

Sounds Tough: Masculine Vocal Performances in 21st Century American Cinema

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## ABSTRACT

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Sarah Foulkes

My thesis proposes that we should listen to masculine voices in a new way. Instead of listening to the voice as a locus of liberal interiority or as a gateway to identity, I read it as an event of relationality between speaker and listener. With a focus on 21st century American cinema, I situate the voice as the site where questions of power, language, race, and gender converge --either through dialogue or through clusters of hidden signifiers. Throughout "Sounds Tough," I use compelling motifs from sound studies, such as the ventriloquist, the vortex, and the hypnotist, as guides through sonic encounters with male performance. Each film revisits and remakes history in different ways, using stylized male vocal intonation as a technique to challenge or subsume realist representation. The first chapter on *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) argues against the popular belief that Ennis Del Mar's mumbling is a symptom of his repressed queerness, opting instead to read it as a tentative attachment to speech. Spike Lee's satire *Bamboozled* (2000) has been a crucial text in Black cinema, yet its protagonist's mannered vocal performance has mostly been ignored despite its rejection of essentialist claims to blackness. The subject of my third chapter, *The Master* (Anderson, 2012), stages contrasting vocal performances from Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Phoenix's emotive mumbling and Hoffman's oratorical prowess are complementary expressions of post-war turbulence. In *The Master*, the body rather than the voice is a medium for power and violence. By analyzing these three films through the voice, this thesis reveals how the voice articulates new futures by inflecting history's echoes.

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## Introduction

### Distant Voices, Hearing Sounds

When I was growing up in the suburbs of Montreal, I would take frequent trips to HMV, a now-defunct chain selling primarily CDs and DVDs, at the local mall. After my parents left the store to shop around, I would stay standing under one of the TVs suspended from the ceiling, my neck arched up, and watch whatever movie they had on. The sound from the TVs was either off or drowned out by that year's latest releases blaring from speakers placed around the store, but I remember hearing the dialogue in my head. I distinctly remember imagining Viggo Mortensen's sonorous cries as Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Jackson, 2001-2003); his mouth wide open, as I tried to anticipate the words and synch up my recollection to his lips while ignoring whichever singer's voice was blasting through the speakers. Mortensen's voice was detached from his body and housed in my head.

My spectatorial experience at HMV was in some ways the opposite of acousmatic listening, which Michel Chion defines as listening to sound without seeing its source.<sup>1</sup> Chion advanced this method of listening as a means to elevate the soundtrack to the spectator's attention and listen for sonic form disengaged, at least somewhat, from the sound's origin. This imagining also points to the threat of separation between sound and image; voice and body (in the case of HMV, supported by digital home technologies). The voice we hear and the voice produced by the body do not always align. And in instances where they don't align, like when a soundtrack is dubbed, the result can be playful or even politically subversive, or both, as in the case of the popular YouTube channel "Bad Lip Reading."<sup>2</sup>

The voice has long been a subject of philosophical inquiry. Around the time of the invention of the phonograph, whose "special mission as preserver of the voice,"<sup>3</sup> Amy Lawrence argues, was predetermined, the study of phenomenology gained popularity. The phonograph and phenomenology, or the study of "structures of

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Chion and Claudia Gorbman, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Mats Carlsson, "The Strange Object of the Voice: A Bad Lip Reading – Senses of Cinema," accessed May 14, 2021, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/the-strange-object-of-the-voice-a-bad-lip-reading/>.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), 11-12.

conscious experience as experienced from the first-person point of view,”<sup>4</sup> may appear to have little in common with one another. However, Brian Kane argues for Western philosophy’s indebtedness to the reproduction of the voice and its untethering from the body that produced it.<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, a key figure in the philosophical movement, believed that hearing one’s voice in silence is when “the inner voice is at its purest.”<sup>6</sup> Later, Derrida denounced and deconstructed this “virginal voice,”<sup>7</sup> as Rey Chow calls it. Not even the inner voice is unmediated.

So, if hearing one’s own voice is not constitutive of a hermetically sealed interiority, then what about hearing someone else’s voice? No doubt, voices other than our own make up a large portion of the voices in our head. What kind of relationality does this engender? And what is the relevance for performance? The actor’s job is to make the screenwriter disappear through the reproduction and embodiment of the writer’s words. My project may not attempt to deal with the interiorized voice, yet the voice is unique in its position inside and outside of the body. In order for speech to be produced, it must leave the body. That does not, however, necessarily mean a smooth trajectory from thought to vibrating vocal chords to sound.

