aesthetic decisions, to the point of placing him on the edge of silence. The first visible consequence is the disarticulation of language, which becomes a sort of babbling. Alongside this, another metaphor for the disintegration of the previous order: the image that explores the pixel, the recording with a small mobile phone that shreds the images to the limit of abstraction. Ruins of the language, of the image, from which a new alphabet has to be reconstructed, because the previous one has become useless.

Pazienza devotes a crucial film elegy to thinking about the death of his father, *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* (*Scenes from a Wild Boar Hunt*, 2007). He is visibly traumatized, we perceive it in his face and also in his voice: an extremely fragile voiceover runs through the film from beginning to end, a voice that whispers and trembles, repeating phrases as if in shock, and that always seems on the verge of breaking. The film presents an unpredictable geometry of sequences that attempt to deal with loss from different angles: attempts to reconnect images and words, ritual performances, conversations about mourning or murmurs of bewilderment at a world in which his parents are no longer there. In it he associates the death of his father in 2006, at the age of sixty-seven, with the death of the wild boar, as occurs in certain forms of shamanism, such as Corsican mazzèrism, where the dream of the dead boar announces the death of a close person (see Carrington 2004). He also associates, more broadly, photography and hunting, connecting with the idea sketched by Chris Marker at the beginning of his essay film on photography *Si j’avais quatre dromadaires* (1966): “The photograph is the hunt; it is the hunting instinct without the desire to kill. It is the hunting of angels: you follow your prey, you aim, you shoot and clack! Instead of killing a man, you make him eternal.” Four decades after Marker’s film, Pazienza puts into concrete images this contradiction of the shot that kills or eternalizes, using a very particular device: the symbolic reconstruction of the famous “chronophotographic” rifle of Étienne-Jules Marey, which could shoot twelve images per second. *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* is a filmic object destined to think about that possibility pointed out by Marker and also by Bazin (1967, 9), that of embalming, that of the immortality of the beloved if one knows how to shoot with the right rifle. (Fig. 4)

The death of the father provokes a sort of shockwave that leads to wandering, disorientation, a break in the usual chain of gestures, images, language. The film is written and spoken in the language of trauma, with broken sentences, with doubts, with a kind of obstinate, rhythmic repetition, again in the second person: “You say: ‘There are no pictures for that which is whistling and unfurling within you.’ You say: ‘The wounded pictures live inside you.’ [...] You say: ‘The deaths of your loved ones have contaminated all the pictures.’” In another of the most crucial elegies of Belgian cinema, *Mort à Vignole* (1999), the filmmaker Olivier Smolders had asked himself: “Could we film our friends, our children, our parents on their deathbed?” Pazienza explicitly answers this question with an unconscious but inexorable impulse, that of the need to “be” for the last time in the same image with his father. (Fig. 5) The film then becomes tactile, and shows the need to touch the body



Fig. 4: *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* (Claudio Papienza, 2007).



Fig. 5: *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* (Claudio Papienza, 2007).

of the loved one, living or dead, and also the need to touch the images. This need to touch the traces of that which was life makes him think of the containers of the disappeared life: his father’s clothes, which still retain his smell; his father’s house, violently silent. With both the clothes and the house, Paziienza makes a distancing from their habitual uses because, suddenly, they can no longer mean the same thing; the whole world has changed. The father is suddenly mute, and the son is paralyzed and has to rethink everything all over again. “What happened to your alphabet prior to the pictures?”, he asks himself. This film is a first attempt at an answer, continued in his next and last film to date, dedicated to the death of the mother, significantly entitled *Exercices de disparition* (2011). In 2023, the filmmaker confirmed my intuitions about the folds of his traumatic writing and voice with these words: “After my parents died, I found myself—how shall I put it?—*not knowing how to speak*. [...] Faced with the disappearance of my loved ones, faced with the inexplicability of death, in a way I think there is no other solution than to relearn how to speak.”⁷

Within the scheme of uses of the voice proposed by Michel Chion in his seminal book *Audio-Vision* (1990), Paziienza’s voice in this film could be situated within the coordinates of the “wandering text,” a specific variant of the “textual speech” (which would correspond, more broadly, to voiceover and commentary). To explain his idea of “wandering voice,” Chion gives the example of Godard’s *Lettre à Freddy Buache*, a poetic, geometric description of the city of Lausanne:

