

34. The event was the International Center of Photography's symposium, "Avant-Garde German Photography: 1919-1939," held at the Guggenheim Museum. Quotations are based on notes.

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## Dis-Embodying the Female Voice

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It is by now axiomatic that the female subject is the object rather than the subject of the gaze in mainstream narrative cinema. She is excluded from authoritative vision not only at the level of the enunciation, but at that of the fiction. At the same time she functions as an organizing spectacle, as the lack which structures the symbolic order and sustains the relay of male glances.<sup>1</sup>

It is equally axiomatic that the female subject as she has been constructed by Hollywood cinema is denied any active role in discourse. The mechanisms of that exclusion are much more complex than those which deny her access to authoritative vision, though, and they warrant a very careful formulation.

Like the male subject, the female subject emerges only within discourse; she knows herself from the place of language, and once inside the symbolic order she has no more access to her biological real than does her masculine counterpart. Both are spoken by discourses and desires which exceed them. However, whereas the male subject has privileges conferred upon him by his relationship to discourse, the female subject is defined as insufficient through hers.

A corollary of this very important difference (and it is at this level that sexual difference must be conceptualized) is that the male subject is granted access to what Foucault calls "discursive fellowships," is permitted to participate in the unfolding of discourse.<sup>2</sup> In other words, he is allowed to occupy the position of the speaking subject—in fiction, and even to some degree in fact. Within dominant narrative cinema the male subject enjoys not only specular but linguistic authority.

The female subject, on the contrary, is associated with unreliable, thwarted, or acquiescent speech. She talks a great deal; it would be a serious mistake to characterize her as silent, since it is in large part through her prattle, her bitchiness, her sweet murmurings, her maternal admonitions and

her verbal cunning that we know her. But her linguistic status is analogous to that of a recorded tape, which endlessly plays back what was spoken in some anterior moment, and from a radically external vantage. The participation of the male subject in the production of discourse may be limited, and contingent upon his "willingness" to identify with the existing cultural order, but the participation of the female subject in the production of discourse is nonexistent.<sup>3</sup>

Classical cinema projects these differences at the formal as well as the thematic level. Not only does the male subject occupy positions of authority within the diegesis, but occasionally he also speaks extra-diegetically, from the privileged place of the Other. The female subject, on the contrary, is excluded from positions of discursive authority both inside and outside the diegesis; she is confined not only to safe places *within* the story (to positions, that is, which come within the eventual range of male vision or audition), but to the safe place *of* the story.<sup>4</sup> Synchronization provides the means of that confinement.

*Prisoner of a sensible appearance, doubly mastered by the camera lens and the gaze of the spectator, the [female] voice is subject to the most rapid of critiques, that of the eye.*

—Pascal Bonitzer<sup>5</sup>

Synchronization functions as a virtual imperative within fiction film. Although the male voice is occasionally permitted to transcend that imperative altogether, and the female voice is from time to time allowed a qualified respite from its rigors, it organizes all sound/image relationships. It is the norm to which those relationships either adhere, or from which they deviate. Since within dominant cinema the image track is cut to the measure of the human form, and the sound track to the measure of the human voice, the rule of synchronization must be understood as referring above all to the smooth alignment of the human form with the human voice—i.e., to the representation of a homogeneous thinking subject whose exteriority is congruent with its interiority. The "marriage" of sound and image is thus performed in the name of homo-centricity, and under Cartesian auspices.

However, the union is less harmonious than it seems. It is based not so much on mutual respect as on mutual antagonism: body and voice are played off against each other in a way calculated narrowly to circumscribe their signifying potential. Both Heath and Bettetini speak of the voice as a device for mastering the body ("Everything that the image shows of its own accord becomes specifically indicated by the words that accompany it and restrict its sense to one or more meanings"),<sup>6</sup> while Bonitzer describes the body as a mechanism for restraining the voice—for diminishing "its resonance, its amplitude, its tendency to stray, its power and its restlessness."<sup>7</sup> Synchronization plays a major part in the production not only of a homo-centric but an

ideologically consistent cinema; by insisting that the body be read through the voice, and the voice through the body, it drastically curtails the capacity of each for introducing into the narrative something heterogeneous or disruptive (it minimizes, that is, the number and kinds of connotations which can be activated).

Like the shot/reverse shot and other elements within the system of suture, synchronization helps to stitch together the fabric of the fiction over the apparatus.<sup>8</sup> It asserts the primacy of the diegetic over the extra-diegetic, creating the illusion that speech arises spontaneously from bodies, and that narrative proceeds from the desires and movements of self-present actants. The promptness with which sounds follow images—their seeming simultaneity—makes the former seem immanent within the latter, rather than the product of a complex enunciation. Script, dialogue coach, the voices of the actors, sound engineer, recording and mixing equipment all fade into oblivion before the impression of "direct" speech.

By deepening the diegesis and concealing the apparatus, synchronization also maintains the viewing/listening subject in a protective darkness and silence. Metz has discussed at length the connections between voyeurism and film viewing ("the obscurity surrounding the onlooker, the aperture of the screen with its inevitable keyhole effect... the spectator's solitude... the segregation of spaces").<sup>9</sup> However, not only does the moviegoer see without being seen; he or she listens without being heard. As Mary Ann Doane observes, "in the fiction film, the use of synchronous dialogue and the voice-off presuppose a spectator who overhears and, overhearing, is unheard and unseen himself."<sup>10</sup> (The synchronic instance is here, as elsewhere, to be distinguished from the voice-over, which not only assumes a listener, but addresses the listener directly, over the "heads" of the characters.)