Indeed, different vocal modes in life and in cinema constitute different attachments to the body and to the speakers’ listeners. Mumbling, the subject of my first and third chapters, suggests a troubled relationship to being heard. Vocal affections, such as a strange voice or an accent, present another barrier between the “inner voice” and its expressive counterpart. In a larger debate on interiority, musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim excoriates the belief in the voice as essence and as an unobstructed pathway to the soul. Eidsheim demonstrates this fallacy using the example of Billie Holiday, whose troubled personal history was the filter through which fans listened to her voice. In a chapter on the singer, Eidsheim explains that “both voice as an unmediated expression of a singer’s autobiography and voice as involuntarily channeling the ancestors depend on a basic understanding of voice as essence.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Rey Chow, “Listening after ‘Acousmaticity’: Notes on a Transdisciplinary Problematic,” in *Sound Objects*, ed. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 114.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), 156.

The voice may offer the illusion of interiority, but listeners are also responsible for projecting their own narratives onto the voice. Listening is not neutral. Visual markers of identity are often listened for and confirmed by the body of the speaker. In short, listening produces voice, in that listening and vocal production are situated in a feedback loop, fueled by encultured practices and socio-historical coordinates. How, when, and if, we are listened to affects how we use our voices. Listening without the distraction of the visual doesn't jettison these contexts. As I will elaborate in Chapter 2, Chion's acousmatic listening (or reduced listening) may offer the promise of sonic impartiality, yet this method has not gone without its criticisms. Pooja Rangan details the ways in which the racialized body marks its voice, or rather how the listener marks the vocal tone with the body's skin tone.<sup>9</sup>

How do we listen across gender and racial identifications without imposing our encultured views, while also acknowledging that they necessarily affect how we listen? In this thesis I will demonstrate how sound can help interpret or, at times, complicate the image. The soundtrack offers its own regime of knowledge separate from but tethered to the image. For my three chapters, I am listening to the masculine gender specifically, in order to try to answer what 21st century masculinity in American cinema sounds like. To return to Aragorn, the battle cry is a powerful signifier in the lexicon of masculine sounds. It is not the only masculine-coded sound, however. My three case studies are drawn from contemporary North American cinema. Two of them are period pieces: *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) and *The Master* (Anderson, 2012), the subject of my first and third chapters respectively, are in direct dialogue with socio-historical conceptions of masculinity. Thus, by necessity, my thesis is invested in changing historical discourses on gender, race, and sexuality.

Despite the popular image of the 1950s as an era of conservatism and conformity, a crisis of masculinity emerged in that decade which had contradictory effects: a rebellion against a restrictive repertoire of gender performances clashed with an affirmation of masculinity as something necessarily non-feminine. In cinema, the stardom of John Wayne, James Dean, Cary Grant, and Marlon Brando, all of whom embody differing ideals of masculinity, reveal the inconsistencies within any narrow view of what white masculinity should look and sound

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<sup>9</sup> Pooja Rangan, "The Skin of the Voice: Acousmatic Illusions, Ventriloquial Listening," in *Sound Objects*, ed. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Duke University Press, 2019), 130–48.

like. With the recent emergence of terms like “toxic masculinity” and “white male fragility,” it would appear that masculinity is in crisis anew. Is it the same crisis? Certainly, contemporary films are charting a somewhat uneasy departure from archetypes and conventions, using the male voice to express masculinity in new and compelling ways. Yet these archetypes, the ones Wayne and Brando each inhabit, still stand as distant beacons of an idealized masculinity. What is the threat to hegemonic masculinity? Femininity? Tania Modleski suggests in *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age* from 1991, if masculinity-in-crisis cycles through perceived threats of feminization, then “we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it.”<sup>10</sup>

By analyzing the formal and narrative contexts from which these sonic modes emerge, I have considered how the affective intensities that voices foster help us to understand contemporary efforts to resist and also reinforce dominant notions of masculinity. I situate my analysis in Heath Ledger’s performance in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Damon Wayans’ reviled performance in Spike Lee’s new millennium satire *Bamboozled* (2000) and finally Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman’s troubled entanglement in *The Master* (2012). *Brokeback* and *The Master*’s return to the ‘60s and ‘50s respectively suggests a parallel in crises. With the advantage of more slack production codes, the filmmakers situate their male protagonists in a maelstrom of post-war entropy, in which the politics are more legible from a distance.

