

Gen Doy

*Vertiginous Voices:
The Lover's Voice..... Kim, Madeleine, Judy and Gen*

Last night I dreamt I went to see *Vertigo* again.

I have watched, and listened to, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* many times. ¹

I cannot remember the first time I saw it, which is frustrating and puzzling to me, given how much I am drawn to the film. I was only ten years old when the film was released in 1958, and I suspect I did not see it until I was considerably older. I may be mistaken, but I do not think that I would have had the same experience of this film unless I had previously experienced desire, love, melancholy and loss. As a ten-year old, I had experienced some, but not all of these emotions.

I remember, much later, a female colleague at work telling me that when she watched *Vertigo* she felt faint with desire. Indeed the vertigo of the title is not just something brought on by the leading male character's fear of heights; it is a dizziness and disorientation, a panic leading to loss of balance (in many sense of the word), and even loss of consciousness...not just the loss of consciousness when we faint, but the destabilisation of consciousness when the unconscious threatens to take control of our thoughts and behaviour. This what happens when you fear that you will fall from a building, a high stool, or a church tower, but more dangerously and excitingly, it is what happens to you when you fall in love and you are drawn physically and emotionally into a spiralling vortex of the recurring promise of desire fulfilled.

Vertigo is the kind of art I would want at my funeral, but I am sure it would only reduce people tears to be confronted with such seductive sounds and images of loss, and the impossibility of re-gaining what it is you have lost, even if you imagined that you possessed it in the first place. The pain of desire, loss, mourning and melancholy would be too much to bear. ² And I have no wish to return from the dead to take possession of the body and mind of another.

Haunting, ghosts and the spectral are prominent themes and plot devices in *Vertigo*. The *revenant* ... the ghost ... the person who comes back, is not just Carlotta Valdes, who supposedly takes possession of Madeleine Elster. The *revenant* comes back when Madeleine comes back as Judy Barton, who comes back as Madeleine, only to be lost once again. Who knows what Scottie will do after the end of the film? Perhaps walk the streets looking for another Madeleine or another Judy.

¹ C.Barr, *Vertigo*, BFI, 2002 is an informative introduction to the film.

² For the classic text on melancholy see S.Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *On Metapsychology*, vol.11 in The Penguin Freud Library , Penguin Books, London , 1991, pp.245-268

The film itself begins to haunt you after you have experienced it and begun to understand it. Its power comes from (amongst other things) the density of its layers.... images, sounds and voices, music, colour, movement, plot.... Kim Novak acts Madeleine Elster and then Judy Barton....but when Kim Novak was acting the part of Madeleine, she was only *pretending to be* Madeleine....she was Judy Barton all the time.... and none of them ever really existed apart from Kim Novakwho was “really” Marilyn Pauline Novak.... who was “created” for the role by Hitchcock. The director specified her costumes, her wigs, her tightly fitting bra as Madeleine, and Madeleine’s famous spiralling, shell-like and ear-like coiffure.³ The camera lens draws us into its depths like a whirlpool of fetishism as Madeleine sits in front of the painting of Carlotta Valdes in the art museum in San Francisco.

The film is, on the face of it, a murder mystery and thriller, but, more profoundly, a meditation on love and loss, desire and melancholy, and the impossibility of possessing the love object. The “plot” is as follows....

Businessman Gavin Elster hires his friend Scottie (James Stewart) to follow his wife Madeleine who appears to be possessed by the spirit of her ancestor, the tragic nineteenth-century figure of Carlotta Valdes, who killed herself while suffering from depression. Scottie is suffering from vertigo, due to a tragic accident when he was in the police-force. Elster knows this, and plots to kill his wife and throw her body from the tower of a mission church, knowing that Scottie will not be able to climb to the top of the tower, despite being lured there by Novak/Madeleine. Scottie therefore thinks that Madeleine, with whom he has fallen deeply and passionately in love, is dead, and falls into a depressive melancholy, unable to even speak. Though his therapist plays him Mozart, he seems to hear nothing and is totally unresponsive. Midge, a professional designer and painter who apparently is in love with Scottie, is unable to get Scottie to respond to her, and at this point walks away and out of the film. The seeming normality of everyday life when Scottie and Midge used to meet, casual conversational banter, and working to earn a living, is pushed aside in the face of hugely passionate and disruptive urges of love, despair, and loss.

Later, still fragile and downcast, Scotty wanders around the city of San Francisco revisiting the places where he followed Madeleine when he was first asked by her husband to “keep an eye on her”. Outside the very flower-shop where he spied voyeuristically on Madeleine as she bought a posy, he encounters a woman who reminds him of his lost love object. Described by Slavoj Zizek as “an ordinary, rather vulgar, common girl” this woman is actually Madeleine, or rather the woman who pretended to be Madeleine Elster.⁴

“He or she is dead. Yet a tiny something survives, emerges from its hiding place. From under the veil, he or she lets me catch a glimpse, hear a whisper of some continuing faint movement or noise. There is murmur, a ventriloquy, rising from the tomb in which he or she or someone else, either a contemporary or an ancestor, was

³ See the useful interview with Novak, 2003, at http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin/kim_novak_c.html pp.2-3.