What has not yet been remarked is that the rule of synchronization is imposed much more strictly on the female than on the male voice within dominant cinema. Although the latter, like the former, is largely limited to diegetic appearances (i.e., to speaking parts which remain "inside" the narrative, even when they are "outside" the frame), and although most of these appearances take the form of synchronous dialogue, it does on occasion manifest itself in both dis-embodied and extra-diegetic ways. In other words, from time to time the male voice speaks from an anonymous and transcendental vantage, "over" the narrative.

Apart from the documentary, where it is almost an institution, the dis-embodied male voice-over occurs most frequently in police thrillers and prison dramas of the "B" variety. The foregrounding of criminality in these films, as well as their rather low production values, would seem to necessitate a kind of "voice on high," whose superior knowledge and diegetic detachment promise eventual justice, despite the vitality of the robbers, the impotence of the cops, and the sleaziness of the *mise-en-scène*. As Bonitzer observes, this

voice is a pure distillate of the law; not only does it "forbid questions about its enunciation, its place and its time," but it speaks with an unqualified authority:

... the voice-over represents a power, that of disposing of the image and of that which it reflects from a place which is absolutely other. Absolutely other and absolutely indeterminable. In this sense, transcendent. ... In so far as it arises from the field of the Other, the voice-off is assumed to know: such is the essence of its power.<sup>11</sup>

The capacity of the male subject to be cinematically represented in this disembodied form aligns him with transcendence, authoritative knowledge, potency and the law—in short, with the symbolic father. Since these are the qualities to which he most aspires at the narrative level, but which he never altogether approximates, we could say that the male subject finds his most ideal realization when he is heard but not seen; when the body (what Lacan would call the "pound of flesh" which must be mortgaged in man's relationship to the signifier)<sup>12</sup> drops away, leaving the phallus in unchallenged possession of the scene. Thus, despite its rather rare occurrence in the fiction film, the dis-embodied voice-over can be seen as "exemplary" for male subjectivity, attesting to an achieved invisibility, omniscience and discursive power.

It would be schematically gratifying to say that the female subject finds her most ideal representation when she is seen but not heard. However, as I indicated above, the female voice plays an important part in classical cinema, serving as the means by which she is established as occupying the positions of mother, siren, patient, innocent, etc. Mark Rutland, for instance, does not attempt to silence Marnie in the film of the same title; on the contrary, he extorts speech from her, using it first as a tool of diagnosis, and then as a device for inserting her into a more orthodox subject-position. The female voice serves a similar function in *Snake Pit* and *A Woman's Face*. The first of these, which dramatizes the rehabilitation of a female inmate in a mental institution, contains the memorable line: "Oh, you've talked—you're going to get well now, I know you will." The second, which is structured around a courtroom scene in which a woman is on trial for murder, concludes happily when that woman speaks the desires which she has previously escaped ("I've always wanted to get married. ... I want a home and children, to go to the market and cheat the butcher. ... I want to belong to the human race").

Lola Montes, most writerly of "woman's films," suggests that it would be more correct to say that ideally the female subject is both *over-seen* and *over-heard*, and that as a consequence of this system of double surveillance she is spoken even when she seems to be in control of her own speech. Lola pays for her notorious past, in which she exercised power rather than submitting to it, by playing not only to the eye but to the ear of an all-male circus audience. The story which she tells "in her own inimitable words"

belongs to Mammoth Circus, "copyright reserved"; when she forgets her lines the ringmaster prompts her, bending her voice to the contours of the confession he has scripted for her. He even determines which of the audience's questions she is to answer. Lola is the prototype of the female subject within dominant narrative film, an extension both of male vision and male discourse.

Both constituents of the surveillance system—visual and auditory—must be in effect in order for it to be successful. To permit the female subject to be seen without being heard would be to activate the hermeneutic and cultural codes which define woman as a "dark continent," inaccessible to definitive male interpretation. To allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which mainstream cinema relies; it would put her beyond the control of the male gaze, and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze sustains. It would be to open the possibility of woman participating in a phallic discourse, and so escaping the interrogation about her place, her time and her desires which constantly re-secures her. (See Teresa de Lauretis' article on *Bad Timing* in this volume.) Indeed, to dis-embodify the female subject in this way would be to challenge every conception by means of which we have previously known her, since it is precisely *as body* that she is constructed.

If, as I proposed a moment ago, male subjectivity is most fully realized when it is most invisible—when it approaches a kind of theological threshold—female subjectivity is most fully achieved when it is most visible. Through a kind of paradox, the male subject, with his "strikingly visible" organ, is defined primarily in terms of abstract and immaterial qualities (potency, power, knowledge, etc.) whereas the female subject, whose organ does not appeal to the gaze, becomes almost synonymous with the corporeal and the specular.

It is of course precisely what is invisible to a symbolic order which is organized around the phallus—that which the symbolic order can only perceive as an absence or lack—which threatens to escape its structuration, and to return as heterogeneity or a foreclosed real. Hence the fascination with the female body, the concern to construct it in ways which are accessible to the gaze and to hear it attest in a familiar language to dominant values.