Godard’s voice (we’re not sure whether he is reading from written notes or completely improvising) does not pronounce a “finished” text. The voice speaks as if searching for the right words; it repeats, hesitates, fumbles, and recovers, finds a phrasing that sounds right, good enough to write [...] There is little direct synchronization of meaning between the spoken discourse and the image, only several brief encounters and some general convergences. (1994, 175–76)

In the case of Paziienza’s film, we don’t know whether he starts from written notes or improvises either, but the rhythmic work with the second person recalls some central moments of the French *nouveau roman* (“new novel”) movement, such as Michel Butor’s *La modification* (1957). And beyond the Godardian model, this work proposes new forms of interweaving voices that recall Serge Daney’s proposals for playing with various English prepositions to explore the possibilities of the voiceover. In an article for *Cahiers du cinéma*, Daney spoke of voices *off*, *in*, *out* and *through* (1977, 22–26). According to the author, the voice *off* and the voice *in* would be voices whose emission is invisible. The former would always run parallel to the images, as in the commentary of a documentary. The second would intervene in the image without appearing in it, for example when interviewing someone we see in the image. The voice *out* would be any voice that we see coming out of a mouth. The voice *through*, finally, would be a voice whose emitter is inside the image, but we would not see it coming out of a mouth, for example because the character’s back is turned. The funeral sequence (minute 13) exemplifies the complexity of Paziienza’s work with voices: at least three of the voices proposed by Daney are here interwoven in counterpoint: *off*, *in*

and *out*. The first is included in post-production as a voiceover; the second is recorded during filming, but with the author still out of the field; the third, when he enters the field. All three are by Paziienza himself and spoken in two languages, French and Italian, and all three are addressed to himself in the second person. But all of them, and especially the Italian voice, are also undoubtedly addressed to his father, who is in front of him but can no longer hear him. (Fig. 6)

From this sequence, and from Paziienza's production as a whole, narrated in his own voice, it is still possible to draw some conclusions about the implications of the foreign accent, which is also valid for Mary Jiménez's film. Hamid Naficy has proposed the concept of "accented cinema" for such cases, a concept that goes beyond the specific accent of the voice but includes it, differentiating three categories: ethnic, exilic and diasporic films. The last two would correspond to films that focus on meditating on the place of origin, now lost, or on the displaced community, which strives to maintain its cultural identity in the place of destination. This does not correspond to the cases analyzed of Jiménez and Paziienza, but the first category, on the other hand, could be applied to both. Naficy describes it as follows: "postcolonial ethnic and identity cinema [is dominated] by the exigencies of life here and now in the country in which the filmmakers reside" (2001, 15). This "accent," literal and metaphorical, would thus be inscribed in every local or universal theme they deal with, always imprinting a stamp of displaced identity, with its associated violence and instabilities. This can also be related to Rosi Braidotti's idea of "nomadic subjects." Braidotti, also of Italian origin and from an immigrant working-class family dispersed around the world, crosses feminism and post-structuralism, to imagine a new theoretical and political creativity from these new hybrid coordinates (2000, 27–28), of which Paziienza and Jiménez are a practical example. According to Naficy and Braidotti's reading, this vindication of accent and hybridization would be an energetic display of political and cultural resistance, that would ultimately draw unforeseen connections between the dispersed members of a transnational community capable of imagining new ways of living and creating: "the accented style helps us to discover commonalities among exilic filmmakers that cut across gender, race, nationality and ethnicity, as well as across boundaries of national cinemas, genres and authorship" (Naficy 2001, 39).

3. The carnivalesque voice in Yaël André's *Quand je serai dictateur*

Inevitably it happens: he is sent to the psychiatric hospital. In the forest he is cured of the hospital; in the hospital he is cured of the forest. After a few years like this, Georges suddenly becomes very sweet. But he looks very, very sad. So I say to him: "Georges, talk to the trees and the rocks. Tell them: 'Checkered tablecloth, pile of sand, (exquisite terrorist), poof!' 'Moss-tache, moss-tache, bang!' 'Pile of sand, bang!' Tell them: 'Shallow bras...' 'Housewives with a side parting, (exquisite terrorist), boom!' Tell them: 'When I'm a mirror in a world without humans.' There, trees and stones hear you."

Yaël André, *Quand je serai dictateur* (2013)



Fig. 6: *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* (Claudio Pazienza, 2007).

