

In Defense of Voicelessness

The Matter of the Voice and the Films of Leslie Thornton

ABSTRACT This essay critiques the liberal axiom of “having a voice,” using readings of Leslie Thornton’s experimental films. Drawing on cultural critics such as Rey Chow, Mladen Dolar, and Frances Dyson, I show how the notion of the voice, as it has been taken up by feminist media critics and documentary practitioners, is thoroughly mired in the cultural politics of objectification. I focus on the trope of voice-over commentary, which has been favored among feminist filmmakers working to subvert the representational conventions of narrative cinema and ethnographic documentary. I argue that the associations of verbal commentary with textual authority and liberation in contemporary feminist debates extends a metaphysical narrative that favors certain ideal, and therefore more human, voices over those voices encumbered by the matter of embodied difference. Contrary to giving a voice in the conventional sense, Thornton’s unusual manipulations of the voice-over behave as a defense of voicelessness. In *Jennifer*, *Where Are You?* (1981), *Adynata* (1983), and *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985–2013), Thornton explores the violences of the voice, as well as the alternative modes of relation that its abjected, ephemeral materialities can enable. Thornton’s films offer counterintuitive insights regarding the way that sound operates in relation to the image in cinema and, in the process, rearrange our understanding of the voice and of the horizons of humanity onto which it can open. **KEYWORDS** documentary, experimental film, gender, race, Leslie Thornton, voice

INTRODUCTION: WHEN VOICES OBJECTIFY

Can a voice objectify in a similar, if not more powerful, manner than a look? This question is seldom posed by feminist media scholars, among whom there remains a consensus that the politics of racial and sexual objectification are shaped primarily by visual dynamics. The experience of alterity, it is proposed, takes shape in response to a paralyzing gaze that “fixes” the other in the manner of an object: a mere thing, fetish, or spectacle. This insight has shaped some of the most impactful interventions in the history of feminist media theory,

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including Laura Mulvey's classic work on the visual pleasures of the female body in Hollywood narratives and Fatimah Tobing Rony's elaboration of the Orientalist antecedents of ethnographic media spectacles of race.¹ Works such as these describe the predicament of cinematic objectification as a form of "silencing": a masterful gaze, they suggest, can rob those who are looked at of the capacity to speak for themselves. Perhaps in logical consequence, since looking and speaking have been theorized as twinned loci of power, feminist and postcolonial inquiry of the past several decades has approached the work of resistance in terms of reclaiming the look or speaking out.

The sheer volume of feminist media theory devoted to the topic of the gaze provides undeniable evidence of the ocularcentrism of feminist academic discourse—a tendency that some scholars have sought to displace by turning to senses other than vision as the basis of noninstrumental modes of looking.² In comparison, the notion of speaking out, and its vehicle, the voice, has received relatively little critical attention, even though the soundtrack—and specifically the documentary convention of voice-over commentary—has become a central site of feminist intervention and medium of political expression since the 1970s. With few exceptions, the metaphor of "having a voice," which has had particular traction among feminist documentary filmmakers seeking to subvert the audiovisual conventions of narrative and ethnographic cinema, has not received nuanced theoretical treatment: the voice remains, by and large, the good object of feminist critique. The question of how precisely a speaking voice counters the objectification of a powerful gaze, and of whether a voice can, in fact, give rise to similar patterns of objectification, has not been satisfactorily answered.

My essay questions the liberal axiom of "having a voice" that has guided feminist documentary filmmaking of the past several decades. I attend to the corporeal sonic dimensions of the voice that exceed linguistic meaning—that is, the embodied matter of the voice that is inevitably excluded when "voice" is employed as a metaphor for political subjectivity. Such questioning, I argue, has the potential to realign the narrative of documentary history, as well as the implicit notion of humanity that underpins its investments in voicing as a marker of social progress. To do so, I reassess several field-defining works in feminist documentary studies in light of recent scholarship in the emerging interdisciplinary field of critical theories of sound, including the work of Mladen Dolar and Frances Dyson. Together, Dolar and Dyson reveal the metaphysical inheritance of much of twentieth-century progressive thought, in which the voice is seen as an ideal form of "inner speech" rather than as a physical phenomenon inflected by the matter of embodied difference. I argue that the trend of denying the

materiality of the voice is paradoxically intensified by feminist attempts to recuperate the voice-over as a cinematic site of resistance. Championed by scholars such as Trinh T. Minh-ha and Kaja Silverman for its associations with textual authority and liberation, the voice-over has become a resounding feature of contemporary feminist filmmaking. Although such reappropriations of the voice-over are intended to “give a voice” to formerly objectified and silenced subjects, the structural role of verbal commentary in the audiovisual architecture of documentary, as I show, tacitly reinstates the distinction between ideal speech and abjectly corporeal voices.

The final third of my essay is devoted to a discussion of filmmaker Leslie Thornton (1951–), who is frequently anthologized as a part of the feminist turn in documentary practice. I argue, however, that Thornton’s unusual approach to the voice makes her a fascinating outlier. Her boundary-crossing cinematic idiom manifests and questions her training by some of the most prominent practitioners of avant-garde and documentary film: she challenges experimental filmmakers who equate corporeality with a liberating escape, and she also troubles the feminist pursuit of the documentary voice-over as a means of eluding corporeal entrapment. Through readings of three of Thornton’s films, which span a thirty-year period in her career, I explore how her use of experimental techniques reveals the collusion of sound and image, voice and look, in the documentary dynamics of objectification. Each of these films enables a unique apprehension of the violences of the voice as well as the alternative modes of relation that its abjected, ephemeral materialities can enable. At stake in Thornton’s practice, I argue, is a counterintuitive and imaginative reassessment of the materiality of a voice—one that explores how *voicelessness* can open onto new horizons of being in the world.

From a media-historical perspective, Thornton is worthy of reconsideration because her cinematic innovations anticipate and predate contemporary scholarly insights regarding the material specificity of the voice. In addition to illustrating how these interventions play out in relation to the architectonics of sound and image in audiovisual media, my readings of Thornton’s work also reveal the limitations of the predominantly semiotic terms in which her work has so far been theorized. By historicizing her significance in this manner, my essay models a theoretically informed revisionist approach to the cinematic and intellectual history of the feminist turn in documentary. In what follows, I take a detour through a number of recent scholarly perspectives regarding language, race, and sound to bring into focus a longstanding metaphysical discourse that has enshrined the concept of the voice in modern Western thought. I then examine how this unspoken way of thinking has infused liberal discourses of social

justice, including the audiovisual conventions of feminist documentary practices purporting to “give a voice” to the voiceless. As I show over the course of this essay, these conventional forms have layered implications for the minoritarian beneficiaries of this discourse.

Rey Chow’s work on language provides a point of departure as well as a frequent point of return for my inquiry into the voice and the dynamics of objectification. In *Not Like a Native Speaker*, Chow revisits a canonical account of the formation of abjected subjectivity to show how language collaborates with vision in the politics of racial objectification.³ The account in question is Frantz Fanon’s description of feeling stereotyped and debased by racist comments (“Look, a Negro!”) regarding his appearance in the streets of colonial Martinique in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*.⁴ This celebrated scene, which grasps race as, by and large, a visual spectacle, has set a precedent for much subsequent scholarship on the logics of race and racism. Fanon presents a scenario in which the skin and the face—surfaces that are seemingly in plain view—function both as an interactive stage and as a visible clue that “confesses” the identity of the raced subject, leading to hurt and humiliation.

