



Becoming-Voice: The Female-Animal Sonic Entanglement

Annalisa Pellino, Department of Communication, Arts and Media, IULM University, Milan, annalisa.pellino@iulm.it

The video essay explores the materiality of voice in *Attenberg* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010) and *Le sorelle Macaluso* (Emma Dante, 2020). Both films foreground the performative side of cinematic language, revealing how the painful experience of absence and death affects bodies and voices producing different *degrees of muteness*.





Creator's Statement

Voice in cinema lends itself to a wide range of uses. It holds a paradoxical status between embodiment and disembodiment, simultaneously inside and outside language and body, phonation and relation. The video essay focuses on this ambiguity, highlighting its importance in the representation and construction of meaning—which lies phenomenologically within the body and personal experience, and precedes words and semiosis. By comparing the use of voice in *Attenberg* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010) and *Le sorelle Macaluso* (Emma Dante, 2020), I interpret it as a wound within both the films' and the spectator's body. This wound has both audiovisual and metaphorical meanings; indeed, in both films, female characters experience the illness and death of their relatives, and their vocal gestures are symptoms of an *emotional impairment*, herein considered as a fundamental dimension of human experience (Sterne 2021), as well as of a relational disability resulting from the painful effort of coping with the loss and disappearance of their loved ones.

The editing strategy pursues two lines of analysis. The first concentrates on modes of expression rather than dialogue, focusing on the materiality of voice and exploring its heuristic value for interpreting the relationship between image and sound. It concentrates on a number of non-semantic vocal expressions, which embody a radical sonic entanglement between *minor forms* of existence, female and animal. According to Deleuze and Guattari, they manifest as pure sonic material and “pure intensity” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 71) of animality, capable of disarticulating language and

social stereotypes. They argue that becoming-woman is the first manifestation and the precondition of becoming-minor, a process enabled by the voice, understood here as a “line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 69). “Is it not first through the voice that one becomes animal?”, ask the philosophers (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 4).

Accordingly, a second line of analysis concentrates on the idea of female-animal sonic entanglement, insofar as the women maintain a special relationship with their animal counterparts. Marina (Ariane Labed), the main character of *Attenberg*, loves watching Sir David Attenborough documentaries, imitating the animals’ corporeal expressiveness and voices with sophisticated mimicry, contagiously extending this to her best friend and her father, a cancer patient. Similarly, the Macaluso Sisters are orphans who raise doves to hire out to wedding organizers, maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the birds to the extent that they know the doves will always return home. Their fragile bond is threatened first by the accidental death of Antonella (Viola Pusateri), the youngest sister, and then by the death of Maria (Simona Malato), caused by cancer. Ultimately, a Mediterranean sense of mourning pervades both films, affecting bodies, voices, and their gestural interactions within a domestic environment—an uncertain limbo between childhood and adulthood where voices oscillate between sonic emission and aphonia.

Although the video essay does not explicitly address how feminist film theories engage with the politics of embodiment in women’s voices in cinema, it implicitly draws on this critical background. Feminist scholars have shown that women’s voices in film are complex sites of both control and resistance, narrative discontinuity and the potential for transformation. Kaja Silverman (1988), for example, has used psychoanalytic theory to argue that while classical Hollywood cinema contains and limits the feminine voice through techniques like invisible editing and synchronization—thus denying women a space for enunciation—avant-garde women’s films employ radical disembodiment of the voice to resist patriarchal oppression, breaking the link between voice and body, and escaping the male gaze. Amy Lawrence (1991), meanwhile, has highlighted how sound technologies have historically privileged male voices for discourse—relegating female voices to singing—and has explored the metaphorical separation of sound and image through the myth of Echo and Narcissus. Along the same lines, Jennifer Fleeger (2014) has further examined how technologies designed for male voices complicate the recording and perception of female voices, especially in 1940s noir films, where women’s voices become focal points of anxiety and tension. While, other scholars, such as Britta Sjögren (2004), have interpreted the displaced female voice in genres like noir, horror, and melodrama as a structuring element that enables new perspectives and spaces for multiple subjectivities.

Collectively, these approaches reveal the ongoing struggle for female subjectivity and agency, positioning the voice as a transformative force in cinematic representation. Their analyses demonstrate that the politics of embodiment in women's voices is marked by a tension between containment and discontinuity, materiality and disembodiment, and the struggle for subjectivity within patriarchal structures. Nonetheless, in films such as those by Tsangari and Dante, where the male presence is largely absent or marginal within the narrative economy, the male gaze or patriarchal control is not at stake and does not constitute the central focus. Here, the space of enunciation for women and female agency is never questioned but rather taken for granted, with the peculiarity that enunciation does not require semiosis but is mostly conveyed through bodily sound utterances. Even within a wholly female cinematic space, however, the voice continues to assert its irreducible ambiguity, opening a space of crisis in narrative and representation.