Thus (with the exception of music) there are no instances within mainstream cinema where the female voice is not matched up in some way, even if only retrospectively, with the female body. For the most part woman's speech is synchronized with her image, and even when it is transmitted as a voice-off the divorce is only temporary; the body connected to the female voice is understood to be in the next room, just out of frame, at the other end of a telephone line. In short, it is always fully recoverable.

The female voice almost never functions as a voice-over, and when it does it enjoys a comparable status to the male voice-over in film noir—i.e., it is autobiographical, evoking in a reminiscent fashion the diegesis which constitutes the film's "present," a diegesis within which the speaker figures centrally. Lisa's narration in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, which provides one of the most extended voice-overs in classical cinema, is a case in point. Not only is it at every point anchored to a specific female body, but the temporal interval which separates it from that body constantly diminishes as the film unfolds. Moreover, Lisa speaks to a male auditor (Stephan) whose willingness to read her letter activates its discourse. In a sense what we *hear* is what he *overhears*; her voice is his mental construction. (In the same way, what we see is what he imagines, as the final, montage flashback makes clear.) Lisa's narration is obedient to Stephan's desires, to his ear.

Not surprisingly, feminist cinema has focused an enormous amount of attention on the female voice. Three examples from New German Cinema suggest that this is true not only of experimental work, but also of documentary and even more conventionally narrative films. Helga Reidemeister's documentary, *Apropos of Fate*, is in large part the deployment of cinema by the female members of a family for the express purpose of talking through their relationships to each other, men, work and the social order. The director participates in this conversation, but her dis-embodied status—the fact that she remains "pure" voice—indicates the irreducible distance which separates her, both as an effect of the apparatus and as someone external to the family, from the pro-filmic event. Helke Sander's *All-Round Reduced Personality* utilizes an anonymous female voice-over to situate the work and personal problems of a woman photographer (Etta) within the context of West Berlin politics and culture, a device which emphasizes the general fragmentation to which the central character is subjected (since that voice remains so close to Etta, we are encouraged to think of it as something of her own from which she has become alienated).

Jutta Bruckner introduces *Hunger Years* with an autobiographical voice-over which enjoys an unusual relationship with the image track: the film's narrative concludes with the apparent suicide of its female protagonist, a suicide prompted by her inability either to tolerate or to break with the maternal legacy—with the legacy, that is, of classical female subjectivity forcibly bequeathed to her by her mother. However, both the profound pessimism of the larger text and the finality of the act of self-destruction with which it concludes, are qualified by the introductory voice-over, which speaks about survival, transformation, escape. That voice converts the images of a highly ritualized suicide into metaphors of rupture and change—in short, it de-literalizes them.

It is in feminist avant-garde practice, though, that the female voice has been most exhaustively interrogated and most innovatively deployed. A statement by Laura Mulvey in an interview about *Riddles of the Sphinx* can be taken as an epigraph to this practice:

... there is an important theme: the difficulties of women being articulate and putting emotion or thought into words. In *Riddles*, I think, I felt the time had come not to deal with that kind of silence which so many in the women's movement had felt and talked about, a kind of cultural silence essentially. Having taken that as a fact, one had to go ahead and try to fill in the gaps and think of what ways one would give voice to female desires.<sup>13</sup>

However, whereas *Riddles of the Sphinx* attempts to exhume a female voice which has been repressed by patriarchy, but which has nevertheless remained intact for thousands of years at some unconscious level, the films about which I would like to talk for the remainder of this essay function more as a series of responses to cultural "givens" about female subjectivity. In other words, rather than searching for a pre-symbolic female language, they confine themselves to an examination of the place of the female voice within the existing discursive field.

In each case that examination involves the dislocation of the sound from the image track. Indeed, all of these films—*Misconception*, *Film About a Woman Who*, *Dora*, *News From Home*, *Empty Suitcases* and *Journeys From Berlin/71*—resort in one way or another to the principle of non-synchronization, devising various strategies for divorcing the female voice from the female body. *Journeys From Berlin/71* makes clearer than any of the other films precisely what is at stake in this disassociation of sound and image: the freeing-up of the female voice from its obsessive and indeed exclusive reference to the female body, a reference which turns woman—in representation and in fact—back upon herself, in a negative and finally self-consuming narcissism.

Perhaps the simplest strategy for challenging the imperative of synchronization, especially insofar as it provides the support for sexual difference, is the alignment of the female voice with a male body, or that of a male voice with a female body. This is the strategy employed by Marjorie Keller at a key moment of *Misconception*, a film which is devoted to the exploration of the three-way relationship between the male voice, the female voice and the female body.

*Misconception*, which records the birth of the filmmaker's niece, uses heavily edited documentary footage to dispell the myth that childbirth is not only painless but a kind of *jouissance*. Shots from the delivery room are intercut with both interior and exterior shots of the wife, the husband and their son taken at an earlier moment in the pregnancy. The sounds from one context are often connected with the images from the other, but no extra-diegetic information is introduced.