Without minimizing the vast implications of the visual dimensions of racism, Chow repositions Fanon’s insights as a suggestive commentary on how speech, like the look, can operate as a vehicle of racial discrimination. It is now regarded as axiomatic that language behaves as a cut that confers subjectivity and social status even as it requires that something be given up. The mutuality of this exchange is elegantly but deceptively apparent, Chow notes, in the gesture of naming—an idea for which Louis Althusser’s description of the interpellation of the subject has become a common reference point.⁵ But Fanon complicates Althusser. Whereas the prospects of subjecthood are wide open with optimistic possibility in Althusser’s account, thanks to the anonymous pronoun of ideology’s hail (“Hey, *you* there!”), the anonymity in Fanon’s scenario is of a reduced, abjected quality in that the “you” in question has been qualified by the barbed nouns of explicit hate speech: “Negro”; “Dirty nigger.” In today’s more common scenarios, the pronoun itself may instead be laced with such implications. For Chow, this is just one instance of the many modes through which language operates as a covert site for the uneven distribution of objectification and subjectivity. She elaborates:

What Fanon is describing, therefore, is not simply an instance of what we nowadays call hate speech, but also an ontological subtraction and contradiction: the laying-out of a trajectory of self-recognition from which the possibility of self-regard (or self-respect) has, nonetheless, been removed in

advance. For the black person, this chance of self-recognition is held out in the precise form of his reduction or thing-ification: he can be/become (himself) by being/becoming less, by being/becoming diminished. A self-recognition for which he has to take off (minus) whatever self-esteem he may happen to have.⁶

Chow's discussion of such ontological subtraction is provocative, not least because the notion of having a name, or being hailed into existence, is frequently regarded in terms of self-formation rather than self-deletion. Even more important, her observations regarding language and racism point out the auditory registers at which objectification can occur alongside and in counterpoint to the visual. The recipients of debasing racist remarks often experience such trauma, she writes, not only as a visual distortion (being turned into an image that is either hypervisible or barely visible), but as a sensation of speechlessness or aphasia. In such an extreme circumstance, the nonwhite subject is stripped of the capacity for verbal response with which she might ordinarily parry the blows of a racializing hail. But even under less coercive conditions, the prospects of "speaking back" to power are fraught: as Chow notes, the racializing violence of language takes a psychic toll on the nonwhite subject, who inevitably emerges from the encounter with a sensation of unredeemable loss and of having been reduced to a shadow of herself.⁷

I now shift Chow's emphasis and mobilize her provocations toward a speculation regarding the *voice*. Liberal discourses of progress often measure the privileges of political subjectivity in proportion to one's capacity to "speak out" or "have a voice." Indeed, the concept of a voice is often associated in the Western critical tradition with the positive attributes of humanity, interiority, and subjectivity. However, Chow's reading of Fanon urges us to see the subjectivity indexed by the aural speech-act as the uncertain product of asymmetrical, volatile, and even violent conditions of interpellative contact. Extending this insight in a different direction, we might say that the seemingly progressive act of conferring agency upon those who have been silenced must be understood in terms of the uneven give and take, or addition and subtraction, involved in the encounter between those who would seek to give a voice and those who are hailed to respond by having a voice. When approached in this light, the sonic phenomenon of the voice, as well as the subjectivity with which it is equated in feminist thought, seems not a positive entity but a hollowed-out shell: the uncertain and ghostly remainder of an operation of ontological subtraction.

This line of inquiry has two related implications for the audiovisual politics of the voice-over. First, having a voice, or speaking out as a subject, always involves the speaker in the psychodynamics of objectification, which are played

out in the relationship between the voice and the image in the audiovisual scene. And, second, when a voice-over is employed to assert the presence of a subject, special care must be taken so that its sonic attributes will shore up, rather than negate, this subjectivity. I elaborate further below.

THE MATTER OF HAVING A VOICE

A voice can, therefore, behave simultaneously as a medium of objectification *and* as a pathway to subjectivity, often in radically unequal measure, depending on who is speaking to whom, how, and in what context. And yet the erosion or subtraction of matter referenced by Chow is seldom acknowledged in discourses of social justice, whose central metaphor—having a voice—turns on the importance of speech for participating in any political process. “Speaking out” is commonly understood as a liberatory act of giving expression to an interior idea, thought, opinion, or wish that inaugurates the subject’s entrance into the political sphere and, indeed, into humanity. The belief that humanity abides in the capacity for externalizing interiority through speech is one of the most enduring refrains of Western philosophy, dating back to Plato and Aristotle.⁸ According to this narrative, the voice, or the capacity to produce physical sounds, exists to make meaning—specifically linguistic meaning. This is what is believed to set humans apart from other animals. Animals, Aristotle famously proclaimed, do not have a voice, even though they produce sounds, for “voice is a sound with a meaning.”⁹ The meaning in question is thought to *already* reside within the body in the form of *logos* or inner speech, the human bequest of the Word of God; the voice is merely the vehicle by which it may be evidenced.

The metaphysical imperative that man “rise above matter” to achieve his true inner substance—reason—weighs upon the voice in a particular way. In this tradition of privileging the linguistic content of speech over its social, embodied modes of making meaning, the voice is treated as a “vanishing mediator,” in Mladen Dolar’s words, whose corporeal content evaporates in the act of utterance. Dolar’s elaboration of this phenomenon is worth quoting at some length for its clear explanation of the paradoxical dualism between mind and body, subjectivity and corporeality, that structures such thinking:

We can make various other sounds with the intention of signifying something, but there the intention is external to those sounds themselves, or they function as a stand-in, a metaphorical substitute for the voice. Only the voice implies a subjectivity which “expresses itself” and itself inhabits the means of expression. But if the voice is thus the quasi-natural bearer of the

production of meaning, it also proves to be strangely recalcitrant to it. If we speak in order to “make sense,” to signify, to convey something, then the voice is the material support of bringing about meaning, yet it does not contribute to it. It is, rather, something like the vanishing mediator (to use the term made famous by Fredric Jameson for a different purpose)—it makes the utterance possible, but it disappears in it, it goes up in smoke in the meaning being produced. Even on the most banal level of daily experience, when we listen to someone speak, we may at first be very much aware of his or her voice and its particular qualities, its color and accent, but soon we accommodate to it and concentrate only on the meaning being conveyed. The voice itself is like the Wittgensteinian ladder to be discarded when we have successfully climbed to the top—that is, when we have made our ascent to the peak of meaning. The voice is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning is the goal. This gives rise to a spontaneous opposition where voice appears as materiality opposed to the ideality of meaning. The ideality of meaning can emerge only through the materiality of means, but the means does not seem to contribute to meaning.¹⁰

In the scenario laid out by Dolar, the sole purpose of the voice is as a vehicle for linguistic meaning: as a corporeal, bodily thing, it is both the medium of and an obstacle to the expression of divine speech. Dolar reveals the unspoken paradox of popular and scholarly discourses that subscribe to this logic, including structural linguistics and much of poststructuralist semiotics (whose impact on feminist media theory will be seen later in the essay). Even though these modern discourses approach subjectivity as the product of a system of differences rather than some “inner” thing, they still reenact a version of the idealist binary in their aversion to theorizing the corporeal, sociocultural dimensions of language and voicing. In contrast, Dolar proposes that the voice may be defined as the abjected matter that *does not* contribute to making linguistic sense. This category would then accommodate all the corporeal sounds that Aristotle believed do not have “soul” in them—for instance, vocal qualities such as accent, intonation, and timbre; nonverbal expressions such as song; and mechanical, involuntary utterances such as coughs, hiccups, laughter, sighs, breathing, echolalic babbling, and the like. Accordingly, Dolar proposes that while the voice stems from the body, it does not belong either to the body or to the realm of language and culture but remains recalcitrantly alien to both.¹¹

