

The Body of the Voice: Orality as Sound and Performative Expression in Non-Fiction Film

Almost a century after the advent of sound film, it is hard to explain the prevailing hegemony of visual approaches in film studies, which still monopolizes the field. The introduction of sound not only brought along music but also the emergence of voice with all its potentials, both in communicative and expressive terms. The attention to this fascinating phenomenon that modulated “spoken cinema” has mainly focused on the often-literal uses of dialogue in fiction films, which has basically impoverished or neglected the expressive interactions with the image. Within that rather orthodox scenery, Marguerite Duras constituted a remarkable exception, as she generated radical detours and dissonances between image and sound in films such as *India Song* (1975) or *L'Homme atlantique* (1981).

In the realm of non-fiction films, the past few decades have seen a preference for essay film as a subjective form that expresses the filmmaker’s conceptual and sensitive thinking by using a first-person voiceover. This voiceover channels comments about the filmmaker’s experience, presenting a critical, political, and self-reflective understanding of both reality and cinema. Through this approach, the essay film rehearses and exposes the thinking processes that each essay mobilizes. As a result, the essayistic voice often accentuates uncertainty, questions, ambiguity, and error.

Still, the expressive quality of the voice goes beyond the mere transmission of ideas through words; voice hosts and supports language, but it is not equal to language. The body acts as a speaker, and the voice indicates the presence of the body in the sound image; this body is not visible, yet it is audible. Some film trends expand the limits of the spoken word to release it from a purely semantic function. Thus, they foster its strength as a physical and audible experience that is embodied by a “sonic body” (LaBelle 2014). In this way, sense and sound interact, overflowing their limits and reverberating into each other.

The human voice can be deconstructed into a series of micro-oralities that go beyond words and their meaning, namely: extra-significant vocal gestures, phonemes, interjections and onomatopoeias. Additionally, the sonic body talks, sings, hums, whistles, recites, stammers, babbles and whispers. It laughs, shouts, cries, coughs, yawns, sneezes, hiccups, moans and sighs. These and other actions are bio-communicative sound acts that appear as “an intrusion of voice into the speech” (Díaz 2011) and produce the emergence of an “embodied language that is *all voice*” (Chion 1999). These oral behaviors provide “corpulence” to the sonority that comes from the mouth. The mouth works as

a hinge-organ between the interior and the exterior of the body, between oneself and the others, between oneself and the world.

In the specific field of documentary filmmaking and the essay film, it is crucial to promote discussions around orality and its relationship both with reality and with the image. By inquiring about the connections between the regimes of the visible, the audible, and the sayable, it will be possible to identify coincidences and divergences between image, sound, voice, and words, as they are expressed through associations between thought, experience, body, and reality. Non-fiction cinema provides a suitable framework to integrate these configurations of form and sense and to explore their potential—whether communicative, enunciative, informative, emotional, aesthetic, experimental, poetic, political or identity-based—through different approaches. This allows us to consider images, sounds, oralities and micro-oralities equally important components of audiovisual art. It is therefore mandatory to subvert the traditional subordination of sound to image and move towards these oral and vocal dimensions of film. As a way of playing a part in achieving that task, the current issue of *Comparative Cinema* brings together contributions that explore expressions of non-fiction films in which the “vocal device” is a central concern, either regarding it as a self-reflective voiceover, or through the very materiality or physicality of the oral—to sonically inscribe the speaker’s body into the image.

This issue opens with Laura Rascaroli’s article “Voicing the Border: On Some Spectral Essay Films,” which delves deeper into the author’s research on border image in essay films. Based on Ursula Biemann’s thesis, Rascaroli emphasizes both the auditory nature of the border and the relevance of the voice in the epistemological, political and aesthetic procedures found in three contemporary essay films: *Appunti del passaggio* (Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo, 2014–2016), *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* (*Fantasmata planiountai pano apo tin Evropi*, Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari, 2016), and *An Asian Ghost Story* (九龍東往事, Bo Wang, 2022). Thus, in dialogue with the hauntological interpretations of Derrida’s theory developed by authors such as Avery Gordon and Mark Fisher, Rascaroli conducts an acoustemology of spectral border based on essayist’s translocal, migratory and border-crossing voiceover.