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Uq-kaUFyIk> excerpt from Zizek’s film *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, 2006

buried alive, sequestered, with their desires cut out, deprived of both life and death, and above all, something has been left *unsettled*. “⁵

“Something” in this young woman, Judy Barton, ... (Novak was twenty-five years’ younger than James Stewart)... moves Scottie to follow her to her hotel room, a space which will soon be transformed as a magical, otherworldly place where the dead are resurrected, and bathed in a spectral light offer themselves up to love-making. Scottie’s urge is not to have a sexual relationship with a dead woman, a ghost or a vampire, who can only be perceived by him and no-one else, but to resurrect the dead Madeleine.⁶ He persuades Judy to date him, and he soon tries to obsessively transform her into the lost Madeleine. She begs to be loved for herself, but gives in to his demands for a new Madeleine. Little does he know that she actually is...or was.... Madeleine. He gradually transforms her in fashion houses and beauty parlours until she becomes a pure simulacrum...a copy of which there never existed an original. She returns to the hotel room, and in a final touch, he makes her twist her dyed silvery-blond hair into the spiral which will suck him in....”the spiral of time”....⁷ They kiss, intoxicated, dizzy with desire and incredulity, as the camera turns around them, mimicking the dizziness of vertigo. She is his, he is hers.....

But on that very same evening, Scottie realizes that he is the victim of a carefully conceived plot, as he notices Judy put on a necklace Elster has given her, the necklace which appeared in the portrait of Carlotta Valdes in the art museum. Forcing Judy to accompany him to the scene of the pseudo-Madeleine’s death in order to learn the truth, he drags her upstairs to the top of the tower where Elster threw the body of his dead wife to the rooftops below. Scottie confronts the truth...no fetish or amulet will ward off the evil which ensues...a nun appears, having heard their voices, and startles Judy, who in an uncanny doubling and repetition of the previous death, falls or perhaps even jumps, from the bell-tower.

1958 in the USA

⁵ See “Theoretra: An alternative to Theory” by M. Torok, 1982 in N. Abraham and M. Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol.1, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.254. Maria Torok argues that introjection (the process of taking things in to the mind and developing with them, continually becoming, and responding to events, emotions and traumas) is a sign that mourning is taking place. However when the loss (of a love object, for example) is not acknowledged and the traumatised and hurt subject builds a little sepulchre within him/herself where the ghost of the loved one is buried, introjection does not take place. The subject continues to be haunted and does not manage to take steps towards recovery. Scottie never succeeds in coming to terms with his loss of Madeleine because he refuses to let her go, and in fact he does find her again, beneath the disguise of a Madeleine that never really existed that he has forced upon Judy.

⁶ See Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu Monogatari*, 1953, for an example of a man who is seduced by a dead woman, discussed by Jalal Toufic “Black Holes radiate lovingly” in A. Bangma et al eds, *Resonant Bodies Voices Memories*, Rotterdam, 2008, pp.51-58.

⁷ The filmmaker Chris Marker refers to Madeleine’s hair as “the spiral of time” in his film *Sans Soleil*, 1982, where Marker pays tribute to *Vertigo*. Also in his film *La Jettée*, references to *Vertigo* abound, especially a sequence with tree-trunk where dates are pointed out. See also V. Burgin, *The Remembered Film*, Reaktion, London, 2004, p.107.

History and the past are important elements in *Vertigo*. Madeleine is supposedly haunted and possessed by her ancestor Carlotta Valdes, Scottie is haunted by Madeleine, and, once we have seen the film, we become haunted by it. The film is now over fifty years old, and James Stewart and Hitchcock are both dead. At the time the film was made, its actors wore contemporary dress and inhabited actual scenes in California. Now of course, it seems as if it is from a mysterious and almost vanished other world. Yet, when we watch the film, we watch the images of these dead people brought back to life like a phantasmagoria created by means of projected light. Derrida's word-play of hauntology/ontology more telling in the French *hauntologie* ... is almost perfect in describing the collision of being haunted and being uncertain of the status of being / existence of a living person. ...like Madeleine....⁸

When Scottie and Madeleine visit the forest with the giant redwood trees, wreathed in mist and ethereal light, Madeleine acts her possession by Carlotta Valdes. Pointing at the stump of a giant tree whose rings are marked with dates of historical events such as the Battle of Hastings, Magna Carta, and the Declaration of Independence. Madeleine/Novak indicates points on the rings and intones in an almost disembodied voice : "Here I was born and there I died...It was only a moment...You took no notice". Pierre Nora, in his famous essay on "lieux de mémoire" (places of remembering) , refers to them poignantly as "moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded."⁹

Vertigo itself is like a point in history. Although resonant with spectres of the past, it has nonetheless been torn away from the movement of history. Released in 1958, it presented a self-contained world buried amongst, and oblivious to, wider ongoing social and political issues such as The Cold War, economic downturn and depression, and racial oppression in the USA. Despite the presentation of the female characters in the film as desirable, capable (Midge and Judy earn their own livings), it was only in this year that the first female African America flight-attendant, Ruth Carol Taylor, was judged worthy of being given a job alongside white women and was appointed to Mohawk airlines. That same year, Mildred Loving and her white husband were arrested in Virginia and sentenced to a year in jail for being a "mixed-race" couple.¹⁰ The Black singer, actor and political activist Paul Robeson finally had his passport reinstated, but was rarely seen in public after giving two sell-out concerts due to persecution by the secret services. In July of 1958, the US sent 5,000 marines to Lebanon to shore up the pro-western government there.