The film's complex ironies are produced primarily through the juxtaposition of the mother's voice and image with the voices of the husband and doctor. Indeed, the pregnant woman's voice is edited more at the level of the documentary "fiction" than at that of the enunciation, by the verbal pressure of those two men. She is encouraged to emit only those sounds—linguistic and paralinguistic—which belong to the sanctioned discourse of motherhood. The cries of childbirth enjoy a particularly prominent place here, as does a telephone conversation immediately after delivery in which the mother expresses her pleasure that "it's a girl." Contradictory statements are usually interrupted or corrected. When she confesses, for instance, that if she had it to do over again, she wouldn't have become a mother, her husband firmly responds that she is forgetting the "joys" of her position.

The chief expositor of these joys is the doctor, who, after the successful delivery of the second child, speaks almost orphically about the agents of childbirth:

Those who feel they've done perfectly, they'll feel godlike. They might feel actual ecstasy and look back on it as having transcended. If they are critical the worst that happens is that they recognize they are human beings, that they feel pain, may react other than perfectly, in their own eyes that is, to pain.

But the image track belies this mystical interpretation of childbirth, showing us blood, tissue, the umbilical cord, the afterbirth: signifiers of suffering and toil. It also dramatizes the failure of the spectatorial paradigm by means of which the doctor defines motherhood—a paradigm which demands of the female subject that she "look" at her body and its response to labor in order to determine whether or not she is "perfect."

The failure of that paradigm is anticipated earlier in the film, when the voice of the pregnant woman takes exception to an article in *Esquire* addressed to the topic of childbirth: "I think there is a lot of difference between men's view of having a baby and a woman's. . . . A woman's view is that I just want to make it as easy as possible. . . . and a man's view is that it shouldn't hurt to begin with." Non-synchronization thus occurs within the diegetic as well as the extra-diegetic discourse; not only do the images in the delivery room not correspond to the doctor's voice-off, but the female subject refuses to look at herself from the place which is prescribed for her, insisting instead on the disequivalence between her own self-image and that projected for her by the discourse of motherhood.

In an interview with the *Camera Obscura* Collective, Yvonne Rainer suggests that one of the central projects of *Film About a Woman Who* is the establishment of a dialectical relationship between sound and image, the replacement of synchronization with counterpoint:

. . . I was . . . concerned with interweaving psychological and formal content, i.e. with images being 'filled up' or 'emptied' by readings or their absence, with text and speech being 'illustrated' to varying degrees by images. This made for a situation where the story came and went, sometimes disappearing altogether as in the extreme prolongation of certain soundless images. . . . I was trying to make a silent film with occasional sound.<sup>14</sup>

These remarks are indicative not so much of an impulse to privilege image over sound as the desire to interrupt their conventional and mutually impoverishing marriage, to establish different lines of communication between them. The female subject is seen as having a particular stake in the reconceptualization of the relationship between cinema's two tracks.

*Film About a Woman Who* resorts to a number of devices for dislodging the female voice from the female image. One of these devices, which is taken even further in *Kristina Talking Pictures*, is the delineation of more than one female body to which story and speech can be "pinned." The automatic signifying transfer from a particular female voice to a particular female image is thus frustrated; the semic code is rendered inoperative by the absence of a proper name, a stable visual representation, and a predictable cluster of attributes.

The film's reliance upon voice-over and intertitles further denaturalizes the female voice, also contributing to the jamming of the semic code. The episode entitled "Emotional Accretion in 48 Steps" utilizes both of these strategies, as well as periods of complete silence. It also makes startlingly evident what is at issue for woman in the avoidance of synchronized sound.

In this episode a man and a woman lie in bed together, sometimes turning towards each other and sometimes away. Each movement or gesture is separated by a number introducing a new "step," some of which include intertitles and others of which do not. The intertitles narrate rather than offering direct dialogue, substituting the pronouns "he" and "she" for "you" and "I."

The intrusion of a fragmented but nonetheless intensely psychological narrative into a cinematic system which provides none of the usual supports for viewer identification results in a good deal of free-floating anxiety. The woman who tosses and turns on the bed, and who is described as first wanting to tell the man to go and then deciding to demand his attention, seems to be constrained by a discourse (the discourse of the "affair") within which she is not entirely comfortable, and to which moreover she does not entirely accede. The use of the pronoun "she," and of an indirect rather than a direct construction, indicates her unwillingness fully to activate her own subjectivity within that discourse, an event which, as Benveniste tells us, requires the articulation of the first-person pronoun.<sup>15</sup>

The climactic moment in this episode involves precisely such an articulation. In the only use of synchronized sound in any of the 48 steps, the woman asks: "Would you hold me?" The contradiction between the discourse to which she here accedes and her own desires is indicated in steps 43 through 48, where we read:

She arrives home. She is very angry. She knows the crucial moment was when she said "hold me." Somehow she had betrayed herself. She hadn't wanted to be held. (Do you think she could figure her way out of a paper bag?) She had wanted to bash his fucking face in.<sup>16</sup>

The convergence of synchronization and the first-person pronoun ("me") is highly significant, emphasizing the part played by the former in the production of a coherent, stable and "manageable" subject. *Film About a Woman Who* shows the alignment of image and sound to be an agency of entrapment, one of the means by which the female subject emerges within a discourse contrary to her desires, submits at least temporarily to a fixed identity.