Dolar thereby demonstrates how the notion of divine authorship remains stubbornly associated with the voice even decades after the deconstruction of the notion of authorial agency and voice by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes,

and other scholars associated with poststructuralist critique. Foucault, we recall, dismissed the author's voice as a mere textual product rather than the agency behind a work through a tongue-in-cheek evocation of Samuel Beckett's question "What matter who's speaking?"¹² Dolar approaches this question literally and shifts our attention to the *matter* of the speaking voice, thereby offering a new means of egress from the intractable idea that Foucault sought in vain to displace. Although Dolar is opposed to anchoring the concept of the voice in the organic or in the singularity of individual bodies, his unexpected redefinition of the voice as that matter that "does not contribute" to making sense is nonetheless reminiscent of Barthes's enigmatic notion of the "grain of the voice." Barthes uses this term to describe the erotic, prelogical element in communication that exceeds its coded, sanctioned forms of embodiment and signification. For Barthes, the "graininess" of expression inheres in the "space of *the encounter between a language and a voice*" that renders both malleable and suspends the foreclosure of meaning. In other words, the grain of the voice represents the singular sonic phenomenon that can emerge from the collision between the material of bodies speaking in their "mother tongue" and the socially established structures of language.¹³ Even though Barthes and Dolar differ in important ways in their approaches to the voice, they overlap in enabling us to envision the concept of a voice in a new and counterintuitive way: from the perspective of its amorphous material potentiality, rather than from the preformed vantage point of speech.¹⁴

Such counterdiscourses of the voice have far-reaching implications for our received ideas about communication, mediation, and humanity itself. For one, they demand a radical realignment of what counts and what does not count as a voice.¹⁵ They also hint at new relational modes that might be fostered by an attunement to those communicative comportments that do not have linguistic meaning as their goal. Elsewhere, I have shown how such an approach can illuminate the embedded assumptions regarding disability and humanity that shape the language of first-person documentary, drawing on humanitarian as well as autistic accounts of what it means to have a voice.¹⁶ For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus on the "matter" of the voice that is called to the fore by Dolar and Barthes and the ways in which voices are subject to different degrees of "subtraction" when they are caught up in the audiovisual conventions of cross-cultural representation.

Radio scholar Frances Dyson adds a feminist perspective to these abstract speculations that is equally applicable to my forthcoming discussion of the documentary context of Thornton's work. For Dolar, "color" and "accent" are

merely vocal flavors to which listeners become habituated (“soon we accommodate to it and concentrate only on the meaning being conveyed”). In other words, Dolar regards the material differences of *all* voices as extralinguistic supplements that are immaterial or, to be more precise, dematerialized, in the endgame of linguistic signification. This is where Dyson intervenes. Using the speaking voice in radio as a case in point, Dyson shows that in practice, voices are subject to unequal degrees of dematerialization depending on the extent to which they are inflected by the material traces of embodied difference—for instance, of race, gender, sex, national or regional identity, or physical ability. Taking stock of the dominant vocal attributes of the radio anchor (clear, articulate, eloquent, factual, informative, newsworthy, sober, articulate, knowledgeable), Dyson observes that a “proper voice” is frequently equated with an authoritative male voice, especially one with a deep pitch and Euro-American accent. The corporeal attributes of such a voice go virtually unnoticed, seeming to yield unmediated access to “inner speech.” Tellingly, other voices that betray the audible signs of illness, femininity, ethnicity, or age are encountered less frequently on the radio: Dyson notes that these “other” voices often have to adopt the pitch and persona of the ideal male voice to be included in mainstream radio programs.¹⁷

To refer back to Chow, Dyson demonstrates how the voices of marginalized subjects are diminished and abjected, their matter literally chipped away, as they depart from this zero degree of speech, whereas normative voices are allowed to remain more or less intact. For marginal social subjects, therefore, having a voice—that is, evidencing their humanity—inevitably involves losing something that matters: the embodied position they allegedly speak for. This means that this progressive slogan should be considered as part and parcel of the dynamics of marginalization, rather than a simplistic corrective to the same.

VOCAL ENTRAPMENTS

These insights regarding the coercive politics of having a voice shed new light on a series of discussions that took place among feminist media scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, and which subsequently have had a profound influence on the cinematic idiom of feminist documentary practitioners. These discussions, spearheaded by Trinh T. Minh-ha and Kaja Silverman, centered around what was perceived to be a common predicament of representation across the domains of mainstream fiction film and documentary film, particularly in then-prevailing ethnographic and observational approaches to documentary. In both domains, it was argued, men did the talking, whereas women and minorities

were cast as “to-be-looked-at.” The convention of voice-over commentary was discussed both as a problem that perpetuated this dynamic and as a potential solution, to the extent that its textual authority could be borrowed to give a voice to marginal subjects. The feminist reappropriation of the voice-over is now widely regarded as a turning point in the history of documentary, and it is cited in canonical accounts of the genre as the moment when documentary form became reflexive.¹⁸ However, when we approach these historical debates with Dyson’s and Chow’s critiques in mind, we are able to see this well-established narrative regarding the evolution of documentary form in a different light. This approach requires us to think carefully about what happens to the materiality of the voice as a consequence of the interplay between the voice-over and other audiovisual elements.

Over the 1980s, Trinh wrote a series of essays (now collected in the 1991 volume *When the Moon Waxes Red*) critiquing the unspoken assumptions of documentary practices that purported to represent non-Western cultures speaking for themselves. The target of Trinh’s polemic shifts across her various works, but broadly, she was concerned with the realist tropes of objectivity employed in two documentary genres that had been growing in popularity since the 1960s: anthropological film and direct cinema. Her work brought a cinematic specificity to postmodernist critiques of the ethnographic realism of cultural anthropologists such as James Clifford and George Marcus and drew on the avant-garde ethnographic sensibility of French *cinéma vérité* practitioners such as Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, and Chris Marker in its censure of the observational tendencies in direct cinema.¹⁹

In “Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity,” Trinh offers a pointed assessment of the problems of observational conventions such as long takes, wide-angle shots, anti-aestheticism, minimal editing, and hand-held camera work.²⁰ When employed in a cross-cultural context, she argues, these so-called tropes of fidelity and objectivity have the added effect of reinforcing ethnography’s salvage paradigm, or the tendency to cast the non-West in a perpetual primitive present. Objectivity, under these circumstances, easily becomes a form of objectification: a means for creating an artificial cleave between East/West, subject/object, and center/margin.

Trinh’s essay is especially relevant to our current discussion of how voices objectify because of its attention to the auditory counterparts of the aforementioned visual techniques of objectification—both of which are, arguably, still encountered in contemporary documentary practice, even though the genres that popularized them are no longer in vogue. Trinh notes that the textual effects of

observational framing and editing are exacerbated by the recourse to expository commentary as a supplement to oral testimony. A case in point: even though voice-over commentary was generally reviled by proponents of direct cinema as a didactic holdover from an earlier generation of documentary, it was still selectively employed as an ethnographic technique of “giving a voice,” frequently in the form of Griersonian “voice-of-God” commentary delivered by an authoritative male voice from off-screen. Trinh elaborates:

Making a film on/about the “others” consists of allowing them paternalistically “to speak for themselves” and, since this proves insufficient in most cases, of completing their speech with the insertion of a commentary that will objectively describe/interpret the images according to a scientific/humanistic rationale. Language as voice and music—grain, tone, inflections, pauses, silences, repetitions—goes underground. Instead, people from remote parts of the world are made accessible through dubbing/subtitling, transformed into English-speaking elements and brought into conformity with a definite mentality. This is astutely called “giving voice”—literally meaning that those who are/need to *be given* an opportunity to speak up never had a voice before. Without their benefactors, they are bound to remain non-admitted, non-incorporated, therefore, unheard.²¹

Trinh hones in on the documentary soundtrack as a manifestation of the asymmetrical conditions of power under which minority individuals are interpellated as subjects. Her comments extend Dyson’s claims regarding the radio voice to other media that operate in the sober, discursive mood, such as television news and documentary exposition. Here, too, the voices of others are subject to various forms of erasure and editorializing when they depart from the Anglophone cultural norms of legitimate speech. The passage above explains how the ethnographic voice-over (or what Trinh calls commentary) participates in these processes of erasure, subtraction, and objectification. Even when they are hailed to speak, the vocal utterances of minority subjects are always subordinate to the interpretive authority of the voice-over.