Through the analysis of these three films, I demonstrate how fruitful listening and thinking through sound can be in discussions of gender and performance. Each film showcases a vocal performance that has drawn criticism, confusion or praise. *Brokeback*’s mumbling hero Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) has been widely recognized as a moving embodiment of repressed queerness. But what if we moved beyond this facile equation of mumbling with repression to discover other ways in which mumbling can produce an optimistic, yet troubled attachment to being heard? *Bamboozled* was widely lambasted and misunderstood upon its release, and the vocal performance of its lead caused a great deal of confusion. Played by comedian Damon Wayans, the protagonist Pierre Delacroix speaks with a prissy, nasal voice. Characters and critics alike accuse Delacroix of not being black

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<sup>10</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age*, (Routledge, 2014), 7.

enough, with his manipulated voice as Exhibit A in their critiques. In my chapter, I rely on Eidsheim's argument that all voices are the product of encultured practices situated on a continuum of listening and speaking. The widely held concepts of "talking black" or "talking white" are stable and authentic racial markers. Delacroix fails to synch up to an accepted expression of blackness, but that should be no reflection on the validity of his racial performance. Finally, *The Master* showcases two contrasting performance styles. Joaquin Phoenix speaks in a low mumble, letting his words tumble out of his mouth, whilst Philip Seymour Hoffman's voice travels across a range of frequencies in a mesmerizing display of technique. From the hyper audible to the inaudible, these voices are all situated on a horizon of affectability. "Who can listen?" and "who can speak?" are questions of power and desire, just as much as they are questions of performative styles and strategies.

Since the topic of my thesis lies at the intersection of sound theory, affect theory, and masculinity studies, I have drawn on a wide variety of scholarly work. An obvious touchstone writer for sound studies is Michel Chion. His book *The Voice in Cinema* is a key reference point for how to analyze and write about (especially male) voices in film. His deployment of acousmatic listening, whereby the soundtrack is listened to independently of the visuals, allows for a more rigorous understanding of the soundtrack and its relationship to what is seen on screen. Chion, working in the Lacanian tradition, is concerned primarily with the relationship between the voice and its function as a symbol of gender and identity. Many sound scholars contemporary with Chion (including Mary Ann Doane, Amy Lawrence and Kaja Silverman) have widened the field's focus to analyze what sound signifies in a cultural and political context. Mladen Dolar's Lacanian work on the voice as a psychoanalytic object in *A Voice and Nothing More* is a crucial introduction to the voice's significations beyond that of aesthetic object or as a vehicle for language.

Although the psychoanalytic tradition is unavoidable as an influence, I would like to steer the discussion of voice away from this method when possible. Instead, I have attempted to read the voice as a signifying event built by and through a relation to listening and speaking. The voice, in my analysis, is as compelling for what it says as how it says it. Britta Sjogren's *Into the Vortex* rehabilitates female subjectivity in voice-off from 1940s Hollywood cinema. Her feminist scholarship has been crucial for me in how I read the voice as a structuring force. I borrow her powerful invocation of the vortex in my first and third chapters as conceptual guides through

sound and the voices in the films I've written about. Indeed, voices steer the narrative backward and forwards, operating a push-pull mechanism whose centre is absent. Although I do not examine voice-off, her narrowness of focus on voice has opened a much-needed mode of critical inquiry.

Important to consider are the changes that digital technologies have brought to sound recording, performance styles and exhibition. In the 21st century, on-set recording technologies reached a level of sophistication that could capture sounds at lower frequencies and with greater detail. No longer are whispering and mumbling out of earshot. Cheap, portable equipment enabled a generation of independent filmmakers to shoot films in their apartments with a new-found freedom, best exemplified in North America with *Mumblecore*. *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman, James Lastra's *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, and Jacob Smith's *Vocal Tracks : Performance and Sound Media* are canonical works that tackle sound from these varied North American perspectives. Smith charts the development of performance styles with technological innovations, identifying key links between performance, audiences, and technology. His work on white singers' operatic style in minstrel recordings has been especially useful for my second chapter. What may be perceived as a racially-coded black sound now, was in fact a stylistic device to ensure white audiences that their performance of blackness did not extend to the singing voice. The notion of an essential black voice is thereby erased by historical white fragility. Since I am analyzing recorded sound, a look at its history is essential.

In *Overhearing Film Dialogue* Sarah Kozloff argues that the lack of respect towards dialogue is due to its association with femininity. In many analyses, she argues, emphasis on dialogue frequently gives way to discussions of the visual. Whether or not this argument still stands, Kozloff's work on reappraising the place of dialogue in film studies is important and valuable work that has been useful in my own research, specifically in regards to what male characters say, how often they speak and how their lines are received in each film. By looking at dialogue across genres, in isolation, as well as integrated within the rest of the film's moving parts, Kozloff's methods reveal the advantages of listening to words from different angles.