Weinstock, Pajackowska, Tyndall and McCall's film, *Sigmund Freud's Dora*, does not at any juncture actually disengage the female voice from the female image. Indeed, it employs synchronized sound throughout. However, by overtly and literally appropriating the text of Freud's case study, and by introducing footage from "adult" movies and television advertisements, it creates a space between its female voices and the words they speak, a space which shows those words to proceed from a source external to them. In short, the film foregrounds a number of discourses by means of which female subjectivity is presently constituted.

It also suggests—and this may be its most important contribution—that the female voice plays a vital (albeit passive) role in at least two of these discourses: psychoanalysis and advertising. It indicates, that is, that these two discourses require a female subject who speaks about herself in rigorously codified ways, who implicates her body at every turn of phrase. *Sigmund Freud's Dora* thus demonstrates that for psychoanalysis and advertising, as for cinema, the ideal female subject is one who permits herself to be heard as well as seen, who participates in the discursive alignment of her body with male desire (that of the father, Herr K, Freud), commodities (liquid Tylenol, F.D.S. deodorant), and the scopophilic drive, always testifying to the excellence of the "fit."

The concluding section of the film adds a voice which has been conspicuously absent from its earlier sections, as from Freud's case study—that of the mother. Once again the female voice is oddly disassociated from the words it utters; in fact, this sequence indicates more clearly than any of the others that the female voice is, within the existing social order, a reading voice, one which repeats what has always already been written or spoken elsewhere. However,

a series of disruptions at the discursive level effectively frees the female voice from any signifying relationship to the words she articulates. The mother, whose image remains stable but whose identity is put into extreme flux towards the end of the film (she could be the psychotic housewife, the grandmother, the woman both Herr K and Dora's father "got nothing out of," the image of the madonna, the mother Dora sought in her brother, the real or the symbolic mother) reads aloud from a group of postcards written by a daughter whose own identity remains equally indeterminate. Although that daughter is also called Dora, she is not always—as Jane Weinstock observes—a resident of the same century:

...the postcards could not have the same return address. The early letters seem to be sent by a 19th century daughter, very much like Freud's Dora, and the later ones by a 1970's feminist, also named Dora. Moreover, the 19th century Dora's postcards of twentieth century pornography set up a literal contradiction. The spectator, already uprooted by a shifting address, is now split between centuries...<sup>17</sup>

The proper name thus no longer serves as the locus for a relatively stable cluster of attributes, but is itself the site of an extreme temporal and discursive division.

Chantal Akerman uses the letter-reading device as a means for introducing an even more radically split subjectivity into one of her films. She inscribes both a mother and a daughter into *News From Home* through a voice which at no juncture meshes with the images we see, images of New York City. That voice reads aloud letters sent to New York from a mother who remains in Belgium, and it is defined only as the receiving point for this maternal address.

Its formal status is also extremely ambiguous. Because it is dis-embodied it is technically a voice-over of the transcendental variety, but it has none of the authority or appeal to superior knowledge which are the usual attributes of that device. In fact, it is often drowned out by the noises of the city, and because of the monotony of its message we only periodically attend to it. Moreover, it at no point connects with the image track, either as diegetic complement or metalanguage. Whereas the former depicts a sultry Manhattan, the latter dwells persistently on the domestic situation back "home," in Belgium.

Finally, we are asked to distinguish between the voice itself and the words it utters, a distinction which the classic text would work hard to erase. To begin with, this voice has a very definite flavor or grain, in contrast to the carefully standardized voice used in documentaries and police thrillers. To its qualities of youthfulness and softness the English version of *News From Home* adds foreignness, for it speaks with a strong Belgian accent. Dis-embodied though it is, Barthes would say that this voice engages the flesh

("The 'grain' is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue").<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, the words "belong" to the mother, and the voice to the daughter, which is another way of saying that they represent very diverse points of view. In her own gloss on the largely autobiographical *News From Home* Akerman emphasizes that diversity; she describes her mother, source of the film's words, as an uneducated woman who has never been to America, and whose entire existence revolves around her tightly integrated family. Each detail underscores the daughter's distance from the home front:

My mother wrote me love-letters, and that was marvelous. With her own words. . . . My mother didn't learn to write, she quit school at 11, and then there was the war. She writes as she can, she formulates her feelings in an unsophisticated way, they really reflect her. If she were more sophisticated, she wouldn't have dared to ask me all the time 'When are you coming back? You know very well that we love you, you know that we miss you.' She wouldn't have dared, she would have said it by a thousand 'detours.' But she's not sophisticated, she used the words she had, so she had a more direct relationship.<sup>19</sup>

The film indicates the same thing through its non-continuous sound and image tracks: the claustal and repetitive quality of the mother's phrases contrasts markedly with the detachment and open-endedness of the cinematography and editing, which are here signifiers of the daughter's "outlook" on the world.

There is never, however, any implied hierarchy between these two points of view. Nor is there any implied hierarchy between the New York we see, and the Belgium we hear. Fundamentally, the letters which the daughter reads and the city which she visits belong to two different discourses, neither of which is capable of "containing" her. We hear her voice reading one, and we participate in her vision of the other, but she remains on the edges of each. Significantly, all of the film's shots, with the exception of those inside the subway system, are exterior, and the final one leaves us stranded in the New York harbor, neither "here" nor "there."