In the world of *Vertigo* there is not a single Black or Latino person, as far as I can see. Carlotta Valdes, the "ghost", is specifically described as Spanish, rather than Mexican. The world of desire is for white people. Even Judy Barton has to be remade

⁸ See J.Derrida , *Spectres of Marx*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994,p.10 ff.

⁹ P.Nora, "Between Memory and History:*Les Lieux de Mémoire*", in *Representations*, 26, Spring 1989, pp.7-24, quote from p.12. In an interview from 2003, Novak describes being moved by touching the rings in the tree, "you have such a sense of the passage of time, of history...touching the essence, the very substance of life", and later took her father with her to visit the redwood forest. "He wept and so did I. He 'got' it in the same way as I do." http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin/kim_novak_c.html p.1.

¹⁰ <http://www.forthoodsentinel.com/story2.php?id=8462>

from the working-class girl that she is (remember Žižek's description of her as vulgar and common) into the higher class Madeleine, and this is not insignificant for the fulfilment of Scottie's sexual desire. Falling for a ghost is all very well, but she has to be an educated and socially acceptable one, and wear her hair in a chignon .

The contemporary Black British film-maker John Akomfrah's recent exhibition at Carroll/Fletcher Gallery entitled *Hauntologies* , has a somewhat different kind of haunting in mind from that of Hitchcock. Akomfrah's work is dedicated to the experience of migration, displacement, racism, and marginalisation lived by Black people. The holocaust of slavery is an ever-present historical event which haunts the Black diasporan experience.

Avery Gordon, in her thought-provoking book *Ghostly Matters :Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, also relates the concept of haunting and the spectral to narratives of the dispossessed, the marginalised and the disappeared. "To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories" (p17). It is unlikely that she was thinking of *Vertigo* when she wrote:"Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition." (p8) However the way in which the film makes us feel and experience through our bodies the situation of Scottie and Madeleine/Judy, their desire and its passion and pain, the expectation, excitement, the persistence of their hopes despite everything, is, I would argue, "transformative recognition".

The political and historical awareness of Akomfrah's poetic works complement the approach of Hitchcock in *Vertigo*, where the focus is much more on a compelling personal relationship between a man and a woman, which is conducive to a psychoanalytical approach. Yet when Akomfrah speaks about haunting, and his interest in Derrida's political/philosophical concept of hauntologie, we realise that haunting can also be related to the very personal situation of Madeleine/Judy and Scottie:

"The idea of *Hauntologies* comes from Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. In this text he was gripped by the idea of ghosting, of how the other invades and structures the self. I find it especially resonant because it alludes to questions of mourning and memory, to subjectivity as a scene of being possessed by the past and what he also called spectrality: the way in which the past haunts the present. It is not that the term absolutely fits what we are trying to do here, but it gives you an indication of the ideas and processes I'm hoping will come out of the show." ¹¹

Akomfrah's show in London included *Peripeteia* (2012) which takes as its inspiration two drawings by Dürer of a Black man, and a Black woman . These figures, now lost to history, wander in a contemporary moorland landscape, inviting us to insinuate the past into the present. Like his recent longer work, *The Nine Muses*, (2010), Akomfrah's assured creative deployment of sound and images builds up a densely-layered and seductive visual and sound environment, immersing the viewer

¹¹ Akomfrah, J. interview with Barbara Rodriguez-Muñoz (Go to past exhibitions and download exhibition publication). <http://www.carrollfletcher.com/exhibitions/12/overview/>

and listener in a potent and poetic meditation on history, landscape, belonging and culture. Akomfrah situates history at the core of his work, often editing-in archival footage and sound in order to make the past collide with the present. This is very different from what happens in *Vertigo*, where “reality” is kept at a distance while the past becomes part of an elaborate deception within which the two main characters become entrapped.

However the brilliant deployment and fusion of the aural and the visual in both directors’ work is something they share. Supported by his sound collaborator Trevor Mathison, Akomfrah has spoken of his desire to construct a dialogue between sounds and images in his work, and also a dialogue between different elements of the soundtrack itself. Music, spoken words by various actors, diegetic sounds, layers of historical archival sound, and voiceovers (such as in his recent work on Stuart Hall, *The Continuing Conversation*, 2012) are deployed to create rich multilayered sound experiences using a number of speakers (that is, various speaking voices within the work, *and* a number of loudspeakers giving the sounds a presence in space)...sound experiences which permeate the body.

Akomfrah states: “Sound has a gaze, I don’t mean sound as music...I mean the physicality of noise in general has a gaze and that reverses the traditional understandings that people have about sound and the way sound and image works. Normally images are what have gazes or points of view and sound underscores – I’m very interested in the sense of cacophony in the metaphoric sense, it has a kind of subversive presence, it has a sort of disruptive value vis à vis the logic of images, images say there’s an “A” and a “B” and sound says ‘actually no, there’s no A and B, there’s just flux’.”¹²

Akomfrah consciously sets out to make sound an important part of his work; part of a creative dialogue which produces the whole piece. But other films, such as *Vertigo*, for example, can be conceived of as multi-layered dialogues between sound and image once we come to question modes of analysis such as semiotics, which give precedence to the visual. Arguing for a bodily experience of film, not just one employing the spectatorial gaze, Laura U. Marks in her wonderful book, *The Skin of the Film*, writes that “Theories of embodied spectatorship counter at their root theories of representation grounded in the alienation of visuality from the body, in particular Lacan’s theory of the mirror phase, which has been so influential in cinema studies.” (p150) Freudian and Lacanian notions of loss at the heart of sexualized viewing subjectivity were also referred to by Silverman, when she wrote in 1988 that “Film theory has been haunted since its inception by the spectre of a loss or absence at the center of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject.”¹³

Laura U. Marks argues also that our bodies encode history, influencing how we perceive the world. (*op. cit.* p152) Perception can also be consciously and unconsciously manipulated, screening out unpleasure and the traumatic. As Marks effectively puts it “perception is not an infinite return to the buffet table of lived experiences but a walk through the minefield of embodied memory.” (p152) Such a

¹² From an interview with Akomfrah on the DVD of *The Nine Muses*, 2010.