Trinh’s critique is evocative of another landmark feminist study of the mediated voice from the late 1980s: Kaja Silverman’s *The Acoustic Mirror*.²² Whereas Trinh is concerned with the racialized division of vocal authority in traditional ethnographic documentary, Silverman focuses on the structural inequities among male and female voices in the sound design of classical narrative cinema. Bringing a feminist perspective to Michel Chion’s pioneering work on the acousmatic voice in cinema,²³ Silverman notes that the masterful interiority associated with the disembodied, acousmatic voice-over is often reserved for the

male voice in mainstream fiction film, whereas the female voice is nearly always embodied, synchronized, and “pinned to” the female body, which is relegated to the role of spectacle. Like Trinh, Silverman equates the voice-over with discursive liberation and potency. She describes the vocal condition of being “bound” to a body as a form of “entrapment” in which the female voice is diegetically contained: roped to an image and kept under a strict watch from above. Accordingly, Silverman celebrates the achievements of feminist filmmakers such as Sally Potter, Yvonne Rainer, and Patricia Gruben who have “experimented boldly with the female voice-off and voice-over, jettisoning synchronization, symmetry, and simultaneity in favor of dissonance and dislocation . . . [so] as to problematize their corporeal assignation.”²⁴

From the 1990s onward, increasing numbers of documentary scholars and practitioners have echoed these investments in the voice-over as a site of freedom and social recognition. Voice-over commentary, frequently in the first person, is a common denominator across a number of works associated with what Bill Nichols refers to in his seminal study of the genre as the “reflexive” turn in documentary practice. Nichols broadly invokes the work of practitioners who are self-conscious about documentary form, style, conventions, expectations, and effects, often blurring the boundaries between fiction and documentary, for which other scholars have used terms such as *subjective filmmaking* (Michael Renov), *first-person documentary* (Alisa Lebow), *the essay film* (Laura Rascaroli), and *autoethnographic film* (Catherine Russell).²⁵ As Russell notes, the voice-over is frequently the site of such reflexive activity: a concertedly subjective voice-over, typically in the first person, is commonly employed as an autoethnographic strategy of complicating the objective authority associated with expository voice-over commentary by bringing in other types of voices that are unreliable, unstable, or uncertain.

Of the studies I mention above, Russell’s most clearly emphasizes the feminist orientation of the reflexive turn in documentary: for her, the term *autoethnography* encompasses makers working from either side of asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination to combat various vectors of oppression such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. These include the work of Trinh, as well as Chris Marker, Jonas Mekas, Richard Fung, Marlon Riggs, Su Friedrich, Rea Tajiri, and Mona Hatoum, among others. In a chapter that discusses the aforementioned practitioners, Russell argues that their reflexive uses of the first-person voice-over not only places formerly objectified subjects in control of the diegesis, but also deconstructs the associations of the verbally narrated “I” with honesty, truth, or stable interiority. Works such as these

subvert the narrative as well as the documentary conventions of cross-cultural representation by rendering the very notion of identity as thoroughly fragmented, split, and hybrid.²⁶

Although Russell's book was published over fifteen years ago, her description of autoethnographic films applies to a large number of contemporary works, including many of the first-person documentaries discussed in Lebow's 2012 anthology. Given that many of these works seek explicitly to complicate the received formal language of authorship, personhood, and textual authority, their reliance on voice-over commentary, as well as their corresponding verbal rather than visual emphasis, deserves closer critical scrutiny. Even as these works multiply, fragment, and diversify the balance of vocal authority, their predominantly verbal disposition reveals that "voice" in this discourse is more or less equivalent with speech. For instance, Russell notes that although the autoethnographic voice can be expressed through the look of the camera, as well as the image, the voice-over remains its primary site.²⁷ Indeed, the equation of the voice with linguistic meaning remains strong in the widespread use of voice among documentary scholars as a metaphor for some interior motivation (this is likely a legacy of Nichols's influential employment of "voice" as a stand-in for each documentary's unique "social point of view").²⁸ The persistence of this metaphor, as well as its literalization in the voice-over, is symptomatic of the lingering logocentrism of documentary discourse, even though much recent scholarship on the genre has contested Nichols's definition of documentary as a sober, rhetorically oriented discourse.

For the sake of argument, let us entertain the strategic possibilities offered by the convention of voice-over commentary, as described below by Charles Wolfe in his essay on vocal narration in classical documentary:

Those who speak in voice-over may know, comment on, or drown out sounds from the world a film depicts, but that relationship is asymmetrical: voices from that register have no reciprocal power to introduce or comment on the voices that overlay this world. We might want to say, then, that voice-over covers the world of the "diegesis." . . . In short, the idea of "voice-over" depends upon our sense of the film as a text, capable of being partitioned in ways that are conceptual or structural, not simply technological or material.²⁹

Wolfe describes a structural and technological partition in the meaning-making apparatus of documentary that results from a power play between the voice-over and the diegetic sounds and images that it "covers" from above—one that Trinh and Silverman also attribute to its disembodied emanation from an

“other,” off-screen space. At one level, as Chow notes elsewhere, the asymmetrical power of the voice-over is a function of the relationship between sound and image in documentary: because of the positive form of the image, sound functions as a negating “slash mark” that subtracts meaning from the image while appearing to add to it.³⁰ Wolfe locates the voice-over at the apex of such sonic subtraction, given its hierarchy over other sounds. However, with Dyson’s refinement of Dolar in mind, we can also see that a voice’s textual power comes with caveats: namely, it depends upon “removing” undesirable audible material not only from itself, but also from the elements that lie “beneath” it in the audiovisual hierarchy.

Feminist proponents of claiming the voice-over seldom acknowledge this structural logic or the metaphysical narrative of voicing that this convention inevitably activates. Instead, autoethnographic deployments of the voice-over are celebrated as subversive and reflexive: they are thought to displace an authoritarian expository tradition by according a position of power to formerly silenced minoritarian voices and subjectivities. But to what extent does taking back the voice-over go hand in hand with giving up the grain of the voice? What is at stake in the forms of subjectivity and interiority and, by extension, the horizons of humanity evidenced by the voice-over? When we consider all that “goes underground,” in Trinh’s words, the voice “given” to minority individuals in the form of the voice-over comes into view as a form of metaphysical entrapment rather than one of liberation. This precise problematic is given rigorous and compelling treatment in Leslie Thornton’s work.

EXPERIMENTS IN VOICELESSNESS

Boundary-crossing is at the center of Thornton’s film practice. She was among the first of her generation of artists to make the transition from film to video, and her idiom consists of a complex exploration of the material specificities of both media, as well as the cinema theater and the gallery as exhibition contexts. A former painter, she was trained by avant-garde filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Stan Brakhage, and Peter Kubelka and later by proponents of observational documentary such as Ed Pincus and Richard Leacock. Thornton’s early films, as her partner, the writer Thomas Zimmer, recounts, were met with great consternation because of her way of drawing on the rigorously structural principles encountered during her artistic training to undermine the techniques of documentary contingency prized by her teachers.³¹ Moreover, Thornton’s work brings the feminist and postcolonial sensibility of close colleagues such as Trinh, Yvonne Rainer, and Su Friedrich to bear on the thematic and formal preoccupations of experimental film.