The dis-embodied voice of *News From Home* anticipates what might be called the "traveling" voice of *Empty Suitcases*. This film, like *Kristina Talking Pictures* and *Film About a Woman Who*, frustrates the spectator's attempts to connect the sound and image tracks by projecting a diversity of female bodies, any one of which could be the "heroine." However, the real mobility of the film—not just the shift from one female representation to another, but the movement from one city to another, and one discourse to another—is an effect of the sound track.

Near the beginning of *Empty Suitcases* we journey back and forth from New York to Chicago dozens of times in the space of five minutes, as a female

voice reads aloud from a stack of postcards, some of which are addressed from one of those cities, and some from the other. Even more spectacular are the transits from one melodramatic mode to another—from the subject-position of the suffering artist to that of the rejected professor, the angry mistress, the terrorist, the teller of oedipal dreams. Filmmaker Bette Gordon negotiates these constant relocations through a multiplicity of female voices and discursive strategies, including not only the voice-over but the voice-off, synchronized dialogue and monologue, and musical lyrics.

It is through the last of these aural modes that *Empty Suitcases* makes both its wittiest and perhaps its most important statement about the female voice. In the episode in question a woman lies on a bed lip-synching the words to the Billie Holiday song, "All of me." Although there is a perfect match of the movements of the woman's lips with the lyrics we hear, it is belied by the complete dis-equivalence between her facial expression and the affect of the music; she remains completely impassive as Holiday's voice reaches ever new crescendos of masochistic ardor. The song is ostensibly about a woman's complete surrender of herself to her lover, but it takes the form of a series of auto-references. Holiday's voice offers up her body piece by piece, in an elaborate dismemberment ("Take my lips. . . take my arms. . . you took my heart, so why not take all of me?").

This sequence points to the intimate connection between the synchronization of the female voice with the female image in classical cinema, and the semiotics of self-reference which it habitually promotes in its women viewers and listeners. That semiotics, which obliges the female voice to signify the female body, and the female body to signify lack, isolates the female subject from effective political action, prevents her from making investments in a new social order, and guarantees that she will remain in the same place.

These issues are treated at much greater length in what is unquestionably the most remarkable deployment of female voices within the feminist avant-garde, if not within the whole of experimental cinema: Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys From Berlin/71*. Two of its many voices—those of the "patient," also called Annette, and that belonging to Rainer herself—are synchronized with the image track, while a third—that of the female analyst—connects up with a woman's back. Two other female voices remain completely dis-embodied, although the persona represented by each is evoked with extraordinary vividness. These voices "belong" to an adolescent girl, and to an adult woman who is engaged simultaneously in a conversation about political violence and the preparations for a meal.

One other voice must be included in this list, although it derives from a man. This last voice could best be characterized as a dirty phone-caller, but during his longest and most persistent intrusion he delivers one of the film's most important female monologues:



My daddy called me Cookie. I'm really a good girl. I'll go along with anything as long as you'll like me a little. I'll even promise not to bring up all that business about being such a low element, such primeval slime, such an amoeba, such an edible *thing*. I'm not one for fussing. Not like those movie women: Katy Hepburn facing the dawn in her posh pad with stiff upper chin. Merle Oberon facing the Nazi night with hair billowing in the electric breeze. Roz Russell sockin' the words 'n' the whiskey to the best of them. Rita Hayworth getting shot in the mirror and getting her man. Jane Wyman smiling through tears. I never faced the music, much less the dawn; I stayed in bed. I never socked anything to anybody; why rock the boat? I never set out to get my man, even in the mirror; they all got me. I never smiled through my tears; I choked down my terror. I never had to face the Nazis, much less their night. Not for me that succumbing in the great task because it must be done; not for me the heart beating in incomprehensible joy; not for me the vicissitudes of class struggle; not for me the uncertainties of political thought. . . .<sup>20</sup>

The dirty phone-caller speaks from the position of the traditional female viewer; "her" voice registers the subjectivity conferred upon women by classical cinema—a subjectivity which is the effect of a masochistic misrecognition. Rita Hayworth, Katharine Hepburn, Merle Oberon, Rosalind Russell and Jane Wyman (both as stars and as characters) provide some of the ideal representations by means of which that misrecognition occurs, propelling the female viewer into a negative narcissism.<sup>21</sup>

Images of the kind cited above both structure and exceed the female viewer; indeed, they structure largely through excess, through the elaboration of hyperbolic spectacle. The felt inadequacy of the female subject in the face of these ideal images induces in her an intense self-loathing. At the same time it is impossible for her simply to turn away from them, to retreat into herself, since she has only a relational identity, knows herself only through representation. Her inability either to approximate or transcend the mirror in which she sees herself as the dim reflection of a luminous original locks her into a deadly narcissism, one more conducive of self-hatred than self-love. It must further be noted that each of the movie citations enumerated by the dirty phone-caller constitutes a masochistic inscription. Each glamorizes pain, renunciation, death. Classical cinema thus overdetermines the production of a docile and suffering female subject.