Quand je serai dictateur (*When I Will Be Dictator*, 2013) is the fourth feature film by the Belgian filmmaker Yaël André. It differs widely from her three previous films, which are in turn very different from each other: *Histoires d’amour* (1997) was organized around a series of intimate on-camera testimonies on the idea of love, *Filles en orange* (2003) is an autobiographical musical, and *Chats errants (zones temporaires d’inutilité)* (2007) is an essay on the “useless” spaces of the city, usually inhabited by cats. *Quand je serai dictateur* could be defined as a quantum autobiography: after the suicide of a close friend, here called by the pseudonym Georges, and with the burden of guilt for not having answered the last time he tried to contact her, the filmmaker imagines a whole catalogue of parallel lives in which her friend would still be alive. She illustrates these parallel lives, in turn, with fragments of old Belgian home movies found in garages and flea markets, and she organizes them in chapters such as “When I am a mother of a large family” or “When I am an invisible man.” But the relationship between the voiceover narration and the images is open, without a pretension to literal illustration, so that both lines (the text read and the image) advance independently in parallel, interacting occasionally. (Fig. 7)

The tone here is decidedly carnivalesque, the world turned upside down, the inversion of reality towards another hypothetical reality where tragedy can be reversed. In 2023, the filmmaker told me about the origin of the project: “When I wrote the plan for the film, I wanted to see if it was possible to talk about death in a ‘burlesque’ way. Which isn’t really possible after all...”⁸

The writing of the text, in permanent open dialogue with the montage of images, is an interweaving of real memories and imaginary possibilities, crossed by ellipses, cut sentences, suspensory points, onomatopoeias. For example, the ellipses, translated into slight violences of the voiceover, are decisive in describing the stuck guilt that forms the traumatic repetition in memory:

One day, Georges telephones me. He leaves a message saying: “Happy New Year.” For various inconsequential reasons, I don’t call him back right away. A few days later, he died. Suicide. Then, it’s as if the sun has suddenly gone out. There must be at least one universe in which Georges hasn’t hanged himself from a tree, alone, on a winter’s night. [...] When Georges died, time stood still. Something got stuck. Seasons pass, several times. But this doesn’t pass. *I wish that... I didn’t mean that... I feel that...* Too late. We were thirty years old. Georges will be thirty forever.

The onomatopoeias are decisive in one of the most vertiginous parts of the film; André uses them like gunshots in one of the parallel lives, the chapter “When I am a psychopath”:

Here, my good Judeo-Christian and bourgeois upbringing has made me a more or less civilized and restrained person, who says “thank you” and does not cross at red lights. But there... at the other end of the universe... There, I shoot all the boring and tedious people without batting an eyelid, without warning and without flinching. The vain cashier: poof! The chubby driver of the 4x4: bang! bang! [...] Parisians in Paris and abroad, sadistic prison officers, bra and hoover salesmen: ratatatata!



Fig. 7: *Quand je serai dictateur* (Yaël André, 2013).

Some explorations of twentieth century literature can be pointed to as references for the kind of highly personal voiceover that this film proposes. In narrative, André’s irreverent and colloquial text can find a distant inciter in Louis Ferdinand Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932). In poetry, her work with the materiality of words (onomatopoeias, whispers) is close to some pioneering experiments in Dadaist poetry by authors such as Hugo Ball. In them, on the one hand, the materiality of words is given more weight than their meaning and, on the other, the importance of orality in poetic transmission is emphasized. The use of onomatopoeias has also been explored in popular culture, with the great reference in the French-speaking world being the song *Comic Strip* (1968) by Serge Gainsbourg. In the Belgian cinematic context, André’s proposal could be related to some wild poetic intrusions, such as the shouted improvisation of a Dadaist poem by Jan Bucquoy in *La vie sexuelle des belges 1950–1978* (1994) or the violent recitation of Jean-Pierre Verheggen’s poem on the myth of Icarus in *Tableau avec chutes* (Claudio Papienza, 1997).