The encounter with alterity in its many avatars is a central theme in Thornton's films, whose protagonists and subject matter range from non-Western women to children and animals; however, her work is set apart from many of her fellow-travelers in the experimental film world who share a predilection for a realm "outside" culture in its uncompromising investigation of the politics of representation. Thornton's rigor is also evidenced in the decades-long process involved in several of her major works, whose raw materials she constantly revisits and reactivates in different historical and technological contexts. Most recently, her practice has involved multiscreen installation works that manipulate documentary footage of animals to explore the unconscious dimensions of cinematic vision.

Thus far, scholars who have engaged these themes in Thornton's work have tended to frame her interventions as a cinematic extension of semiotic theories of language and signification. Thornton herself has described her own work in these terms. Others, such as Russell, have situated her work as part of a modernist aesthetic tradition of discontinuity and shock, emphasizing her innovative uses of found footage, archival imagery, and collage.³² These readings, while valuable, tend to disregard those aspects of Thornton's practice that cannot adequately be apprehended with the help of the poststructuralist intellectual paradigms that were in vogue at the time when her work began to gain recognition. I argue that Thornton's most striking cinematic innovations are sonic and have to do with her way of bringing our attention to the violence as well as the potential of the voice as a vexed site of interpellative contact. Below, I examine the sonic design of three of Thornton's important works, *Jennifer*, *Where Are You?* (1981), *Adynata* (1983), and *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985–2013), paying particular attention to the ways in which Thornton explores the stakes of the voice and its status as documentary evidence of humanity.

The readings that follow are not intended to be exhaustive. The films I discuss have already been analyzed in detail in many excellent essays and reviews, several of which are referenced below, and the rich and variegated themes of Thornton's work, which spans over four decades of film, video, and installation art, are beyond any single essay's scope. I focus solely on different instances of Thornton's experiments with the voice-over, with two goals in mind: to demonstrate Thornton's contributions to the critical study of sound, an intellectual history in which she does not currently figure, and to critically reassess the logocentric concept of the voice that currently orients feminist histories of documentary. I argue that Thornton's films remold our vision of progressive representational politics by inhabiting the voice in a thoroughly counterintuitive

manner. Rather than indexing subjectivity or interiority in the linguistic sense, the voice, in Thornton's hands, belongs to the shadowy penumbra of articulate speech: to the subtracted *matter* to which Chow and Dolar refer. In her films, the condition of being voiceless—that is, being mute, speechless, inarticulate, inchoate, or unresponsive—offers a sonic portal to altogether unexpected ways of being in the world. Instead of speaking in defense of the voiceless, her work offers a perverse but ultimately enlightening defense of voicelessness.

EXPANDED LISTENING

What would it mean to apprehend a speaking voice as something other than a voice conveying a linguistic meaning? The experience of enduring Thornton's short film *Jennifer, Where Are You?* involves an uncomfortable but eventually revelatory confrontation with this question. The film's basic elements are captured succinctly in a review by Su Friedrich:

The dominant image is a tight close up shot of a small girl engaged in various activities: playing with lipstick, a mirror, matches. These shots are separated by black leader from other, upside down, images. The soundtrack consists of music, natural sounds (footsteps, water, etc.) and a man's voice repeatedly asking the title question.³³

Clocking a mere ten minutes (see video 1), the brief duration of this 1981 color film is hard to reconcile with the sensation of sustained discomfort into which it plunges the viewer. Like *Peggy and Fred*, which I discuss below, *Jennifer* amplifies the violence of perfectly ordinary, everyday scenes of childhood. The scenario is a female child being summoned by a male authority figure. Thornton's densely layered soundtrack, which switches between found fragments of tinny Baroque piano clips and other comical sound effects, nostalgically evokes the background sounds of channel-switching on a television set during Saturday-morning cartoons. The interruption of this idyll by a parental voice is familiar, even unremarkable. But Thornton's ordering of audiovisual materials turns this quotidian scene of interpellation into a meditation on the violence and hidden possibilities of the cinematic voice-over.

In her review, Friedrich characterizes this film as “a question[ing] of authority and authorship, of the power implicit in authority, of the balance between her fear and her will to disrupt, of the balance between his angry question and his inability to understand her (lack of an) answer.”³⁴ Indeed, the central tension of the film has to do with the cherubic young protagonist's complete indifference

to the question issued by the male voice as she faces the camera, absorbed in play. The acousmatic voice reads as Caucasian, like the little girl, and as middle-aged, its peremptory tone laced with paternal irritation and disapproval. Every thirty seconds, the question is repeated on a loop: “Jennifer, where are you?” Occasionally, a female hand enters from off-screen to light matches, which the girl then blows out.

The film footage (outtakes, we are told, from a fire-safety commercial) seems to belong to an altogether different realm from the voice that hovers over and around it. The set-up is an apt allegory for the inevitable, predatory encroachment of language into the malleable, mimetic world of the child—a personal experience to which Thornton often alludes in interviews.³⁵ However, the modernist fantasy of the “primitive” child existing outside the domain of language (an adjective used by Ed Pincus in reference to Thornton’s work) is only a foil for a more intriguing intervention.³⁶ Rather than castigating the impositions of the spoken voice-over or appropriating its powerful position, *Jennifer* turns into an exploration of alternative avenues for mobility that can exist in the interstices of conventional narrative scaffolding.

In the beginning of the film, the menace of the acousmatic voice from its unseen location fills the innocent profilmic scene with dread: our focus is held by its message, which is as much a command to respond as a question, testifying to the undivided agency of its source. But as the phrase is repeated over and over, the meaning begins to evacuate from the words, until the agency from which they emerge seems less human than mechanical and automatic. The refrain takes on a percussive, musical quality, melding into the other noises and snatches of music. For a moment, it appears as though the child is responding, at least implicitly, to the hail of femininity (“Jennifer”) as she applies bright-red lipstick to her lips, occasionally glancing down at a blue hand mirror. But she does not stop where her lips end, coloring garishly outside the lines until the bottom half of her face is a clownish mess. By the end, she appears bored and fatigued, frowning at the lit matches that are offered to her to blow out (figs. 1–2).

The film’s inversion of patriarchy—as clearly signaled by the found footage of domestic signifiers (a man, a couple, a house) that Thornton splices in, upside-down and in reverse, between the footage of the girl—is only one obvious level at which *Jennifer* can be read. The film also operates more subtly as a training exercise in what we might, modifying Chion’s notion of “reduced listening,” call an “expanded” mode of listening. In *Audio-Vision*, Chion extends the work of composer and music theorist Pierre Schaeffer in differentiating among three different modes of listening in cinema. The two more common modes, causal



FIGURE 1. Still from *Jennifer, Where Are You?* (dir. Leslie Thornton, 1981, 10 mins., color, 16mm). Reproduced with the artist's permission.



FIGURE 2. Still from *Jennifer, Where Are You?* Reproduced with the artist's permission.

and semantic listening, refer respectively to listening to gather information about a cause or source, and listening for a code or language to interpret a message. The third mode, reduced listening, focuses on the traits of sound independent of their cause, meaning, or effect. Chion advocates reduced listening as a means of

disrupting the filmgoer's habitualized modes of perception and developing a more acute auditory attunement, while also acknowledging that it can be difficult to achieve because of the ways in which the cinematic image pre-frames the perception of certain elements of the sound and obscures others (thus the negation of the image by sound, as earlier noted by Chow, can be seen to cut the other way, too). One possible exception is the case of acousmatic sound, which is heard without its cause or source being seen. But whereas Schaeffer believed that the acousmatic could encourage reduced listening, Chion argues that the opposite typically occurs in cinema, with the sound posing a question regarding its source: such is the case with the unseen voice, which always invokes the off-screen extension of the diegetic space.³⁷

In the case of the acousmatic voice-over, causal and semantic listening arguably overshadow reduced listening: the audiovisual hermeneutic described by Chion operates in conjunction with its metaphysical status to subordinate the sonic matter of the voice to its semantic content. Thornton fully engages this dynamic, only to slowly unravel it over the course of *Jennifer*. But whereas for Chion (following Schaeffer) the purpose of reduced listening is to evolve a usable typology of sonic traits, Thornton produces an encounter that could instead be considered a multiplication and expansion of the auditory dimension. As the film unfolds, we are made privy to an encounter with the voice as it might be perceived by an entity not yet habituated to its semantic and indexical signification: as that sonic matter that “does not contribute to” making sense, in Dolar's words. The commanding words “Jennifer, where are you?” disaggregate through incessant repetition into their constitutive matter, and we are able to glimpse in the child's boredom the expanding field of ontological possibilities that the words vainly attempt to contain.