*Journeys From Berlin/71* explores the relationship of subjectivity to the existing symbolic order not only through the voice of the dirty phone-caller but through those of the adolescent girl, the patient, the cooking woman and the director herself. Each is located within a context in which women have traditionally been encouraged to talk, contexts which structure and circumscribe their subjectivity. Thus the adolescent girl addresses her diary, the patient her analyst, the cooking woman the man with whom she presumably lives, and Rainer her mother. Each of these discourses is characterized by a

high degree of reflexivity; although they all probe the relationship between the personal and the social, the accent falls increasingly on the first of those terms. Toward the end of the film the four voices converge more and more, until they finally seem to be participating in the same narcissistic speech.

The diary entries read aloud by the voice of the adolescent girl range across a wide variety of topics. However, the self is a constant point of reference. The first entry describes a number of events whose common denominator is that they induce in the writer what she calls the "chills" or the "shivers." Subsequent entries return obsessively to the feelings evoked in the adolescent girl by other people and things. The one dated Friday, September 28 is symptomatic:

The tears are here again. Brush them away. Something just happened. Mama just finished listening to one of those one-hour dramas, a real tragedy. She said, "I shouldn't listen to those stories, they really move me too much. But I don't know what else to do with my time." And the tears came. Sometimes I feel an overwhelming tenderness for her. I don't know if it's love. Right now I am being strangely moved by my feeling for her.

The object is virtually eclipsed in this libidinal economy, whose extensions are all circular.<sup>22</sup>

Events in the external world function as signifiers of the self in much the same way in the patient's discourse. Vietnam provides material for masturbatory fantasies, Samuel Beckett finds his way into a story about shopping in Bloomingdale's and the defeat of the patient's hard-won independence, and statistics about political prisoners lead to the seemingly unconnected observation that "rejection and disappointment are the two things that I've always found impossible to take." The most breathtaking assimilation of the public into the private is effected during a reverie about the body:

Some people don't seem to notice their own body changes. . . . I can predict exactly where new pressures of clothing will occur the next day— buttocks, thighs, belly, breasts—what new topography will appear on my face: creases and barrows as conspicuous as the scars slashed by two world wars into the soil of Europe.

Here all of twentieth-century history and a large portion of the world's geography yield metaphoric precedence to a woman's face and figure, and to the self-loathing of which they are the distillate. The patient's voice is synchronized to her image in more ways than one.

The voice associated with kitchen noises speaks about virtually nothing but women anarchists and revolutionaries, reading at length from their letters. However, when asked whether she has read the political writings of Emma Goldman, she responds: "No, I have a collection of her essays, but all I've read is her autobiography." Moreover, towards the end of the film this



voice talks a good deal about the difficulty she has always experienced in empathizing with oppressed groups. Instead, she gravitates toward radical "stars," ideal representations which frustrate rather than assist her desire to transcend traditional female subjectivity. Like classical cinema's exemplary woman viewer, she both identifies with the suffering of these ideal representations, and defines herself as lacking through them (thus whereas the figures she most admires all heroically subordinate the personal to the political, she herself despairs of even achieving "correct social behavior"). *Journeys From Berlin/71* draws attention to the similarities between these two sets of images when it shows the female analyst looking through a stack of photographs in which Jane Wyman and Rita Hayworth coexist with Vera Figner, Ulrike Meinhof and Vera Zasulich.

Finally, there is the voice—and the image—of Yvonne Rainer, speaking from Europe to her mother about a movie she has just seen, a movie filmed in Berlin before the war. Rainer talks about how affected she and the other viewers were by the shots of a city which no longer exists. Again the emphasis falls on the feelings evoked in the female subject by external occurrences, on sentiment rather than history or the social order. The auto-referentiality of all these voices is periodically accentuated by the appearance against a black background of rolling white titles providing facts and figures about West German postwar politics, i.e., by a discourse traditionally associated with values of "objectivity" and "neutrality," as well as by the interpolation at the level of the sound track of other, more strident political statements and accounts (here excerpts from a letter written by Ulrike Meinhof to Hannah Krabbe about the necessity of resisting prison psychiatrification).

In the general conversation about narcissism to which all of the female voices contribute during the last third of the film, a conversation which often occurs simultaneously on several registers, the adolescent girl confesses:

Everything I've written has been put down for the benefit of some potential reader. It is a titanic task to be frank with myself. I fear my own censure. Even my thoughts sometimes appear to my consciousness in a certain form for the benefit of an imaginary mind-reader. And strangely enough, I am that reader of these pages; I am that reader of this mind. I have very strong impressions of my childhood "acting." Up to a few years ago, whenever I was alone I would "perform." I didn't think I did anything unusual or dramatic at these times, but the things I did do I did with the thought in mind that I was being watched. Now this reaction is becoming more and more unconscious, having been transmitted to my actions, speech, writing, and my thoughts. This last is the most unfortunate of all.

What this female voice records is the internalization of the specular and auditory regime upon which classical cinema relies, and which it helps to perpetuate within the larger cultural order. The notion of performance is of

course an important one in all of Rainer's films, but in *Journeys From Berlin/71* it gains new resonance.<sup>23</sup> It becomes a metaphor for female subjectivity, for the interiorization of discursive demands which must be met at every moment of psychic existence, and which carry out the functions of over-seeing and over-hearing the ego even in the most solitary of situations. The rigors of that performance are so severe that they leave the female subject with no capacity for struggle on any other front, and result in extreme cases in suicide.