How male characters speak is another important question. Paralingual elements of speech such as rhythm, pitch, and intonation offer a rich terrain of research. In an essay in the collection *Film Dialogue*, Donna Peberdy listens to Humphrey Bogart's lisp and James Earl Jones' stutter, linking their speech affectations to a wider

discussion of masculinity on film. Peberdy argues that Bogart and Jones' voices, although deep and hoarse, undermined the construction of stable personas and characters through their affectations. The lisp and the stutter are speech impairments, rather than stylistic choices. Yet, Bogart and Jones' star personas were partially constructed through their vocal timbres and speech patterns, alternately undermining and bolstering masculine ideals.

Recent work in cultural philosophy has focused on the importance of affect as a key site for sustaining and critiquing the often intangible but powerful ways that sensibilities about power and gender manifest in everyday forms. Grouped under the rubric of affect theory, scholars such as Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, and Sara Ahmed, have argued that affect is the key to understanding the futility of chasing self-realization and “the good life” amid contradictory messaging on how to achieve it. Berlant especially has dedicated much of her research to the study of sentimentality, the affection for familiar and inherited sensibilities, and the ways in which we attach ourselves to that which impedes our flourishing. The widely used term “toxic masculinity” can be thought of as a critique of that kind of sentimental attachment. It reframes a type of masculinity that connotes strength and virility but redirects it to include male aggression in its many forms – from overt physical violence to more subtle acts that can form the emotional contours of everyday lived experience. Indeed, these complex affective encounters reveal a common contradiction: the desire to flourish and the desire for aggressive yet familiar expressions of masculinity frequently go hand-in-hand. Precarity is a term used to describe economic uncertainty and insecurity under post-Fordist neoliberalism, yet I am also using it to describe the attachment to an expression of masculinity that risks fracturing the intelligibility of familiar masculine performances. Pierre Delacroix's attachment to James Baldwin's voice risks his intelligibility as a Black man. Mumbling in *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Master* functions as a precarious attachment to the words as agents of affect and power.

In my first chapter, I borrow from Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* to think through Ennis Del Mar's mumbling as an attachment to speech rather than a symptom of his repressed sexuality. Berlant examines the conditions under which an attachment to the fantasy of the good life structures our relationalities, despite the reality that these optimistic attachments may work against the flourishing of individual and collective beings. Though Berlant does not write extensively on the relationship between masculinity and “cruel optimism,” her book is wide enough in scope to allow for critical openings and interpretations. She is, after all, diagnosing an affective

experience of global contemporary precarity.

In my second chapter, I deploy Christine Goding-Doty's theory of race as an event of relating. Thinking of race as something one does, rather than something one has, is especially conducive to writing about performance. That being said, performing race is different from performing gender. The event of race demands two or more bodies in relation with one another. Race is what emerges from this encounter. In my work, listening is a form of relating. I include myself as a nodal point in the event of relating. How I listen to the vocal manipulations of Pierre Delacroix, a Black character, is necessarily modulated by my own whiteness. In short, listening is never neutral and always political.

In my third chapter, I take up Eugenie Brinkema's appeal for film scholars writing on affect to write on the forms of the affects, rather than on cinema's effects. For Brinkema, the study of the affects in the cinema has become an opportunity for personal reflections whereby the film offers itself up to the critic as a pick-your-punctum smorgasbord:

Affect is taken as always being, in the end, for us. The theoretical consequence of this assumption is an approach to writing theory that emphasizes the personal experience of the theorist. Because of the polemical agitations of much work in the turn to affect, there is a performative dimension to the theory that repeatedly traces spectatorial movements, ruptures, rumblings, and passions—but this performance is also always a solipsism. [...] The turn to affect thus risks turning every film theorist into a phenomenologist, each critic a mere omphaloskeptic.<sup>11</sup>

Though I have not taken up her plea for the three chapters, I do share Brinkema's skepticism, especially as it relates to performance theorists. Too often I have read critics and scholars praising a performance as "revelatory" or "inspired" with little discussion as to what the actor is actually doing. If the Kuleshov effect demonstrates how emotional expressivity is determined in part by its visual context in a montage, then can the same be said for how an audience perceives a performance? One viewer may well find the way in which Heath Ledger speaks his final line "Jack, I swear . . ." particularly moving depending on their own investment in the narrative or LGBTQ+ politics. We all know this to be true, yet rarely do I read critics take the next step from "does it move me?" to the "why" of it by analyzing the mechanics of the performance, not their personal experience. The voice is a challenging opportunity for me to discuss these "hows" and "whys."