¹³ K.Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror. The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1988, p.2.

walk through the minefield of embodied memory takes place in the latter part of *Vertigo*, where Scottie tries to dig up the memories buried deep in his and Judy's bodies, and resurrect them. His impossible wish to unite past and present briefly makes the embers of a smouldering, almost smothered, fire burst into life.

Avery Gordon, towards the end of *Ghostly Matters*, persuasively calls for a different kind of cultural and social analysis, leading to a sensuous knowledge, not just an intellectual one. This is clearly something that artists can relate to, whatever media they work in. Earlier in her book, following Marx, she points out that capitalism transforms the living into the dead. The task of the radical academic, she argues, is to try to answer the question of how to transform the dead into the living. (p168) Gordon attempts to lead us along the path to this sensuous knowledge by looking at slavery, and the tortured and disappeared in Argentina, not just as broad themes but also through individuals. She concludes that "Sensuous knowledge is a different kind of materialism, neither idealistic nor alienated but an active practice or passion for the lived reality of ghostly magical invented matters. Sensuous knowledge is receptive, close, perceptual, embodied, incarnate." (p205) But this is also the knowledge that Scottie has in Judy's hotel room when they come together in that almost magical kiss, conjured up from the past. Scottie knows Judy really is Madeleine incarnate when he kisses her, and we are allowed to know this too, as he breaks off from the kiss to find himself transported back to the livery stable at the old mission to the south of the city where he was with Madeleine before she "died". The discovery of the necklace is perhaps not that much of a surprise to him; rather the coming to the surface of something he would rather had remained repressed; a moment where the uncanny is materialised in an object he has seen before as a painted representation.

Despite their differences of time, place and *genre*, these different filmic works by Akomfrah and Hitchcock do resonate with Gordon's sought-for "new way of knowing". Or perhaps the "new way of knowing" is partly a return to a previous way of knowing based on a sensuous politics...more precisely a sensuous politics of listening. As Janice Radway writes in her foreword to Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* "...a knowing that is more a listening than a seeing, a practice of being attuned to the echoes and murmurs of that which has been lost, but which is still present among us in the form of intimations, hints, suggestions and portents." (Gordon p.x)

Vertigo appears to be far more about seeing than listening, the obvious reason being that Scottie, the retired policeman, is reluctantly persuaded to return to work as a "private eye" and carry out a surveillance operation on Madeleine Elster. So for much of the early part of the film we see through Scottie's eyes as we spy on Madeleine, who, seemingly, does not realise she is being watched. However the sound in *Vertigo* is also very important. Bernard Herrmann's music, the diegetic sounds, and the spoken script all work together to combine in dialogue with the visual which draws in the viewer and listener. From the very beginning of the titles, we are shown the face of Kim Novak, but starting with her ear and a bit of her mouth, her eyes, then one eye, from which the titles start to emerge.

After Scottie's traumatic experience on the roof, where his colleague falls to his death, we discover he is suffering from vertigo, which is caused by a problem in the brain or the inner ear. Throughout the film, if we are attentive, not only seeing, but

hearing, provides a rich sensuous experience. While Scottie is following Madeleine, he falls in love with her by looking at her intently, even obsessively. At times he appears to be like a Peeping Tom, especially in the flower shop where Madeleine goes to buy a posy like the one in Carlotta Valdes' portrait. We see him hiding behind a door spying on Madeleine. The erotic power of his gaze does not even need the sound of her voice at this stage. In the flower shop, we see her lips and face move as she talks to the attendant, though we hear nothing but Hermann's film-music. Gradually this withholding of the sound of Madeleine's voice becomes a source of increased desire. When Scottie follows her to the art museum, we see and hear the famous scene where the camera lens draws us into the spiral of Madeleine's hair, like a throat, the entrance to the ear, and of course other entrances to her body. Breaking off from this vertiginous prospect, Scottie asks the attendant "Say, will you tell me something?..." The attendant will, but Madeleine does not. He has "fallen for her" without even hearing her voice.

Hitchcock creates a long sequence where Scottie is following Madeleine and we hear music but never her voice. The first time we hear her voice is after Scottie takes her home, takes off her wet clothes after she has jumped into the bay, and she wakes up. First we hear her mumbling incoherently in the bed, and then she appears to say her first audible words of the film "What am I doing here?..." Her voice is well-educated, slightly English, slightly clipped. Her voice is the voice of her part, just as her look is. Midge, who has a fairly normal, slightly flirty, chatty relationship with Scottie, watches Madeleine leave the house later in the film and remarks "...was it a ghost? Was it fun?..."