*Journeys From Berlin/71* engages in a relentless expose not only of the female voice, but of the psychic mechanisms which operate it, and the symbolic field of which they are an extension. It suggests that by taking into herself the power-relations which organize the existing cultural order the female subject can never be anything but smoothly aligned with it—that her speech and her image will always be perfectly synchronized not only with each other, but with those discourses which are dominant at any given moment. The invocation by the woman analyst of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* is not coincidental, since it is there that we find the most chilling account of a condition which may be pathological for the male subject, but represents the norm for the female subject—that condition of negative narcissism which blights her relations both with herself and her culture:

The patient represents [her] ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; [she] reproaches [herself], vilifies [herself] and expects to be cast out and punished. [She] abases [herself] before everyone and commiserates [her] own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy. . . [she] declares that [she] was never any better.<sup>24</sup>

*Journeys From Berlin/71* does more than deconstruct this closed theater of female subjectivity; it also points beyond. Not only does it detach voice from body, interrupting in the process the coherence upon which the performance relies, and revealing the degree to which the former has been obliged to talk about and regulate the latter, but in its final moments it involves its female speakers in a choric repudiation of ideal images and self-hatred. It also broaches, in a tentative and fragmentary manner, the possibility of moving beyond masochism toward externally directed action—the possibility, that is, of political struggle: "one might conceivably take greater risks. . . in using one's power. . . for the benefit of others. . . resisting inequities close at hand."

## NOTES

1. See in particular Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18; Linda Williams, "Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions," *Ciné-Tracts*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Winter 1981), pp. 19-34, and "When the Woman Looks" (in this volume, pp. 83-99); Teresa de Lauretis, "Through the Looking Glass," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 187-202; and Sandy Flitterman, "Woman, Desire and the Look: Feminism and the Enunciative Apparatus in Cinema," *Ciné-Tracts*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1978), pp. 63-68.
2. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan-Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), Foucault speaks of "'fellowships' of discourse, whose function is to preserve or to reproduce discourse, but in order that it should circulate within a closed community, according to strict regulation, without those in possession being dispossessed by this very distribution." (p. 225.)
3. For a more extended discussion of the connections between sexual difference and discourse, see my "Histoire d'O: The Story of a Disciplined and Punished Body," *Enclitic*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1983).
4. Stephen Heath describes the insertion of the voice into the diegesis as its preservation within a "safe place," and adds that this place is carefully maintained in the fiction film (see "Narrative Space," *Screen*, vol. 17, no. 3 [Autumn 1976], p. 100).
5. Pascal Bonitzer, *Le Regard et la voix* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1976), p. 30.
6. In "Body, Voice," (in *Questions of Cinema* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981]) Stephen Heath writes "the sound cinema is the development of a powerful standard of the body and of the voice as hold of the body in image, the voice literally ordered and delimited as speech for an intelligibility of the body..." (p. 191); Gianfranco Bettetini, *The Language and Technique of the Film*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), p. 161.
7. Bonitzer, p. 30.
8. "Suture" designates any cinematic element which encourages the viewer/listener's identification with fictional characters and narrative progression. The shot/reverse shot formation has been seen by many theoreticians as virtually synonymous with the system of suture, functioning as it often does to align a character who looks with the supposed object of that character's gaze. Such an alignment organizes the spectator's point of view around character, and inspires in him or her the desire for the next shot, i.e., for more narrative. For a fuller treatment of the system of suture, see Chapter 5 of my *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
9. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Summer 1975), p. 64.
10. Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980), p. 43. See also "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, pp. 47-56.

11. Bonitzer, p. 33.
12. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," trans. James Hulbert, *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56 (1977), p. 28.
13. "An Interview with Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen on *Riddles of the Sphinx*," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 4/5 (1979), p. 24.
14. "Yvonne Rainer: Interview," *Camera Obscura*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1976), p. 89.
15. In *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971) Emile Benveniste writes that "Language is... the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity and discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. In some way language puts forth 'empty' forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to his 'person,' at the same time defining himself as *I* and a partner as *you*. The instance of discourse is thus constitutive of all coordinates that define the subject, and of which we have briefly pointed out only the most obvious (i.e., pronouns, verb forms, etc.)." (p. 227.)
16. See *October* 2 (1976), pp. 39-67 for the script of *Film About a Woman Who*.
17. Jane Weinstock, "Sigmund Freud's *Dora*?" *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1981), p. 73.
18. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 182.
19. Christina Creveling, "Chantal Akerman," *Camera Obscura*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1977), p. 137.
20. All quotations from *Journeys From Berlin/71* are taken from the complete, unpublished script.
21. For a fuller and somewhat different discussion of this condition, see my "Hamlet and the Common Theme of Fathers," *Enclitic*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1979), pp. 106-121.
22. A passage quoted in *Journeys From Berlin/71* from Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" suggests that melancholia (or negative narcissism, as I prefer to call it) always involves the loss of any external object: "The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object—if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego's original reaction to objects in the external world... In the two opposed situations of being most intensely in love and of suicide the ego is overwhelmed by the object, though in totally different ways." (In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey [London: Hogarth Press, 1953], Vol. XIV, p. 252.)
23. B. Ruby Rich treats this metaphor at some length in *Yvonne Rainer* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1981).
24. Freud, p. 246.