In light of this, the video essay concentrates on the somatic occurrences of the voice, outlining a radical phenomenology where humanity and animality converge in the same expression—a wide range of vocal strategies, namely non-semantic phonations and vocal mimicries, acousmatic voices and sonic close-ups, shouting and singing voices, and all sorts of inarticulate sounds (breath, hums, whispers ...). Consequently, the montage combines poetic and explanatory modes. It draws attention to the different tones and emotional intensities that punctuate both films, showing how they place particular emphasis on the “lexicon of the mouth” (LaBelle 2014), which is open to a “perpetual motion of evasion” (Dolar 2006: 165). Indeed, it privileges scenes where the voice comes to the foreground, prioritizing its sonic presence, highlighting prosody and nonverbal vocalizations, and stressing how these can be both symptoms of disease and tactics for its overcoming. In addition, as far as the materiality of the voice is concerned, translated subtitles have been deliberately avoided. However, to clarify my point of view, some written words, short phrases, and citations have been inserted, also taking advantage of the black screen as a useful intermezzo to draw more attention to sonic utterances.

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Biography

Annalisa Pellino is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Communication, Arts, and Media at IULM University in Milan, Italy, where she also teaches as a lecturer in Expanded Cinema. Her research interests lie in the fields of film sound and voice, audiovisual culture, and critical media studies with a particular interest in media archaeological approaches, contemporary arts, and videographic criticism, film circulation and exhibition. Her publications include the monograph *La voce in transizione: Cinema, arte contemporanea e cultura fonovisuale* (Mimesis, 2023) along with a number of peer-reviewed articles in academic journals and volumes. She is currently involved in the editorial team of *Cinéma&Cie: Film and Media Studies Journal* and engaged in academic research activity within national and international research groups and contexts, including the project EUMEPLAT – European Media Platforms: Assessing Negative and Positive Externalities for European Culture, supported by the Horizon2020 program, and the PRIN: Project of Relevant National Interest titled “Giallo Atlas: Media History and Popular Culture in Italy (1954–2020).”

Review by Landon Palmer, University of Alabama

In this videographic work, Annalisa Pellino examines the non-semantic utterances of women characters in the Greek film *Attenberg* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010) and the Italian film *The Macaluso Sisters* (Emma Dante, 2020) as a manifestation of their grief in the face of familial loss. Drawing from the writing of Deleuze and Guattari and more recent scholarship on the voice and disability by Jonathan Sterne, Pellino highlights “a radical phenomenology where humanity and animality converge in the same

expression” across these films. Pellino’s video essay makes a valuable contribution to ongoing scholarly debates about women’s voices in cinema, vividly demonstrating how videographic criticism can be a generative space for continuing this area of inquiry that has occurred over decades. Her editing brings together striking moments of radical vocal embodiment, from breathy eating to birdlike clicking emerging from the top of the neck to other “sonic close-ups” that bring the viewer into direct somatic encounter with the instrument of the voice. By presenting her analysis in videographic form, Pellino invites her viewers/listeners to sit with the sonic experience of non-semantic vocal expression, an aspect of these films that would have been lost—or, at least, rendered inappropriately intelligible—in a written essay, an intention she points to in her avoidance of subtitles. In so doing, Pellino has demonstrated how emerging investigations of women’s voices in cinema not only benefit from, but may indeed find their most fitting expression in, videographic criticism, especially for exploring the potentialities of utterances that push the boundaries of legibility and coherence. I hope others will find inspiration in this videographic work to use this genre of media scholarship to further investigate the “irreducible ambiguity” of the voice.

Review by Russell Sheaffer, Palomar College

Fluid moisture mouth movement.

Annalisa Pellino’s “Becoming-Voice: The Female-Animal Sonic Entanglement” interweaves moments of vocalization and sonic eruption in *Attenberg* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010) and *Le sorelle Macaluso* (Emma Dante, 2020), pointing us towards resonances between the female and animal in these works. Pellino crafts her own dynamic soundscape in her assemblage of these cinematic texts, embracing that liminal space that is the periphery of the body, the air that moves in, through, and out of it, the fluids inside and surrounding it.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari in her supporting statement, Pellino writes that “non-semantic vocal expressions take on a radical sonic entanglement between ‘minor’ forms of existence, female and animal.” Pellino’s video essay is compelling in this respect, but I am also particularly drawn to a moment of sonic resonance that she includes apart from the living animal/human body: a parallel moment she crafts between the body of a hairy (presumably animal) carcass being sliced open with a scalpel and a succulent being similarly dissected, both ruptured by human hands. Here, the fluids that make all bodies sustainable, that carry nutrients through their systems—whether human, animal, or vegetable—are vivid, clear, and captivating.

Pellino’s video essay is also particularly compelling in its own eschewing of spoken language, privileging text-on-screen as a part of her intervention in meaning-making. In so doing, her piece is rich in a form of meaning that is allowed to blossom from the sonic close-up. This is sometimes visual and literal—we see mirrored mouths in extreme close-ups, for example—but her piece also revels in our heightened awareness of discrete sounds. The sound of saliva in the mouth. The sound of bath water beneath a song. The sound of televised birds mimicked by a film’s human protagonists. These moments allow us access to affective forms of deep knowing outside of “semantic vocal expressions.”

Pellino understands there to be “a sense of mourning [that] pervades both films,” with characters in “uncertain limbo between childhood and adulthood where voices oscillate between sonic emission and aphonia.” Her video essay clearly communicates the implications of the sonic in this “limbo,” illuminating a beautiful potentiality in the rupture of cinematic conventions.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

