[in]Transition

Onur Turgut and İncı Asal (2025), "Denied Voices and Cacophony." *[in]Transition* 12(1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/intransition.16779

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Denied Voices and Cacophony

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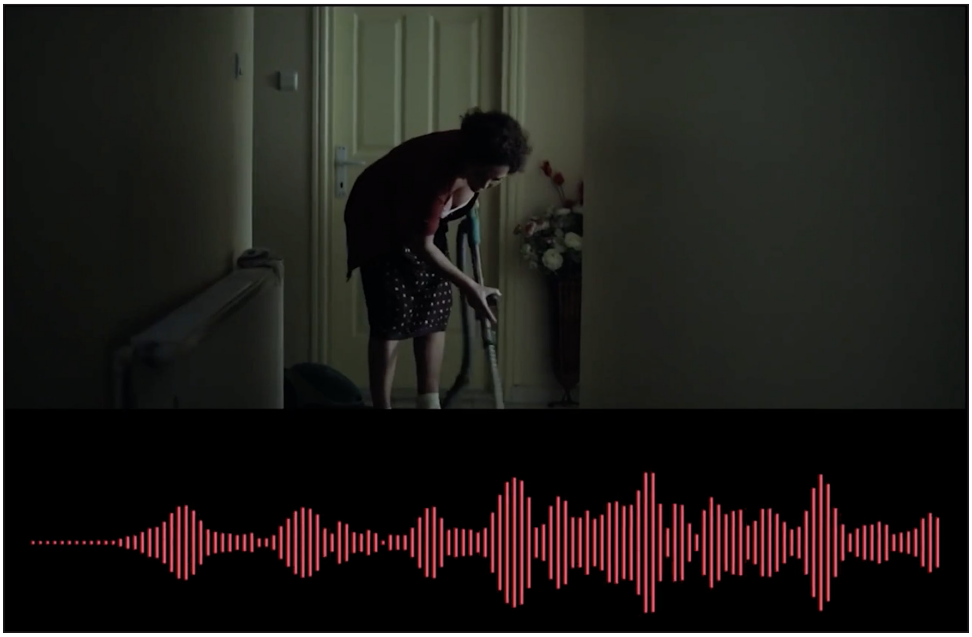
In this study, we aim to expand the dialectic between sound and image to explore the hierarchical structures of female representation in New Turkish Cinema. Through selected examples, we seek to demonstrate more clearly the impact of sound regimes and aesthetic choices on the use of female voices.



Creator's Statement

This study aims to expand the dialectic between sound and image to unveil the hierarchical structures of female representation in New Turkish Cinema. We believe that fully understanding films requires considering the role of sound, especially how the female voice is approached. Frequently, the objectifying power of the gaze results in the neglect of sound's potential. As Britta Sjogren highlights (2006: 10), perceiving the gaze as a monolithic agent points to the loss of sound's objectifying qualities. It is arguable that in the cinema regime, female voices are generally under male or institutional control and are often limited to expressing oppression directed at women. We contend that this representation is confined to restrictive forms.

The silence/denial of women's voices implies the presence of a voice that is not their own or from which they have been deprived. This often manifests as the male voice, and its absence or suppression represents patriarchal dominance in the cinema universe (Lawrence, 1991). We want to emphasize that denied voices are not entirely silent but manifest through non-verbal vocalizations such as murmuring, crying, whistling, and shouting. These sounds are, in fact, a form of rebellion as powerful as silence, and when combined, they create a strong cacophony. Thus, these denied voices symbolize not only their physical silence but also how their stories, emotions, and thoughts are marginalized and erased under male narratives. As Anneke Smelik (2001: 18–19) points out, the female voice is frequently reduced to passive sounds like screams, murmurs, and silences, reinforcing their marginalization.