THE SKIN OF THE VOICE

Thornton elaborates the problem of sexual difference in *Jennifer* as a matter of sound as well as vision. “She is all image; he is all voice,” as Mary Ann Doane notes.³⁸ The interplay between looking and speaking is explored even more thoroughly in relation to the imagery and soundscapes of Orientalism in Thornton's 1983 film *Adynata*. I return to the scene of objectification near the start of my essay as a way to tease out this film's sophisticated treatment of the audiovisual intricacies of objectification. When describing Fanon's response to the racist comments of white passersby (“Look, a Negro!”), Chow observes how Fanon was rendered speechless by this vocal appellation. This anecdote also equates Fanon's silence with a form of speech that operates as an eviscerating

objectifying kind of *look* that flattens him into an image: a nonspeaking thing that exists merely to be looked at. A speaking voice, in other words, can have effects that translate at the level of the look, just as a petrifying look can take away speech.

Adynata has been praised by feminist film scholars for its way of grappling with the politics of speaking and looking in cinema. Doane and Linda Peckham have both separately likened Thornton's wordless layering of stereotypical audiovisual signifiers of the "Far East" (ornamented kimonos, powdered and painted faces, exotic flowers in botanical gardens, embroidered "lotus" shoes, Chinese opera recordings, "pinging" musical effects, dialogue from a Korean television soap) with unrelated snippets of contemporary television programs, rock music, and art cinema and the rhetorical term *adynata*, which refers to "a stringing together of impossibilities; sometimes a confession that words fail us."³⁹ Doane interprets Thornton's technique of calibrated mismatching and purposeful disorientation as a way to empty the meaning out of the signifiers of Orientalism through an excess of codification. For Linda Peckham, Thornton's "pre-vocal," murmuring voice-over expresses the failure of words by "speaking with no speech or not speaking as speech" (see video 2).⁴⁰

These readings position Thornton's work as an extension of Trinh's cinematic experiments in "speaking nearby." Trinh was committed to "speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it."⁴¹ Trinh's poetic, evasive voice-over in her film *Reassemblage* (1983) is often cited as an alternative to the authoritative, objectifying tone of ethnographic exposition. Peckham similarly reads Thornton's voluntary "confinement outside language" as a sympathetic meditation on the predicament of being the object of ethnographic scrutiny.⁴² In this instance, the object in question is the film's central figure and inspiration: the elaborately dressed wife of a Chinese Mandarin, posing stiffly with her husband and children in a formal photographic portrait from the late 1800s. Together with her silent reenactment of the ethnic woman's pose, dress, and blank stare, as well as her inhabitation of various other states of confinement, such as foot-binding and bonsai arrangements in a botanical garden, Thornton's own mute response becomes an analogy, according to Peckham, for the condition of being rendered voiceless by the weight of the overdetermined imagery and sounds that inscribe cultural and sexual identity (see figs. 3–6).



FIGURE 3. Still from *Adynata* (dir. Leslie Thornton, 1983, 30 mins., color, 16mm). Reproduced with the artist's permission.



FIGURE 4. Still from *Adynata*. Reproduced with the artist's permission.

Readings such as these reveal much about the inner workings of this fascinating film. However, they fail to notice how Thornton was grappling with the extralinguistic matter of the voice, which, as Dolar notes, is never adequately theorized in the semiotic theories of language and signification that have been used to understand her work. In fact, *Adynata* offers an astute commentary on



FIGURE 5. Still from *Adynata*. Reproduced with the artist's permission.

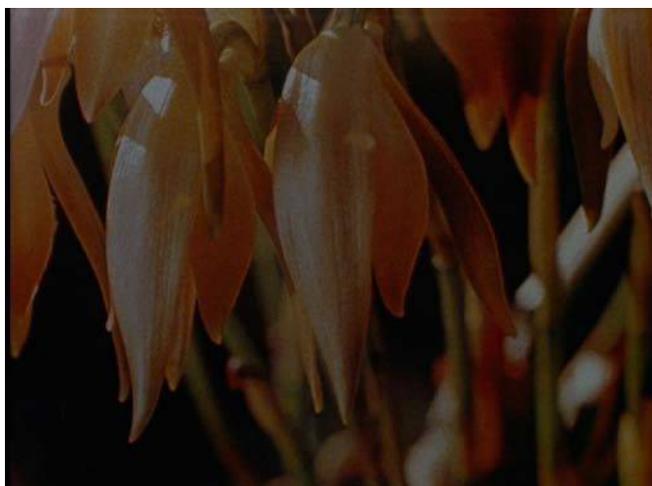


FIGURE 6. Still from *Adynata*. Reproduced with the artist's permission.

the efficacy of the disembodied voice-over as a means of escaping the objectification of a spectacularized body. Thornton's unusual approach to the voice-over in this film gives audiovisual expression to what Chow calls "skin tones," or the audible evidence of racial identity for which voices are routinely scanned in mediated intercultural scenarios even, or especially, when the bodies to which they belong are not visible (Chow notes, for instance, the offshore call-center

agent whose accent “outs” her as South Asian even as she announces herself under a Western name that is legible to her customer base). With the phrase “skin tones,” Chow emphasizes how the auditory phenomenon of the voice is nonetheless subject to a form of surveillance whose logic is visual.⁴³ In this aspect, her work invokes the inverse of Laura U. Marks’s attempt to work against the visual logic of cinema by emphasizing its haptic qualities, or the “skin of the film,” as referenced in the title of this section.⁴⁴

Doane and Peckham both devote considerable attention to Thornton’s mimicry of the visually spectacular and visibly inhibiting poses, costumes, and embodied gestures of the Mandarin woman from the photograph. However, save Peckham’s brief acknowledgment of its “wordless pre-vocal” quality, neither scholar remarks on the uncomfortable details of Thornton’s intermittent voice-over. We first hear this voice-over in conjunction with a sequence that shows a pair of disembodied, jewel-adorned female hands embroidering a pair of lotus-shaped silk shoes, clenching and unclenching with discomfort. Thornton’s utterances, which consist of sing-song imitations of the accented syllables and intonations of a vaguely pentatonic tune (at times they resemble excerpts from the Chinese opera clips, at other times, a child’s rhyme), sound like a crude mimicry of the speech patterns and cadences of “Asian” speech. The effect is discomfiting precisely because of such mimicry is commonly intended as a derogatory form of racism (see video 3).

Whereas Doane and Peckham are quick to recuperate this choice as one that is weighted with symbolic significance—whether the hypercodification of racist speech or the violence of language—I argue that Thornton intends her utterances to be unredeemable. If we approach *Adynata* in the terms put forward by Barthes and Dolar, we can understand Thornton’s echolalic babble as an attempt to inhabit the skin of the other’s voice, or that unredeemable remnant that actively makes meaning even when its role in the signifying operation is not acknowledged. Although this may seem like a regressive gesture that equates cultural otherness with the presymbolic, it is radical in its execution. Thornton’s voice-over enacts, on an auditory level, the white privilege of wearing the outer skin and props of another culture with none of the serious consequences, making clear that what can provide a liberating sensation of immersion for some can be a form of confinement for others. This risky choice offers a pointed critique of the stakes involved in experimental filmmakers’ fascination with escaping the bounds of the symbolic.