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<sup>11</sup> Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2014). 31.

Indeed, the voice is a privileged site for examining these affective encounters due to its complex overlapping roles and registers. As Jacob Smith writes, “the voice can function as an index of the body, a conveyor of language, a social bond, a musical instrument of sublime flexibility, a gauge of emotion, a central component of the art of acting, and a register of everyday identity. The voice is slippery, easily sliding between these categories, sometimes functioning as a conscious expression, other times as an unintended reflection of the self.”<sup>12</sup> By orbiting around the voice as a centre of textual gravity, I hope to locate the force of troubled masculinity within the human voice.

Masculinity itself has also been thoroughly investigated in film studies. Studies of masculinity in cinema inevitably converge with star studies, as case studies of John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, and Sidney Poitier each offer contrasting and complementary critiques of manhood. Indeed, these evaluations more often than not problematize depictions of masculinity, rather than applauding them. In many of the collections surveyed, masculinity is presented as a jumping off point to discuss critical issues surrounding gender performance, patriarchy, class, race and queerphobia. In that respect, masculinity in cinema has been thoroughly excavated. Specific archetypes like the “strong, silent type” and the “tender tough” convention within 1950s dramas among others are productive ways in which masculinity on film has been analyzed.

These critiques often hinge on male physicality, as with Peter Lehman’s renowned study of male physicality in cinema, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*. The body is an integral part of any gender or sexuality-based study, for it allows for discussions of age, weight, race, disability, dress, and so on. However, if masculinity in film has mostly been theorized around the body, then there is a noticeable lack of theorizing around the voice, despite it being an extension of the body. Perhaps this partially explains the masculine voice’s omission. It is both of the body and not. The aforementioned essay by Donna Peberdy is a rare example of sound and masculinity studies converging in an in-depth analysis of Bogart and Jones’ vocal performances. Indeed, her book *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema* is a compelling example of how screen performances necessarily engender debates about gender performance and social roles.

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<sup>12</sup> Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (University of California Press, 2008), 3.

Performance is notoriously difficult to write about. Through my research in performance scholarship, I have noticed a tendency toward vague descriptions of performances, characterized often as “authentic” or “natural” without a clear overview of what those terms are doing and what they point to in the performance. So often scholars focus on idiosyncratic performance details (“the tilt of the head,” “the giddy laugh”) as synecdoches of the performance. Recall Naremore’s detailing of Brando’s improvised gesture in *On the Waterfront* (Kazan 1954), in which Brando picks up Eva Marie Saint’s glove and puts it on. Did these moments jump out to the audience before they knew that they were improvised or do they jump out because they are, perhaps, more spontaneous than the rest of the performance? And what about the other moments in a performance, the continuities that don’t offer themselves up as easily as punctums for the viewer? Acting trainer and writer Steven Lecky has written an acting manual which proves to be useful for close analysis. For Lecky, acting can be analyzed by breaking down elements of human speech and behavior. In order to be “natural” and “authentic,” actors must discover the structure within a text, and render it faithfully (but creatively) with pacing, inflections, natural speech and an array of appropriate impulses for the character hinted at by the text. I have tried to apply a similar rigour to my analyses of the performances by Heath Ledger, Damon Wayans, Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Despite some of the actors’ method training, I would like to steer my performance analyses away from the method. Indeed, rather than attributing complex male performance to this technique, I would like to demystify method acting, alluding to a more capacious understanding of both acting and masculinity.

In terms of the individual films, *Brokeback Mountain* has a wealth of literature written on it, mostly from a queer, gender and genre studies standpoint. In *Millennial Masculinity*, Christopher Sharrett dedicates a chapter to *Brokeback Mountain* in his essay “Death of the strong silent type: The Achievement of *Brokeback Mountain*.” In it, Sharrett looks at the archetype of “the strong silent type” throughout the Western genre and demonstrates how *Brokeback Mountain* departs from this regressive archetype through queering it. Sharrett’s work is an important reminder that genre is not to be left by the wayside. I have taken these three films’ genres into consideration in order to contextualize the specific sound conventions each film is playing with or ignoring altogether. *Bamboozled* is viewed by many as an overlooked and misunderstood gem in Spike Lee’s filmography. Most of the writing on

it, however, has been in the context of black satire and critical race studies. Little research has focused specifically on the voice and how it is working in the film. *The Master* has not been extensively written about in academia, though this is most likely due to the film's relatively recent release in 2012. That being said, Michael Slowik's article on Anderson's soundscapes, "Isolation and connection: unbounded sound in the films of Paul Thomas Anderson," has been useful to me as an overview of the consistencies and inconsistencies across Anderson's soundscapes. Although the article is focused on musical sounds more than on voice, the singing voice, diegetic and non-diegetic, is a gateway to understanding the film's narrative ambiguity and unclear character motivations. Slowik contends that "song lyrics in *The Master* often provide the clearest indication of the central characters' motivations and feelings."<sup>13</sup>