Furthermore, Kaja Silverman (1988: 40) notes that the male voice is depicted as an ethereal phallus, ungrounded, omniscient, and omnipotent. Occasionally, the female voice takes on a compensatory form (acoustic reflection) for the male subject. Referencing Silverman's work, Shohini Chaudhuri discusses how cinema constructs women as objects of the male gaze. She emphasizes cinema's deep connection with sound and particularly highlights the significant role of the female voice. Chaudhuri notes that these voices are produced by characters who lack authority within the narrative. This trait should be considered a unique narrative aspect (Chaudhuri, 2006: 3).

With this awareness, we examined the work corresponding to New Turkish Cinema active from the late 1990s, comprising specific genres such as art cinema and festival films. The Post-Yeşilçam era, also known as New Turkish Cinema, has been active since the 1990s as a hybrid period distinct from Yeşilçam, embracing modern perspectives, diverse genres, and themes. Centered in Istanbul as a metropolis, this era reflects alienation, psychological and social issues, dark and illegal lives, feminist movements, LGBTQ individuals, eroticism, tabloid culture, and pop music in modern Turkish cinema (Asal, 2019: 58). By closely approaching, recomposing, and bracketing our selected samples, we aimed to demonstrate the impact of sound regimes and aesthetic choices more clearly in these types of films on the use of female voices. We believe this cultural field, offering alternative sound policies, allows us to illustrate concretely the hierarchies and power relations established through sound. Building on this theoretical framework, we scrutinized examples from New Turkish Cinema, which began in the late 1990s. It is claimed that female characters emerged in more complex and diverse roles during this period. Films from this era are said to explore women's changing roles in society, domestic and societal pressures, violence, and gender inequality (Atam, 2011). Asuman Suner (2010) argues, that these female characters transcend traditional roles, often challenging societal norms and depicting them as more independent figures. While we partially agree with these views, it can be argued that New Turkish Cinema has not yet made as much progress in female representation as is claimed.

From a historical perspective, it is possible to say that the silence/denial of women's voices is related to many parameters. Perhaps the most important of these is its direct relationship with Turkey's socio-political context, which can be considered the most critical factor. The military coup of September 12, 1980 marks a significant turning point in Turkish history, a period in which the silencing and denial of women's voices became more pronounced, and the discursive authority underwent a major shift. The 1980s, coupled with the most severe suppression of dissenting voices in Turkey across all spheres, irreversibly damaged freedom of expression. Simultaneously, Turkey

underwent a comprehensive process of economic liberalization, with the post-1980 era characterized by privatization policies and the rise of consumer culture. A series of reforms were implemented in the information and communication sectors, with the goal of full integration into the global economy, laying the groundwork for the unstoppable rise of the media. In her work *Female Silences, Turkey's Crises: Gender, Nation and Past in the New Cinema of Turkey* (2016: 12), Özlem Güçlü argues that this specific historical period had textual effects on cinema, with one of the most prominent examples being the representation of silent women. This form of silence should not be seen as a break from hegemonic discourses, but as a manifestation of the struggle for authority within shifting discursive regimes concerning gender, nation, and the past. This representation reflects both non-hegemonic voices and the persistent points of silence in various but interconnected fields in Turkey.

Additionally, Eylem Atakav (2013: 114) offers a different perspective by suggesting that silence representations can have different meanings. According to Atakav, it is important to distinguish between "choosing to remain silent" and "being silenced." In this context, silence can be interpreted as a choice, a form of resistance, or a rejection of the patriarchal language. In our study, silence in female characters is explored as both a conscious choice of resistance and a result of oppression. Some characters use silence to reject patriarchal discourse, while others are silenced by force, highlighting how films address themes of gender, power, and identity through these different layers of meaning.