The three following articles revolve around the oral dimension in Belgian self-representational cinema from different approaches and emphases. Two of these essays focus on Chantal Akerman’s filmography, a director whose great exhibition *Facing the Image* remained open from November 2023 until April of this year, at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona. I find

it important to highlight this retrospective because I believe it showcases the synergy between cultural events held in public spaces (such as the city), and their subsequent transfer into academic research—e.g., as seen in this publication of *Comparative Cinema*. This interaction forms a virtuous circle that deserves attention. In “Variations in Minor Mode: The Question of Accent in Akerman’s Cinema,” Mathias Lavin highlights the significance of accent as a core element in the study of the filmic voice. Lavin describes this vocal signature as a latent, often spectral dimension of the body’s constantly shifting presence in the audiovisual image. In line with Hamid Naficy’s ideas around “accented cinema,” Lavin’s article reflects on the ambivalent relationship between denial and the restrained presence of the Belgian accent—specifically the Walloon accent from Brussels—as depicted throughout Akerman’s filmography. This ambiguity can be related both to the filmmaker’s (including her mother, and her Jewish ancestors) geopolitical displacement as a founding experience, as well as to a certain stigma regarding the Belgian accents in the Francophone world and culture.

The second article dedicated to Akerman’s cinema is “Silencios hápticos, ecos de la salmodia y retratos sonoros. Exploraciones del sonido en el cine de Chantal Akerman” [“Haptic Silences, Echoes of Psalmody and Sound Portraits: Explorations of Sound in the Cinema of Chantal Akerman”], by Ariadna Moreno Pellejero, which analyzes the use of voice, sound, and silence deployed in three pieces of the Belgian filmmaker. Moreno presents three different concepts related to each film: the first one, “haptic silences,” is used to describe *D’Est* (1993), and suggests a sound correspondence to the notion of “haptic visuality” developed by Laura Marks. This concept reveals how the alternation between word and silence in Akerman’s cinema provokes a bodily and sensory experience in the viewer. The second concept, “psalmody echoes,” describes the characteristic cadence of psalmody—a kind of sung recitation that is part of the Jewish tradition—as seen in *Là-bas* (2006). Finally, the idea of “sound portraits,” establishes relationships between Akerman’s ethnographic and autoethnographic explorations, based on the sonorous work she developed in *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* (2007).

In this “micro-corpus” dedicated to Belgian/Francophone cinema, the final article is “The Externalization of Mourning: Considering the ‘Grain’ of the Voice in Three Belgian Film Elegies,” written by Guillermo G. Peydró. The author focuses on the analysis of traumatic writing embodied in the spoken word uttered in the voiceovers of three autobiographical documentaries by filmmakers who experience their lives in a bi-rootedness, in the threshold *entre-deux identités* (Sibony 2003); namely, between

two identities, cultures, and languages. According to Naficy (2001) the visible hyphens that separate the double nationalities of certain filmmakers that are representatives of an “accented cinema,” either unites, separates, or repairs a fractured ethnicity. The case studies explored by G. Peydró precisely respond to this premise: *Du verbe aimer* (1984) by Peruvian-Belgian Mary Jiménez; *Scènes de chasse au sanglier* (2007) by Italian-Belgian Claudio Paziienza; and *Quand j’étais dictateur* (2013) by Belgian-Moroccan Yaël André. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ concept of the “grain of the voice” (1977), G. Peydró examines how the pronunciations, intonations, accents, rhythms, etc., reveal the interferences and infiltrations of the body into the voice that guides these film elegies, which mourn the death of a loved one.

The next article takes us to a different continent, yet it continues addressing traumatic memories. It focuses on the resemantization of the voice as a sound archive, registered in oral documents related to human rights violations perpetrated during the Chilean dictatorship. In “‘Hacer hablar’: operaciones de escucha en *Autor material* (2023) y *Las cruces* (2019)” [“‘To Make Speak’: Listening Operations in *Autor material* (2023) and *Las cruces* (2019)”], Catalina Donoso Pinto and Javier Osorio Fernández bring into dialogue two works of documentary nature but of different media. The first work, *Autor material* (Matías Celedón, 2023), is presented as a book/“non-book”—or *more-than-a-book*, as it can be both heard and read—that reconstructs sound file fragments of an audiobook recorded for a library for blind people by a torturer and ex-agent of Pinochet’s secret police while in prison. The second work, *Las cruces* (Teresa Arredondo and Carlos Vásquez, 2019), is organized around the voices of inhabitants who read the judicial files of the massacre committed at a logging plant in the small town of Laja, a few days after the *coup d’état*. Donoso Pinto and Osorio Fernández transfer Benjamin’s concept of the “optical unconscious” to the sound universe, suggesting the idea of an “aural unconscious” that would reveal unexpected meanings emerging from operations that “make speak” the acousmatic voices inscribed in the archives that articulate both works.