My thesis offers a new perspective through its intersections of methods and fields of study. Although both the voice and masculinity have been much theorized in film studies, the two fields seem to rarely intersect. Moreover, studies of the voice in cinema tend to be confined to a limited scope. This is not to suggest that analyzing the voice from a psychoanalytic perspective is limiting, but there does seem to be an opportunity to excavate urgent socio-political meaning from the male voice, which is seldom taken. In an attempt to fill this lacuna, this thesis explores male vocal performance in the three aforementioned films as a way to uncover some of the overarching trends in depicting masculinity in American cinema. My use of affect theory as an analytic method has allowed me to expand my detailed analyses into a wider web of entangled meaning. These films have been selected for their contrasting and complementary uses of sound and stagings of masculinity. Each film details a crisis of masculinity, yet each crisis stems from a different crux and point of interest. Although these films cannot be subsumed within a specific cinematic movement, they provide an apt context from which to think about gender and sound when considered together.

Since I have drawn on a variety of analytical traditions and modes, I have consolidated these various methodologies throughout my thesis. Although I might be engaging with different theoretical texts, each case study is rooted in a close analysis of the main actors' vocal performance, from dialogue to paralingual elements of

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<sup>13</sup>Michael Slowik, "Isolation and Connection: Unbounded Sound in the Films of Paul Thomas Anderson," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 13, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 131.

speech such as tempo, pitch, and rhythm (also known as prosody) and how these vocal utterances are listened to. My hope is that this narrowness of focus allows for a greater depth of observation and intensity of argument in my discussion of sound and male performance. In her piece on *The Master*, Claudia Gorbman poses the question of how to write about film voices:

Is it possible to write about film voices with the same systematic rigor that can be applied to film scene construction, for instance, which has built its own vocabulary for shots and transitions? How can the inflections of a voice, even the relative pitches and sound levels in a single line that an actor utters, ever be adequately described with theoretical language? If it's necessary to note the rhythms of visual editing in conjunction with the rhythms of speech, how could that possibly be accomplished in a form that isn't unreadable and tedious?<sup>14</sup>

I hope that my project is an effort in the right direction. If the voice is a privileged site for analyzing masculinity in contemporary American cinema, then we must fine-tune our ears.

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<sup>14</sup> Claudia Gorbman, "The Master's Voice," *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (December 1, 2014), 20.

## Chapter 1

### **Mumbling Through Melodrama: Moebius Loops, Figures of Speech, and Sound Attachments in *Brokeback Mountain***

#### **❖ Entering Through Sound**

Before Ennis Del Mar, played by Heath Ledger, even speaks in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) there is already a sense that he is preoccupied with some other duty that Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) cannot pull him from. He speaks in a deep, resonating grumble, as if conjuring something from deep within him. The screenplay describes him as "rough-mannered, rough-spoken."<sup>15</sup> His speech teeters on the edge of intelligibility, almost requiring subtitles and often compelling the spectator to hang on to his every word. Set in Wyoming 1963 and the two subsequent decades, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist see each other before they meet. Jack pulls up to an Employment Office in his pick-up, but Ennis does not meet his curious gaze. Head down, cowboy hat on, hands stuffed in his pockets, Ennis, looking like the Marlboro Man, does not speak until Jack asks for his name. Their boss, Aguirre (Randy Quaid), sends them to herd his sheep on Brokeback Mountain for the summer. There, Ennis and Jack form a bond, despite Ennis' aloofness. One night when Ennis is too drunk to go back to the sheep, Jack invites him to climb into his tent, where he makes a pass at Ennis. They have sex, which, despite Ennis' initial insistence that that night was a "one shot thing," precipitates a decades-long affair.