To convey her frenetic, pierced, carnivalesque texts, Yaël André needed a unique voice, with a personality as captivating as her writing. In her previous film, *Chats errants*, she had relied on the intriguing voice of Michel Keyaerts, and for this occasion she chose the Belgian poet Laurence Vielle. Vielle embodies Yaël André’s text in a very personal way; if we have never seen her speak or recite poems, and as long as we never see her image in the film, the result is highly disconcerting: we cannot tell whether the voice belongs to a man or a woman, nor can we tell his or her age; it is a kind of hoarse, malicious and intelligent voice, enormously intriguing. The “grain” of the voice is a permanent underline as it is a truly unique voice, and some “accidents” show its bodily reactions to the written text, as when we hear Vielle utter, heart shrinking mid-sentence, “There must be at least one universe in which Georges hasn’t hanged himself from a tree, alone, on a winter’s night.” (Fig. 8)

The trauma summoned is, in fact, more complex than the one described in the film, and makes visible the strategies not only of autobiographical fictionalization but also and more specifically of trauma writing. In our interview, André told me that the film actually contains several levels of mourning. The first is family mourning, because among the flow of images there are included images of the filmmaker’s past (her daughter’s early years, Yaël’s life with her partner), and these images are edited from a present in which the family has dissolved. Another level of mourning is that of her own presence in the film, incited by the editor, Luc Plantier; a “narrative” mourning, in her words. A third level would be the mourning for the lives not lived, linked to the collective mourning for the protagonists of the film’s remote images, who are probably dead today. And finally, a last level at the center of the traumatic writing process would be the mourning for the friend renamed Georges in the film, which in turn activates two other past traumas, even more difficult to name: the suicide of a first love and especially that of her elder brother, that “touches on things that are more ancestral and primitive.”⁹

For André, the recourse to carnivalesque writing was thus a concrete proposal, a specific solution to the problem of the



Fig. 8: *Quand je serai dictateur* (Yaël André, 2013).

impossibility of directly confronting this “most ancestral and primitive” pain. Each of the film’s aesthetic choices then functions as a succession of masks that gradually overlap to form a space of security within which to name, by resonance, that ultimate, unnamable pain. The voice of the speaker, that voice-mask, carnivalesque, androgynous, timeless, will then be in charge of allowing the individual and collective catharsis of the author and her audience, breaking down the barrier of the traumatic blockade to flow like an unstoppable and liberating verbal torrent. (Fig.9)

Conclusion

The three films studied show in three complementary ways how the traumatic writing that is at the basis of the three voiceovers results in a very particular sonic materiality. The “grain” of the voice is then enriched and underlined by this link between writing and voice, between language and music, between word and body. In the case of Mary Jiménez, the initial text presents repetitions and permutations of phrases that create a resounding, incantatory musicality; these phrases are then read by an accented voice, according to Naficy’s conceptualization, a marked and nomadic voice, which is also a voice that cannot hide the inscription of the violence suffered in childhood and adolescence. In the case of Claudio Pazienza, a script or sketch of a script made of loose words, broken sentences, even broken words, is read by a fragile voice on the verge of breaking, close to stammering; a proudly accented voice, too, with its hybrid identity inscribed in each word uttered. Finally, in Yaël André’s case, the script proposes all kinds of reliefs and phonetic accidents, gaps, puns, onomatopoeias and a writing between expressionist and surrealist that doubles its effect thanks to a disconcerting speaker. This voice is a voice-mask, and the mask is grotesque, carnivalesque, chosen in this way, exaggerated, to camouflage a pain that is too intense; and yet this voice-mask reveals the state in which the script was written by its author, with moments of fragility due to the dramatic nature of the subject, with verbal and phonetic excesses, with revealing silences. Taken together, these three elegies thus reveal themselves to be examples of the greatest interest in the work of voiceover in the field of essay films.

1/ A monolithic designation that today needs to be qualified regarding its historical reality. See Wolfe 1997.

2/ The actor playing Christ in a *tableau vivant* is taught how to pronounce a word correctly (“verraden”, betray, in the phrase *One of you will betray me*), going beyond what is strictly necessary in a representation of such nature.

3/ This is also how her fictional character Jeanne Dielman reads the family letters to her son in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce – 1080 Bruxelles* (1975).

4/ For a further cartography of the particularities and hybridizations between essay film and autobiographical cinema, see Lagos Labbé 2024, 32–108.



Fig. 9: *Quand je serai dictateur* (Yaël André, 2013).

- 5/ In the case of quotations from books whose original sources are in languages other than English, as well as in the transcription of excerpts from films analyzed whose voiceover is in French, the English translations have been made by the author of this article, unless otherwise indicated.
- 6/ Personal interview with the author in Brussels on May 6th, 2023.
- 7/ Personal interview with the author in Brussels on May 9th, 2023.
- 8/ Personal interview with the author in Brussels on May 8th, 2023.
- 9/ Personal interview with the author in Brussels on May 8th, 2023.

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