Thornton’s disturbing voice-over is also an intervention regarding the vocal idiom of autoethnographic filmmakers such as Trinh and Friedrich, with whom

she is equally in conversation, even though her own work is not autobiographical in any traditional sense, as Zummer has remarked.⁴⁵ By placing her racially loaded preverbal utterances at the top of the film's audiovisual hierarchy, Thornton draws attention to the grainy, embodied aspects of a voice that operates as a substitute for the visible surface of the body and which always threatens to undermine the "inner speech" connoted by the first-person voice-over. This is an act of strategic essentialism: by channeling the stereotypical vocal material that invalidates voices that depart from the ideal of such inner speech, Thornton turns from the traditional notion of having a voice to the unevenly distributed matter that must be subtracted in order to arrive at it. Thornton herself notes: "[m]aybe the 'Self' is not that interesting . . . but what flows through it can be."⁴⁶ *Adynata* is a striking example of the ways in which Thornton directs attention to the space of the encounter between bodies in all of their intractable material differences, and to the cinematic tropes of selfhood and interiority.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND VOCOCENTRISM

I have argued that the voice, especially as it has been understood in feminist discourses regarding documentary and social justice, is thoroughly mired in the cultural politics of objectification. I have also proposed thinking about Thornton's work as a defense of voicelessness: her unusual manipulations of the voice-over draw our attention to the embodied matter of voicing that is actively involved, but seldom acknowledged, in the documentary politics of recognition. Thus far, I have focused on how Thornton's attention to this abjected matter—or what I've called the "skin of the voice"—reveals the implicitly gendered, racialized, and altogether idealized forms of subjectivity or interiority associated with the liberal axiom of "having a voice." In this way, Thornton's films offer an implicit critique of the notion of giving a voice to marginalized or objectified social subjects, as well as the conventional tropes of voicing employed by contemporary feminist filmmakers. To conclude, I offer speculations regarding the more radical implications of Thornton's practice, drawing on her critically acclaimed and ambitious work *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985–2013).

In cinema, Chion writes, a human voice commands the soundtrack much as a human face draws the eye in any shot composition. This unspoken principle of "vococentrism," he argues, is ultimately at stake in the "privilege accorded to the human voice over all other sonic elements" in the technical and aesthetic conventions of cinema.⁴⁷ To state the inverse, we might argue that a voice in cinema connotes humanness only to the extent that it can serve as the audiovisual equivalent of a human face or, as Aristotle puts it, a sound with a

(linguistic) meaning. But unlike a face, which is a discrete, visual, bounded thing, the phenomenal boundlessness of sound means that a speaking voice is alive with elements that threaten to disperse its semantic content. This explains why voices are often attributed to faces or “talking heads” in a variety of cinematic genres. On the surface, this innocent practice seems undeserving of comment, but in fact, it is a way to place a frame around sound and to reel in the inhuman, lawless otherness of the voice. In this regard, the trope of the talking head, in all of its guises, behaves as a version of what Giorgio Agamben has called an “anthropological machine,” or an ideological apparatus for the reproduction of the human.⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have similar concerns in mind when they refer to cinema as a machine of “facialization,” that is, as a signifying system that privileges the human face as a tether of meaning and relational possibilities.⁴⁹

The opening episode of the *Peggy and Fred* series, *The Prologue* (1985), is an exercise in unlearning the principle of vococentrism. It explores the unexpected modes of being and relationality onto which a voice can open when it is unmoored from the normative coordinates of the human. The film famously opens with a dense thicket of ambiguously gendered singing voices: exotic singer Yma Sumac’s vaulting coloratura is layered over extracts from Handel’s *Rinaldo*, a part written for castrato. The uncanny, birdlike resonances of these voices are exaggerated by the image, which features scenes from a science documentary of a set of undulating vocal cords gaping and closing “like a fleshy curtain,” in an undeniable visual reference to singing female genitalia.⁵⁰ The result of this decontextualized pairing is that the voice is utterly estranged as an index of the human, and its analogy with the face perversely inverted. Both soundtrack and image foreground the sonic, mimetic capacities of the voice to merge, bleed, and become something else (figs. 7–8).

The setting of this film, as is well known, consists of a postapocalyptic sci-fi landscape of domestic decay overrun with technological rubble and feral plants in which the two small child protagonists, real-life siblings Janis and Donald Reading, wander unsupervised, seemingly “raised” by a running stream of edutainment that spews forth from an old television set. The prologue’s opening scene sets in motion a battle between two modalities of the voice as they pertain to this allegory of humanity in peril. The camera zooms out to reveal the setting and the science documentary continues playing on the television set. A “neutral” voice-over narrator, reminiscent of Dyson’s “proper” radio voice, asks the listener to listen to a series of differently pitched voices reading aloud the same sentence in order to identify “the pitch most people prefer” for a male versus a female voice (fig. 9).



FIGURE 7. Still from *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* (dir. Leslie Thornton, 1985, 21 mins., b/w, 16mm). Reproduced with the artist's permission.



FIGURE 8. Still from *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue*. Reproduced with the artist's permission.

The children largely ignore these lessons in proper voicing. What is more, Thornton invites the same response from her audience in the two following scenes, which separately feature each child's inchoate musical warblings. Presented largely without cutting, these remarkable *vérité*-like scenes are a study



FIGURE 9. Still from *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue*. Reproduced with the artist's permission.

in entering into the grain of the voice. Perched on a table cluttered with junk, Fred launches into a medley of folk songs, stopping occasionally to crunch noisily on a fistful of nuts. At first, he is captivated by his own performance, crooning for the camera in his white blazer, but soon he loses track of the words. Aimlessly wandering from one tune into another, he becomes fascinated with spitting out some of the words with gurgling, emphatic pleasure (“*Isaac!*,” “and then she *shot* him, she *shot* him real good”) (see video 4).

There is a similar moment in Peggy’s dissolving, tuneless rendition of *Billie Jean*, in which repeating the chorus becomes a portal to an altogether unrepresentable experience. At this precise moment, Thornton tightens her close-up to frame Peggy’s face from the nose upward. The impact of this deliberately artificial editing choice is startling, given the innocuous, observational presence of Thornton’s camera throughout these scenes: Peggy’s eyes and nostrils, rearranged in a strangely alien symmetry, permit a glimpse into the other, limitless realm into which her voice has fled, leaving her face behind (figs. 10–11).

Thornton offers no didactic elaboration of the political, social, or ethical ramifications of the parallel domain of voicelessness that lurks in the shadows of legitimate, articulate speech. We are left to piece this together ourselves from the scenario of the protagonists’ open-ended exploration of their environment, which dovetails with the open-ended form of the *Peggy and Fred* cycle.



FIGURE 10. Still from *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue*.
Reproduced with the artist's permission.