When the summer ends, Ennis marries his meek girlfriend Alma (Michelle Williams) and Jack meets and marries Lureen (Anne Hathaway), a rodeo rider with a rich father. When Jack eventually reaches out to Ennis, they resume their affair under the guise of a fishing trip, meeting for a few weeks a year on Brokeback Mountain. Many years and one divorce later, Ennis receives a postcard he sent to Jack, stamped with "Deceased." Jack's wife tells him that he was killed when a tire he was changing exploded in his face and knocked him unconscious. Ennis, however, envisions Jack's death at the hands, and tire iron, of a homophobic band of men. At the end of the film, Ennis is alone in a trailer. Denied the right to bury Jack's ashes on Brokeback, Ennis is left with only a postcard of Brokeback and a pair of shirts from their first summer together.

Among the overwhelming critical acclaim *Brokeback Mountain* received, Heath Ledger's embodiment of the

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<sup>15</sup> Diana Ossana, Larry McMurtry, and Proulx Annie, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*, Nachdr (New York: Scribner, 2005), SS1.

role drew a great deal of praise. Yet, attention to the sound of his performance is often superficial. Critics have pointed to Ledger's clenched jaw as a sign of his repressed queerness or have praised the Australian actor's mastery over the Wyoming dialect. I seek to go beyond these speculations and evaluations, posing the question of what would it mean to think of Ennis Del Mar's voice as a sonic force worthy of study? How can we use sound's relational ontology as a methodology? If sex and sexuality is primarily conceived as an expression through the body, why is the voice, originating from the body, often left out of discussions of sex and the body?

I would like to demonstrate the rich potentials for sound analysis within queer and masculinity studies. More specifically, I would offer the three-dimensionality of sound and sound's posterior potentialities as a viable methodology in and of itself. By posterior, I mean both sound's capacity to capture space behind the camera, as well as the body part which is a locus of queer, male sex. Beyond that, I would also like to use this sonic methodology to argue for the film's optimistic attachment to the euphemism and the metaphor through mumbling. The film's sonic sites of repressed and repressive reverberations are localized spaces of attachment that complicate arguments that the film fails to depict queer futurity. This chapter is an intervention in queer studies, as I argue that sound belongs in the discussions of queer futurity and representation. I use the image of the moebius loop as a methodological tool that marks the men's voices as structuring narratological and epistemological forces. These voices pick up new meanings and drag them in a forward and backward motion in time and space.

Many of the discussions of the film have orbited around the question of queer futurity and gay tragedy. Is the film denying Ennis and Jack a future? Does it punish them for their longing for the good life? I would argue that reading the film through sound's ontology distills a new perspective on the matter. Indeed, *Brokeback* is a particularly good case study since the film's affects are split. Heather Love writes that "the movie has it both ways: it makes us long for another world in which Jack and Ennis might live together in peace and it makes it clear that they never will - and for reasons that are not only social. [...] Yet, there is more to *Brokeback Mountain* than liberal sentiments and violent urges; longing is also central to the film, and it is a longing that is directed not at a graspable domestic future but at an irretrievable 'brokeback' past."<sup>16</sup> Glancing back toward this archive of feeling may in fact be necessary for queer futures and queer futurity to flourish.

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<sup>16</sup> Heather Love, "Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence," *New Formations*, no. 63 (Winter /2008 2007), 61.

My intention is not to claim that the film frames queer love as “over before anything begins,”<sup>17</sup> but rather, that the sonic sphere embroils such attempts at an argument. Indeed, as Block astutely points out, Annie Proulx bookends her short story, from which the film is adapted, with Ennis dreaming, a dream in which Jack is already dead. From the start, the possibility of a future for Jack and Ennis is dashed. But what can be done within this structure of too-lateness? And what kind of optimistic attachments can we cling to amidst a whirlpool of suffering?

For this first section, I will rely on comparisons to the visual to solidify the position of the audio. The second section is primarily organized around the optimistic attachment to euphemism and mumbling. Only a few of the writings on *Brokeback Mountain* have approached the film from the perspective of sound, though many have written about the film from the perspective of masculinity and performance. This lacuna is understandable, given that there is nothing at first listen that distinguishes the film’s soundscape from any other studio-produced film. Yet, entering through sound is meaningful because, inherently, sound itself has many entry points. Usually, audiences are only seeing one camera set-up at a time. However, advancements in sound recording and mixing have enabled audiences to hear sounds from different directions through a host of microphones. As Rick Altman notes, it is not just the multiplicity of microphones recording at once that engenders a wider scope of sound: “Just as cameras may have wide-angle or telephoto lenses, changing the angle of the image collection, [...] so micro-phones vary from omni-directional to narrowly focused, thus changing both the angle of sound collection and the apparent distance of the sound source.”<sup>18</sup> In most cases, we see from one angle at a time, yet we almost always hear from multiple. Each track is composed of a multitude of sounds and is perceived differently depending on the listener’s and the microphone’s position relative to the sound source. Compounded with manipulations in post-production that have the potential to direct listeners’ attention to specific sounds or away from others, film sound is by nature multi-sited and heterogeneous.