Scottie is hooked. Unknown to him, Madeleine is as well, and not because she is acting her previously agreed part. Amy Lawrence, in her book *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, discusses how some Hollywood stars, such as Dietrich, Garbo, Lauren Bacall (and, I would add, Ingrid Bergman) were fetishised for their low, sometimes husky voices, glamorous and ambiguous in contrast to their often ultra-feminine appearances. (p89) Novak's is not this kind of voice when she is acting Madeleine, but is much lower when she is Judy. Kaja Silverman, from whom Lawrence borrows (and modifies) this discussion, in her well-known book *The Acoustic Mirror*, argues that in Hollywood cinema the female body becomes incorporated into the voice "in the guise of accent, speech impediment, timbre, or 'grain'. This vocal corporealization is to be distinguished from that which gives the sounds emitted by Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, or Lauren Bacall their distinctive quality..." (Silverman, p.61) This low husky quality connotes masculinity, resulting in the semblance of exceeding the gender of the body which produces it. I confess myself I am far more attracted to the voices of Garbo, Bacall and Dietrich, for example, than the voices of such stars as Barbara Stanwyck (despite her wonderful acting), and Catherine Hepburn, whose voice I find irritating and enervating. The voices of male actors too, have their erotic qualities (or not). At times the sound of their voices is disturbed by "noise" or "grain" foreshadowing their eventual spectral status, the sounds that betray heavy smoking, as with Gary Cooper and John Wayne.

In *Vertigo*, Kim Novak's voice as Judy is louder, more confident, and more "ordinary", unlike that of the more educated and well-off Madeleine. Judy does have a regional accent, and shows Scottie her driving license to prove that she comes from a small provincial town. Significantly, when Judy returns to the hotel, is persuaded to

twist her hair into a spiral, and they kiss, there is no sound of voices, only Hermann's swelling, engulfing music. Lawrence also remarks on the Hollywood "audio-spectacle" which constantly "invites the auditor to bathe in a wash of sound, music and voice, all promising pleasure in themselves without need of narrative, psychologically motivated characters, causality in space and time, or closure". She refers to the famous essay by Roland Barthes "The Grain of the Voice", where "Barthes describes the elusive, but overwhelming, pleasure that comes from listening to the voice" (p.96). "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs...I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man *or* woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic".¹⁴ Lawrence points out that since Barthes is speaking of the recorded voice, it has become an object of fetishism, a capturable object. (p.23) Barthes talks about the grain of the voice being the space between language and voice, where you do not hear the meaning of what is being sung or said, you hear the body and the breath, the substance of the individual voice. You hear a voice, I think, which is already almost a ghost. No sooner than you have heard it, it is in the past.

Yet why does Scottie not try to change Judy's voice? He tries to change almost everything else about her to make her into a resurrected Madeleine. Perhaps because when he fell in love with her he never heard her voice or listened to her, he gazed at her. Or perhaps Madeleine sometimes spoke to him as if Carlotta Valdes was speaking through her body, and Scottie is not in love with Carlotta Valdes. Or might it have something to do with "the grain of the voice"? Because the different identities/voices of Madeleine and Judy and Carlotta Valdes all come from the same body, the listener's access to the Barthesian "grain of the voice"/the physical presence of the body in the voice, is frustrated and confusing. Scottie wants the sight of Madeleine to be her identity, not her sound. I still can not work out completely why he does not seem bothered about changing the appearance but not the voice of Judy. Perhaps because he realises there is part of her that escapes him, or perhaps because he is mainly interested in the exterior of his loved one, not something that comes, with her breath, from the interior.

I am interested in thinking about whether there is an auditory equivalent of voyeurism. Voyeurism involves sexual arousal and eroticism derived from looking at the object of desire, usually another person who does not know s/he is being looked at. There seems to be far less discussion of sexual arousal through listening or hearing someone's voice when they are not aware of being listened to. It did, and does exist, however. There is an intriguing testament to the aural excitement experienced by a visitor walking around the streets at Saint Paul's in London in the early seventeenth century:

"It is a heap of stones and men, with a vast confusion of Languages, and were the Steeple not sanctified nothing liker Babel. The noyse in it is like that of Bees, a strange humming or buzze, mixt of walking, tongues, and feet. It is a kind of still roare or loud whisper...It is the other expence of the day, after Playes, Tauerne

¹⁴ R.Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice", in *Image-Music-Text*, transl. S.Heath, Fontanta/Collins, 1977, pp.179-189, quote on p.188.

[tavern] and a Baudy-house, and men haue still some Oathes left to swear here. It is the eares Brothel, and satisfies their lust , and ytch” .¹⁵

In an article entitled “Eavesdropping:-An Aural Analogue of Voyeurism?” Elisabeth Weis proposes a psychoanalytic basis for an erotics of cinematic eavesdropping¹⁶ and proposes the French term *écouteur* for an eavesdropper. This French term for a (male) listener is also used for a second earpiece on a telephone, which allows another listener to overhear a conversation. But she quickly dilutes the topic in a disappointing way, opting to discuss all eavesdropping behaviour, not just listening as an erotic pleasure. She refers to the so-called “primal scene” of Freud who supposes the child overhearing his/her parents engaging in sexual intercourse. She adds “It is often not important what words are overheard; rather, that knowledge is often of something momentous, terrible (anxiety producing), erotic, and secret – carnal knowledge.” (Weis website p.5) Weis also interestingly mentions people who “overhear” as part of their jobs, and the roles they play in certain films. For example the priest in the confessional, the analyst, the counsellor, the judge who “hears” a case, or the “bugger” (the famous example of this being Coppola’s *The Conversation*, 1974).