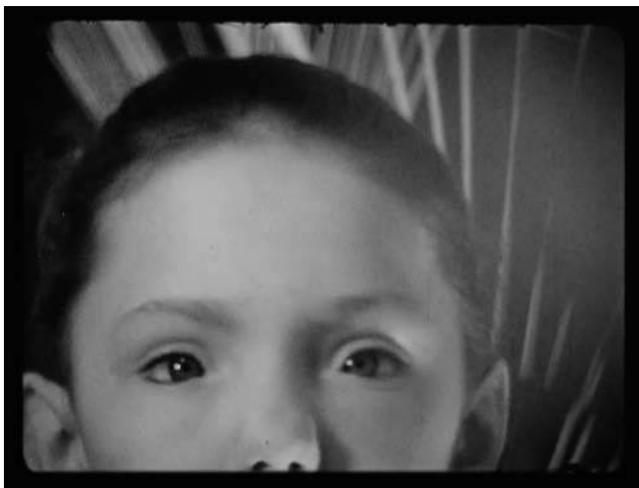


FIGURE 11. Still from *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue*.
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Thornton's process is evocative of the idea of *signifiante* to which Barthes likens the grain of the voice, referring to modes of meaning-making that are by definition opposed to closure:⁵¹ she has added, revised, excised, and reedited various episodes ever since she filmed *The Prologue* in the mid-1980s, so that what

constitutes the cycle at any given screening is never the same (in a 2014 screening of the “complete cycle,” Thornton announced that she was likely to continue editing it and that she intends to exhibit the work in various multimedia installations, even though she does not plan to film new material).

In a way, the figure of a child, which Thornton has described as being “at a dangerous point . . . not quite us and not quite other,” encapsulates the mimetic potential of the voice as well as the ethos of her treatment of the voice’s status as documentary evidence.⁵² Peggy’s and Fred’s meandering vocal utterances allow us, for a moment, to sense a communicative comportment that is less attuned to the gendered and racial coordinates of intersubjective exchange than it is to a merger with an imaginative environment—one that multiplies ontological and relational possibilities rather than paring them down. Thornton embraces and attunes us to this sonic potential, using her cinematic experiments to accommodate us to a more capacious understanding of the human that can be arrived at through voicelessness. With sincere thanks to Leslie Thornton, Tom Zimmer, Kathy Geritz, Caetlin Benson-Allott, Amelie Hastie, and Genevieve Yue. ■

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NOTES

1. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 4 (1975): 66–18; Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

2. See, for instance, Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). Marks examines a variety of film and video works that engage what she describes as a “haptic” mode of visibility, in contrast to an instrumental, Western mode of visibility that feminist and postcolonial critics have associated with objectification, mastery, and othering.

3. Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

4. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 109.

5. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward An Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Monthly Review, 1971), 127–86.

6. Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, 6; see also 2–7.
7. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
8. See chaps. 1 and 2 in Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). These chapters contain an extensive discussion of Plato's and Aristotle's writings on the nonlinguistic manifestations of the voice.
9. Aristotle, *De Anima*, in *The Basic Writings of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 420b, 28–37.
10. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 14–15.
11. *Ibid.*, 13–30 (see all of chap. 1, “The Linguistics of the Voice”), 70.
12. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 115.
13. Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 181, 182. Author's italics.
14. Dominic Pettman, “Pavlov's Podcast: The Acousmatic Voice in the Age of MP3s,” *differences* 22, nos. 2–3 (2011): 140–67; Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
15. These countertheories of the voice may also be productively elaborated in relation to theories of noise. For instance, Laura U. Marks has discussed noise as a casualty of a hierarchy of sonic perception in which certain sounds are filtered out. See Laura U. Marks, “A Noisy Brush with the Infinite: Noise in Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics,” in *Sound and Image in Digital Media*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 103–25.
16. See Pooja Rangan, “Toward an Autistic Counter-Theory of the Documentary Voice,” in Rangan, *Immediations: Humanitarianism, Otherness, and the Documentary Logic of Intervention* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2017).
17. Frances Dyson, “The Genealogy of the Radio Voice,” in *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound, and Transmission*, eds. Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander (Banff, AB: Banff Center Press, 1994), 178; see also 167, 174. Although Dyson does not specify the cultural and historical context of the radio forms she discusses, other radio scholars have argued that her model is applicable not only to the “masculine hegemony” established by the radio as a pervasive medium of the 1920s and 1930s in America, but also remains relevant as late as the 1990s, when female voices were more likely to be heard in radio dramas, domestic ads and testimonials, and lyrical jingles than in news genres. See, for instance, Dmitri Zakharine, “Preface,” in *Electrified Voices: Medial, Socio-Historical, and Cultural Aspects of Voice Transfer*, eds. Dmitri Zakharine and Nils Meise (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 3.
18. See Bill Nichols's definitive account of the evolving modes of documentary: Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 17–30.
19. For a summation of these debates, see George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman, “Ethnographies as Texts,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11 (1982): 25–69; and Brian Winston, “The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (London: Routledge, 1993), 37–57.

20. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity," in Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (London: Routledge, 1991),
21. *Ibid.*, 60; see also 53–64. Author's italics.
22. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).
23. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
24. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 165; see also 42–71.
25. See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Alisa Lebow, ed., *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012); Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Frameworks* 49, no. 2 (2008): 24–47; and Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
26. Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 275–314.
27. *Ibid.*, 277.
28. Nichols writes, "By 'voice' I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense 'voice' is not restricted to any one code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary" (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," 18).
29. Charles Wolfe, "Historicizing the 'Voice of God': The Place of Vocal Narration in Classical Documentary," *Film History* 9 (1997): 150.
30. Rey Chow, "After the Passage of the Beast: 'False Documentary' Aspirations, Acousmatic Complications," in *Ranciere and Film*, ed. Paul Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 35.
31. See Thomas Zummer, "Leslie Thornton," *Senses of Cinema* 23 (December 2002), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/leslie-thornton-experimental/thornton/> (accessed January 28, 2015).
32. See chap. 5, "Archival Apocalypse: Found Footage as Ethnography," in Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 238–46.
33. Su Friedrich, "Jennifer, Where Are You? A Film by Leslie Thornton," *Downtown Review* 3, nos. 1 and 2 (1981–82): 8.
34. *Ibid.*, 9.
35. In an interview with Irene Borger, Thornton explains: "The way language works has been a lifelong preoccupation, starting in childhood when I was painfully shy and had trouble speaking. The kind of extreme self-focus of shyness, the kind of analysis and appraisal that is nearly constant, and in a way objectifies language, even for a child. Language is something outside. Speech was like an object, an enemy, a barrier. It was externalized. Language was overwhelming, inadequate to describe or convey many things—I had a basic sense of this in childhood." See Irene Borger, "An Interview with

Leslie Thornton,” in *Forces of Curiosity*, ed. Irene Borger (Valencia, CA: CalArts/Alpert Foundation, 1999), 140.

36. Zummer recalls that Ed Pincus, one of Thornton’s teachers in film school, called Thornton a “primitive” for her deliberate transgression of the tenets of *cinéma vérité* in her 1976 film *All Right You Guys*. See Zummer, “Leslie Thornton.”

37. Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 25–34.

38. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), 184.

39. *Ibid.*, 187, and see all of chap. 9, “The Retreat of Signs and the Failure of Words: Leslie Thornton’s *Adynata*,” 178–87.

40. Linda Peckham, “Not Speaking with Language/Speaking with No Language: Leslie Thornton’s *Adynata*,” in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1990), 183; see also 181–87.

41. Nancy Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby’: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 82–91; quote from 87.

42. Peckham, “Not Speaking with Language,” 183.

43. Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker*, 7–9.

44. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*.

45. Zummer, “Leslie Thornton.”

46. Leslie Thornton, quoted in Laleen Jayamane, Leslie Thornton, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, “If Upon Leaving What We Have to Say We Speak: A Conversation Piece,” in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, eds. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 54.

47. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

48. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 37.

49. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 167–91.

50. Quote from Ed Halter, “Hell Is for Children: On Leslie Thornton’s *Peggy and Fred in Hell*,” *Artforum* (September 2012): 515. Also see Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 184.

51. Barthes used *signifiante* to refer to “the un-end of possible operations in a given field of a language.’ Contrary to signification, *signifiante* cannot be reduced, therefore, to communication, representation, expression” (Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” 181).

52. Jayamane, Thornton, and Trinh, “If Upon Leaving,” 54.