Another subtheme addressed in this monograph explores the correspondences between non-fiction films and pioneer expressions of Sound Studies. Avant-garde movements from the early twentieth century (Dadaism, Futurism, sound poetry) innovated in breaking words’ syntax and deconstructing language into phonetic utterances, to give to voice the freedom to create new sonorities, rhythms, and musicality. Building on this legacy, the article “La voz lejos del cuerpo. Estrategias reflexivas en la obra de Gillian Wearing y Valérie Mréjen” [“The Voice Away from the Body: Reflexive Strategies in the Work of Gillian Wearing and

Valérie Mréjen”], by Juan Antonio Cerezuela Zaplana, studies the works of British and French contemporary video artists, exploring the convergences and disparities between the face and voice. Cerezuela Zaplana analyzes three audiovisual desynchronization strategies—lip sync, masking, and repetition—used by the artists to distance, separate, and dissociate the sound-voice from the image-face. Through these techniques, the artists reveal tensions between testimony and performance, concealment and unveiling, embodiment and disembodiment.

The last research article in this section of the dossier is titled “El *Video Joker* como estrategia performativa en el cine de Wakaliwood” [The Video Joker as a Performative Strategy in the Cinema of Wakaliwood]. In this essay, Adrián Sánchez Martínez draws attention to the narrative, enunciative, and performative modes of Uganda’s Video Joker (VJ) Emmie’s commentary in the films of Kampalan autodidact filmmaker, Isaac Nabwana. Originally, the VJ’s role was to translate and explain American action films screened in Uganda, where dubbing or subtitling was unaffordable. Over time, VJs evolved into comedic performers; commentators whose voiceovers not only narrated in real time what was happening in the film but also ironized, interacted, and joked with the audience, turning the screening into a true performative and poietic event. This is evident in Nabwana’s action films, where the narrative and performative device of VJ Emmie’s embodied voice accompanying the projection is also recorded and added to the edit, thereby establishing fertile correspondences between the diegetic and extra-diegetic realms, as well as between fiction and non-fiction. Sánchez Martínez’s interest in the current resurgence of performative subjects such as VJs—an individual who can be considered as a modern version of traditional figures from the early days of silent cinema, such as explainers or *souffleurs*—provides us an unparalleled link to the two texts included in the “Films in Discussion” section of this monograph.

The following section delves into essays written by filmmakers Érik Bullo and Marta Andreu reflecting on their creative processes that led to the *mise en scène* of their “performative films” (Bullo 2021). This type of cinema—its possibilities, scope, and projections—has been the subject of extensive theoretical exploration by Bullo over the past decade, who became a crucial voice in the field. Again, I would like to draw attention to the correlation between the city’s cultural life and its resonance in this issue of *Comparative Cinema*. Thanks to the comprehensive *Cinema Paper*¹ program organized by Filmoteca de Catalunya around Bullo’s work, the French filmmaker travelled regularly to Barcelona, providing me with the opportunity to invite him to contribute to this dossier.

Challenging traditional exhibition formats, *Film Conversation* (2020) by Érik Bulloet and *Cançó d'amor* (2023) by Marta Andreu give prominence to the performativity of voice in spoken or conversational films. These exhibitions combine dialogues, monologues, and recitations with projections, archives, fragments of films and unfinished films. In these unique performative conferences, the directors actively participate with their bodies and voices, to intervene, and expose their thoughts on what cinema is—its current state and future direction. In addition to reflecting on cinema as a living art that combines documentary and fiction, cinema and theatre, both essays include excerpts from the screenplays of these performative films made of (and with) spoken words.

The contributions of this issue of *Comparative Cinema* articulate a rich theoretical and methodological proposal exploring new ways of experiencing documentary cinema by focusing on listening and the voice. These articles invite us to imagine the audiovisual universe “making it speak” with a different voice, accent, pronunciation, performativity. They demonstrate how the vocal device has the potential to foster disclosures in the spoken word, performing borders, embodying emotions, revealing oblique confessions, and embracing ambiguity, polysemy, and free association. The films analyzed in these articles illustrate the power of the voice to destabilize the usual correspondences between seeing and naming, thereby promoting an imaginative encounter with both voice and image, where the oral can develop its own visual potency. As a whole, the dossier emerges as a contribution from non-fiction cinema to the so-called “Acoustic Turn,” stemming from the observed relations and tensions between image and sound, sound and meaning, sound and body, body and voice, voice and word, buccal and vocal, oral and aural.

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1/ The program included an exhibition from September 2013 to January 2024, as well as a series of performative conferences, masterclasses and screenings commented by Bullot. The premiere of his film *Langue des oiseaux* (2021) in Catalunya and the presentation of the second volume of *Apunts de cinema* (edited by Filmoteca de Catalunya) were also part of the program. This second volume encapsulates Bullot's reflections on the possibility of an imagined, expanded, or potential cinema.

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