A key example of falling in love with one’s own image is the myth of Echo and Narcissus. Echo, who loved him, gradually pined away till there was nothing left but traces of her voice. There seems to be no equivalent of this visual narcissism in terms of sound. (This issue was addressed in a paper by artist Annie Goh which discussed oral narcissism given at a research event organised by CRISAP at the LCC 17 May 2012.) No-one seems to have fallen in love with their own voice in myth or story, as far as I have discovered. When we speak of someone who has fallen in love with their own voice it has a negative meaning in the sense that the person talks too much, usually boring us. However there are examples of people who fall in love with someone through hearing their voice, the opposite of Scottie and Madeleine, as in *A Matter of Life and Death* (Powell and Pressburger, 1946) where David Niven the wartime aircraft pilot “falls for” the woman air-controller on the other end of the radio just as he believes he is crashing to his death and bales out.

The pleasures and seductions of the voice are strangely undervalued. The emphasis on looking and voyeuristic satisfaction promised (and sometimes fulfilled) by the film often leads the cinemagoer or gallery goer to give little attention to the voice, especially when the filmmaker has done the same. In contemporary gallery films and videos there is considerable emphasis on computer generated sounds and noises, background sounds, or a soundscape where the human voice is submerged most of the time in an elaborately edited aural experience. Even Akomfrah, greatly talented though he is, very occasionally overdoes the density of layers and post-production

¹⁵ John Earle , *Micro-cosmographie*, 1629, quoted in B.R. Smith, “The Soundscapes of Early Modern England” chapter 8 in Smith, M.M. *Hearing History:A Reader*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 2004, pp85-111, quoted on p.92.

¹⁶ Weis, E., “Eavesdropping:-An Aural Analogue of Voyeurism?”
<http://studio.berkeley.edu/coursework/moses/courses/185187WebPages/PRODUCTION/Theory%20Eavesdropping.htm>

effects, and the natural qualities of the voice are sometimes swamped. This does not happen though, in *The Nine Muses*, where he uses extracts from audio books read by actors and poets, and the attractive sonorous qualities of human voices are given space to resonate and address us. Barthes, in *S/Z*, (1974, pp.109-110, quoted in Lawrence p.96) “describes the elusive but overwhelming, pleasure that comes from listening to the voice: ‘It possesses a special hallucinatory power, [uniting] in one plenitude both meaning and sex’”.

I made a voice piece a few years ago, which I recorded very directly in one take and editing very little. There was no reverberation added, no echoes. It was just my voice, in a space. I recorded it in the front room of my old house, now sold. As far as I remember, there was a fire in the grate, but it was just smouldering, not burning, because the sound of the fire would have changed the feel of the piece. The idea was to be direct, to have the voice speak right into the listener’s ears through headphones, but to have the voice in an indeterminate space and time, without any clues as to where it was, the position it was speaking from.

It was called, and still is called, for now, *Voiceover: The Lover’s Voice*. I spoke about the lovers’s voice, and it was left ambiguous as to whether the voice I spoke of was an abstract lover’s voice, or the voice of a particular lover, or whether it was my voice speaking that was the lover’s voice of the title. I made the piece partly out of sadness, partly in remembrance - a kind of *memento mori*. I was able to write it quite quickly, and I surprised myself. The feelings and what I wanted to say were all in my head already. It is not often that this happens to me.

I was in love with someone who did not exist anymore, who had been lost, and with whom I had spent many hours on the phone. His voice became very important to me, and I thought even while I spoke to him about the disembodied nature of his voice and how his voice worked in a metaphorical way, a part of him standing in for the whole. For long periods of time, he became his voice, or, as the title of Mladen Dolar’s book has it, *A Voice and Nothing More*. For months, years, I was plunged into sadness when I heard a voice that reminded me of him. One such voice was that of the singer Eddie Floyd, who can be heard starting to sing *Raise your Hand*, about two minutes and forty seconds into the film of part of the Stax Records tour of Norway in 1967. About halfway through the song Floyd begins to speak as well as sing, calling out to the audience as if he were in Church, encouraging their responses.¹⁷

It always sends shivers down my spine. But part of the reason it does this is that it is a voice from the past. A voice to be haunted by. ...

“Speech resexualized. Sexual potency, linguistic power, abolished at Babel and restored at Pentecost. At Pentecost, tongues of fire, a flame in the shape of a male member. Speaking with tongues is fiery speech, speech as a sexual act, a firebird or phoenix.”¹⁸

I fell into a deep and inconsolable melancholy. I was sent to counselling, a talking cure. We talked, but there was no cure. How could the counsellor’s voice blot out the

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2oF65Qd6Wc>

¹⁸ Norman O. Brown, from his really interesting book *Love’s Body*, p251).

memory of the lover's voice? In any case, it seems to have been my fault. One counsellor said "What did you expect, falling in love with a Black man?" I probably expected much the same as Scottie and Madeleine.