Another important claim is that by unpacking the function(s) of these silences, the silent or silenced female characters can be characterized by the increasing glorification of male lumpen attitudes and the crisis of masculinity (Ulusay, 2004; Akbal Sualp, 2009). The identity crises since the 1990s, marked by fluidity in religious, ethnic, and sexual norms, have fuelled a cynical public attitude, resulting in both silence and cacophony. As Güçlü also states (2016: 12) "The silent form should be thought of not as a break from hegemonic discourses, but as a revelation of the struggle for authority within shifting discursive regimes concerning gender, nation, and the past; because it becomes a representation of both non-hegemonic voices and the ongoing points of silence in different but interconnected areas in Turkey."

In this context, to understand how the female voice is constructed, heard, or unheard, we selected scenes from the following films: *İklimler* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2006), *Sibel* (Çağla Zencirci & Guillaume Giovanetti, 2019), *Tereddüt* (Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2016), *Köksüz* (Deniz Akçay Katıksız, 2013), *Babamın Sesi* (Orhan Eskiköy & Zeynel Doğan, 2012), *Bana Karanlığı Anlat* (Gizem Kızıl, 2023), *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2011), *Daha* (Onur Saylak, 2017), *Ben O Değilim* (Tayfun Pirselimoğlu,

2013), *Görülmüştür* (Serhat Karaaslan, 2018), *Kış Uykusu* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2014), *Gemide* (Serdar Akar, 1999), and *Pandora'nın Kutusu* (Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2008). Of these thirteen films, eight are directed by men and five by women. Our choice of these films was driven by the fact that they were produced by different directors over time and cover a broad spectrum, addressing both urban and rural areas, modern and traditional lifestyles, and individual and societal issues. Moreover, a general view of these films shows that women are often not allowed to speak; their words are suppressed and even denied. The sound regimes have been restructured according to gender stereotypes, and the cinematic universe has been constructed accordingly. We visualized the sound spectrum in real-time to highlight the effects of sound and silence. Our goal was to consciously divert the audience's attention from the visuals to the sounds/denied voices by understandably organizing the sound recordings, thereby increasing viewer awareness and interest.

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Biographies

Onur Turgut

Onur Turgut is a Research Assistant at the Department of Communication and Design, Özyeğin University. He is also pursuing his PhD in the Radio, Cinema, and Television Department at Istanbul University. Experienced in film directing and editing, Turgut's academic interests include cinephilia studies, videographic criticism, and cinema sociology.

İncı Asal

İncı Asal is a Research Assistant at the Department of Communication and Design, Özyeğin University. She is also a PhD candidate in the Cinema and Media Research Department at Bahcesehir University. Asal continues to produce content for video platforms, analog photography, narrative design for computer games, and short film projects. Lately, she focused on video streaming platforms, streaming culture, and AI generative visual culture in the academic field.

Review by Eylem Atakav, University of East Anglia

This is a very strong submission particularly for its audio-visual content. It neatly puts together a range of female characters as represented by films from Turkey. It teases out some of the complexities and implications of the representations of voice, sound, and silence, while offering a thought-provoking video essay. The written statement is also supported with a contextual (and briefly historical) framework within which the films in question are made. This framework not only offers the reader to see the connection between theory and creative practice but also sheds light on a subject that is highly significant and yet lacks the academic attention it needs. The reflective piece is rich with references to the theoretical approaches on the representation of women and silence in films. The video essay offers a collage of images that collectively sends a significant message about the silencing of women as well as silence as a tool for women's reaction to a patriarchal society. When women choose to remain silent, they do so as an act of resistance. And, this aspect on its own is fascinating. The work is also significant in that it focuses on the cinema of Turkey and adds to the discussions of representations of womanhood in world cinema. The authors offer a critical reflection on silence as a form of resisting speaking the language of the patriarchal. This will be a thought-provoking watch and engaging theoretical read.

Review by Annalisa Pellino, IULM University, Milan

Agency by Other Means

Female representation in cinema has been a topic of extensive scholarly inquiry and critical analysis. Similarly, sound, as well as voice, has garnered significant attention

since the 1980s. In their video essay, *Denied Voices and Cacophony*, İncı Asal and Onur Turgut analyse the sonic regime of New Turkish Cinema, arguing that female agency is often suppressed by male-dominated narratives. They highlight how women are silenced and suggest that interpreting female sonic utterances involves complex corporeal dimensions that go beyond their semantic meaning. Nonetheless, there exists an ambiguous interplay between *agency*, *silencing*, and *vocal expression* within their reasoning.