In an interesting article written some time ago (1980) "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space", Mary Anne Doane grapples with the question of the voice, and in particular the female voice, in cinema. In a section of the article entitled "The Pleasure of Hearing", she argues that the cinemagoer who overhears, for example, a dialogue or a voice off-screen, is unheard and unseen himself. This is like the voyeurism often exploited by the filmic image, she adds. The use of the voice in the cinema appeals to the spectator's desire to hear as well as to see. In what does this pleasure consist, to hear the voice with its volume, rhythm, timbre and pitch?¹⁹ Doane states that "Psychoanalysis situates the pleasure in the divergence between the present experience and the memory of satisfaction". Yet another instance when haunting is significant. Our pleasure depends on the spectre of a previous satisfied desire. The traces of our being enveloped by the mother's voice, "the sonorous envelope" never entirely fade.²⁰ In the cinema, the space, the technology, the soundtrack, speakers etc. construct an "aural illusion of position" from where the cinemagoer (and nowadays gallery visitors also) perceive the "presence" of the voice and take it inside their own bodies "thus holding at bay the potential trauma of dispersal, dismemberment, difference. (Doane, p.45)

In the next section of "The Politics of the Voice", Doane examines possible ways of destabilising this position, in search of a more political cinematic and listening experience. The cohesion of the listener is imaginary, not real. Akomfrah, years later, works along these lines in attempting to create films and soundtracks with experiences of dispersal, division, fragmentation and open-ended anti-narratives. (eg. *The Nine Muses*). In an interview with Daniel Trilling Akomfrah states "Because as they [the various narrators] come in to speak partial truths you suddenly start to see the texture of each voice and what each voice does" and adds later with regard to the plurality of voices he employs "And there's no attempt to try and force a unity in the voices."²¹ Turner-prize winner Elizabeth Price has also spoken of her working method which involves assembling a choir of dissonant voices. In an interesting talk at Tate Britain she recently discussed how she convenes a "chorus" of voices which cannot be harmonized, and how she aims to undercut the fictions she constructs at the same time as creating them.²²

I try to make work where there is a collision between past and present, and between more mainstream narratives of the past and the testimonies of the marginalised and unheard. I prefer the notion of collision to that of dissonance, since collision suggests a more forceful purpose, and a more unsettling encounter of different positions, perspectives, voices and sounds. For me, it is also important to try to disturb

¹⁹ Doane, M.A. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space", *Yale French Studies*, no 60, Cinema/Sound, 1980 pp.33-50, see. p.43

²⁰ See Rosolato, G., "La Voix: Entre Corps et Langage", *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, jan-fév. 1974, tome 38, pp75-94, and Lecourt, E. "The Musical Envelope", chapter eight in D. Anzieu ed., *Psychic Envelopes*, Karnac Books, London, 1990

²¹ Akomfrah, J. interview with Daniel Trilling

<http://soundandmusic.org/features/sound-film/interview-john-akomfrah>

²² <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/turner-prize-artists-talk-elizabeth-price>

tendencies towards nostalgia and sentimentality often generated by encounters with history and its “victims”. This can be attempted by, for example, including sounds which seem to intrude upon an already constructed “world” build around a certain atmosphere, or sounds which are obviously “alien” ...a voice singing an old song in a graveyard might be interrupted by a police or ambulance siren, or sung over the sound of an oyster shell insistently scraping on a piece of slate.

Doane then considers some difficulties involved in trying to devise “a political erotics of the voice” (I really wish I could make work embodying that!) based on strategies of dispersal and fragmentation, as opposed to pseudo-unity. She points to three problems:

First of all, the danger is that the emphasis on expanding the range of the senses over meaning, is a kind of “romanticism”, or that it encourages dualism ie. senses vs. intellect;

Secondly, overemphasis on the voice risks “a crude materialism” as she puts it, “wherein the physical properties of the medium have the inherent and final power of determining its reading.” Also the film is not just the voice, but a whole discourse made up of many elements, so that “the establishment of a direct connection between the voice and politics is fraught with difficulties” (Doane, p.49). A film is a complex discourse, she argues, not a “simple juxtaposition of sensory elements” of which one is the voice.

Thirdly, the voice appears to lend itself to an opposition to the image, the male gaze etc. But to align the vocal with the female is a potentially an essentialising strategy. The mother’s voice envelops the child, but the father’s voice is also present in our psyche as the rule of law, says Doane, following many others from Freud onwards. (If you are very fortunate, it is the other way around, and the father’s voice envelops you with love and security, not with limiting and undermining criticism and prohibitions). Doane therefore feels it is unwise to base any politics of the voice *solely* on erotics (by which she seems to mean the erotic pleasure of hearing and listening, rather than erotic pleasure in the voice of a particular love object involving sexual attraction). However unresolved her conclusions are, her article is extremely thought-provoking. Although Doane is wary of basing any politics of the voice on erotics alone, she says very little about other possible ways of creating, and also destabilising, ideological listening positions other than to approach this topic through issues of gender. Akomfrah, on the other hand, is careful to foreground questions of “race” and the history of racial oppression and marginalisation in his visual and audio work, whilst not forgetting gender. Class, with its accompanying power relations and ideological positionings is also important in terms of both speaking and listening subjects. I attempt to bear this in mind when making works I consider important, whether this is explicit or implicit in the work. There is a difficult relationship for me to negotiate between anger aroused by some of the material I want to work with, involving political persecution for example, and the avoidance of polemics...not that polemical work is necessarily “wrong” for an artist to make. The favoured advice given to would-be poets to “show not tell”, means what, exactly, in sound? To invite the person to hear, then to listen, then to feel and reflect? But this implies a kind of linear progression, whereas these “stages” are surely more entwined....

I wonder though if the way really is through destabilising the unified position of the listener? Perhaps it is, but perhaps also it could involve the conscious rejection of expensive software, elaborate post-production effects, and the avoidance of the

production of a listening experience far-removed from natural sounds, and from the human. This is not to say I believe that recordings are copies of nature, or reality. But an attempt to preserve elements of material reality does not mean I am pretending that my sound work is the same as reality, thus placing the listener as a passive consumer of a documentary-style voiceover. I need to reflect on these problems, and their relationship to levels and sophistication of technology is an important factor.

Voices from the past

Madeleine's voice, apparently, dies with her. When she reappears as the transformed Judy, the creation of a Pygmalion-like Scottie, she retains her own voice, and, as the spectral Madeleine in the hotel room, is silent. Madeleine's pretended haunting by Carlotta Valdes leads her to falsify history and "bear false witness". Paul Ricoeur, in his book on *Memory, History, Forgetting*, emphasises the importance of testimony as a transitional structure between memory and history. But Madeleine/Judy's testimony is false, and therefore her history is false with it. Madeline takes Scotty to various "sites of memory", the cemetery with Carlotta's grave, the museum, and the Giant Redwood tree, where she intones in a faraway voice as a liar of history, "here I was born and there I died".

Some of my own work has dealt with history, the repressed and the marginalised. Not just the psychically repressed, but also the physically repressed. I have been greatly inspired by Peter Linebaugh's and Marcus Rediker's book *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. This wonderful book brings to light and to life a largely forgotten history of a multi-cultural underclass in the early modern period. "The historic invisibility of many of the book's subjects owes much to the repression originally visited upon them: the violence of the stake, the chopping block, the gallows, and the shackles of a ship's dark hold. "(p.7)

Using archival sources, and my own creative writing, I made several sound pieces about mutineers in the army and navy who were murdered because they were prepared to make a stand for justice and basic human rights. Men such as Robert Lockyer, the three Levellers shot by a firing squad in Burford churchyard, Richard Parker - leading spokesperson for the mutineers at the Nore in 1797 - and his wife and widow Anne McHardy Parker. Without believing myself to be a medium, I nonetheless hoped to breath life into these people from the past, by literally giving voice to their own words, and my commemorative writings on their beliefs and on their murders. I went to their "places of memory", at the anniversaries of their deaths, in order to evoke them and what they stood for, to bring them to light, and to sound. To read out loud the writings and the reported words of these dead people transforms the marks on a page or a computer screen to something that has passed through a human body, from the interior warmth of a living being, out into the surrounding atmosphere. Their utterances live again through the medium of another's body. I bore witness to them, as did my collaborators in these works, in particular my younger son who is a history teacher and a socialist. To conjure up the dead is often a political act,

since these dead are often repressed, literally and psychologically, unlike the politically approved dead such as Churchill, Wellington, and Nelson.

Despite my fervent hope that these works would commemorate and bear testimony, I did not want to create a historical re-enactment, or a believable piece of historical recreation. I wanted something poetic, something angry, something mysterious and gripping. Something in which a voice reached out from an indeterminate place and time and “grabbed” the listener, the way the ancient mariner “stoppeth” the wedding guest.

In his famous “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Walter Benjamin criticises historians whose aim is to try to recreate history “as it really was”. In a telling sentence he writes: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he [the enemy] wins. “²³

Ricoeur also writes eloquently about the dead of history and the task of the historian. At first, he seems to have a similar view to that of Benjamin, but then towards the end of this quote we see a divergence of opinion, or at least the posing of a question about historical recovery and the urge to find the real person behind the mask.... “The historical operation in its entirety can then be considered an act of sepulcher. Not a place, a cemetery, a simple depository of bones, but an act of repeated entombment.”²⁴ Is this continuous burial the act of the victors/enemies referred to by Benjamin? Enemies do not just bury the dead, they sometimes dig up the bodies (as Benjamin suggests, literally or metaphorically), to crush the bones to pieces, dump them in the sea, or bury them with bulldozers in the Atacama desert as the Argentinian military did to the corpses of the “disappeared”.²⁵

Ricoeur continues:” The work of memory would have attained its aim if the reconstruction of the past were to succeed in giving rise to a sort of resurrection of the past. [this is what Benjamin argues against, I think G.D.] Must we leave to the avowed or unavowed emulators of Michelet [a French nineteenth-century historian G.D.] alone the responsibility for this romantic wish? Is it not the ambition of every historian to uncover, behind the death mask, the face of those who formerly existed, who acted and suffered, and who were keeping the promises they left unfulfilled? This would be the most deeply hidden wish of historical knowledge. But its continually deferred realization no longer belongs to those who write history; it is in the hands of those who make history.” (Ricoeur, p. 499)

Akomfrah’s approach to history in his films seems related to the issues discussed by Benjamin and Ricoeur, and probably closer to Benjamin. In *Vertigo*, perhaps we can see Scottie taking on the role of the historian who, in an impossible quest, tries to remake history as it actually was, without realizing that it is the victors who usually, *but not always*, decide our individual and collective destinies as well as the fate of the

²³ Benjamin, W. “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in *Illuminations*, ed. H.Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp.253-264, quote p.255

²⁴ Ricoeur, P. *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006, p.499

²⁵ See chapter 3 of Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters*, and the beautiful and moving film *Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010, dir. Patricio Guzmán.

dead. But at least Scottie tried, although he was only a former police detective, and, under the mask, an actor.

Filmography

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