Indeed, a frequently overlooked aspect is that the word "silence" concerns not merely the *absence of speech*, but the *absence of any auditory stimuli* whatsoever. Our cognitive and cultural biases incline us to equate *the lack of speech* with a *state of silence*; a default association that betrays a limited perspective and neglects the subtle yet substantial distinction between word and voice. "The voice is sound, not speech," affirms Adriana Cavarero (2005: 209). After all, the common usage of the term "silence" often obscures a more nuanced understanding of its implications; even in everyday language, the expression "to silence someone" is used to say that they are deprived of the *faculty of speech* and, in a broader sense, of their agency—which is what happens to *subaltern* subjectivities within patriarchal societies.

In light of this, by interrogating the assumptions underlying our conventional understanding of silence, we can gain a richer and more multifaceted appreciation for the role of sound, or the lack thereof, in the cinematic experience and beyond. This distinction, in fact, has almost a propedeutical role in the analysis of female *sonic* representation in cinema, to the extent that even if women are not allowed to speak, they can vocalize, expressing their agency in a certainly nonverbal, yet sonorous, bodily manner, even subverting (or *de-suturing*) the institutional mode of representation.

Accordingly, it could be argued that the key issue in the films analysed by Asal and Turgut lies not primarily with *denied voices* or *silence*, but, rather, with the potential agency of female *sounding bodies*—notwithstanding the film directors' intentions. In the selected scenes, in fact, women's voices and sounding bodies are abundantly present and audible and, well beyond the patriarchal constraints, they seem to transcend the *ocularcentric* and *word-driven* modes of representation. In particular, drawing on a fascinating and compelling corpus of films, the video essay explicitly highlights the first aspect, namely the importance of considering auditory elements alongside the visual ones, and moving "beyond the gaze" (McHugh, Sobchack 2004). Indeed, the authors' intuition relies on the necessity of expanding the visual analysis of female agency towards the aural one. However, there remains ambiguity regarding the second, equally crucial, aspect; the blissful, yet unfulfilled, potential for female agency to manifest through alternative, even cacophonous, non-linguistic modes of expression. Specifically, this entails examining complex and diverse ways in which women can

assert their *agency by other means* beyond the boundaries of dominant male-oriented visual and linguistic paradigms. This aspect partially emerges in both written text and the video essay, although it appears to lack clarity and argumentation, resulting in a discourse that conveys a seemingly conflicting meaning.

However, the fact remains that the portrayed women emit a very wide spectrum of sounds and prelinguistic vocalizations, by shouting, crying, chattering, panting, murmuring, and even sounding like a bird. These could also be interpreted as *tactics* (I use the word *à la* de Certeau) to escape from male control, as well as from its codes and communication tools. Indeed, although at first glance certain emotional responses to male violence look like a weakening, or a regression to a primordial state, at a closer look they reveal the seed of what could grow into an empowering strategy. At the end, a split screen with several close-ups seems to epitomize this potentiality, letting women's vocal gestures occupy the screen, both visually and acoustically, with their powerful collective cacophony, as a means to materially and symbolically break through an oppressive state of claustrophobia.

Here lies the subversive and fascinating power of voice; in its capacity to disregard any expectation, which is likely the most interesting aspect of the video essay, as well as of the cinema it critiques. In this vein, the video essay opens up further exploration and discussion in the cinematic representation of women's voices and embodied experiences. It inspires deeper interrogation and a need for comprehensive understanding of the ways in which women's sonic and corporeal presence can subvert or reconfigure the institutional structures that have historically marginalized and continue to marginalize their agency.

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