This ability to represent sound from all angles infuses the image with a three-dimensionality. In *Into the Vortex*, Britta Sjogren translates Guy Rosolato as writing that “a certain flatness seems to characterize vision, then, while sound constitutes a ‘spatialization of the outside in the inside.’”<sup>19</sup> This qualification of sound as replete and

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<sup>17</sup>Richard O. Block, *Echoes of a Queer Messianic: From Frankenstein to Brokeback Mountain*, SUNY Series, Literature...in Theory (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 102.

<sup>18</sup>Rick Altman, ed., *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 1992), 26.

<sup>19</sup>Britta H. Sjogren, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 31.

boundary crossing is counterposed with the image's being flat and "“out there.””<sup>20</sup> Marked in this opposition is the image's anterior-direction and the acoustic's posterior potentials. The camera and its operators have many tricks to capture three-dimensional space, such as the use of mirrors, water, and glass (in short, any reflective material). Heightened by theatrical surround sound setups, sound is three-dimensional.

Sound's possibility to capture posterior sound, and therefore space, can offer an opportunity to investigate the ontology of these sites of sound production. As it pertains to the voice, Chion distinguishes between "the frontal voice and the back voice,"<sup>21</sup> as two different experiences of the same voice heard from distinct positions in space. Posterior space also refers to the rear, an important space in *Brokeback Mountain* for many reasons, one being that the only sex act we witness Ennis and Jack engage in is anal sex. So, what does it mean to situate an analysis, as it were, from (the) behind?

In advocating for sound as a method, I shall unpack Lee Edelman's suggestion that Western thought is situated from "behind." In "Seeing Things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex," Edelman writes about sodomy and re-envisions Freud's primal scene. Freud extrapolates from the Wolf Man's nightmare of a pack of wolves to propose that his patient had witnessed his parents' having sex coitus *a tergo*, but had displaced it onto the nightmare. Edelman uses Freud's interpretation to make the case for Western philosophy and textual analyses as being situated within a "rhetorical moebius loop"<sup>22</sup> in which the back is indistinguishable from the front. He writes: "[Freud's] theories [...] define a psychic experience in which the most crucial and constitutive dramas of human life are those that can never be viewed head on, those that can never be taken in frontally, but only approached from behind."<sup>23</sup> The psychoanalytic method is characterized by this return to trauma and its deferred action. Freud understands the Wolf Man's nervous condition only in retrospect through accessing the logic of his patient's unconscious. Similarly, writing articulates itself "by turning its back on its origin, only to turn back, through that very gesture, to the origin it seeks to deny."<sup>24</sup> For Edelman, the primal scene is both its witnessing and the act itself. Is there a primal scene for listening? As Lacan and Rosolato argue, the drive to hear (the invocatory drive) functions differently than the scopic drive. Then, analysis is trying to replicate something closer to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 92.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 176.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 189.

sound's ontology. So, mapping the primal scene onto the sonic register of analysis would be fruitless, since sound is already, at least partly, structured by and in "(be)hindsight,"<sup>25</sup> rendering a discussion of the primal scene from an auditory perspective redundant.

The image of Benjamin's Angel of History as well as the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice are compelling examples of such a backwards gesture. For Heather Love, the backwards turn is not just necessary when considering Western thought, but queer politics as well:

Homosexual identity is indelibly marked by the effects of reverse discourse: on the one hand, it continues to be understood as a form of damaged or compromised subjectivity; on the other hand, the characteristic forms of gay freedom are produced in response to this history. Pride and visibility offer antidotes to shame and the legacy of the closet; they are made in the image of specific forms of denigration.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, this backward turn is not just a rhetorical turn, but an affective one as well. Nor is it frozen in this position. Rather, it is contained within a moebius loop-like system through which looking backward simultaneously propels the mechanism forward. The image of the moebius strip reoccurs elsewhere besides Edelman, albeit in a different shape. The vortex is like the moebius loop, in that they are both push and pull mechanisms with no clear beginnings nor ends. The very title of Sjogren's book *Into the Vortex* alludes to her methodology. Her reappraisal of 1940s American films which use female voice-off recuperates female subjectivity through a rejection of the dominant view that Hollywood cinema contains and captures sexual difference. More than a methodology in fact, the vortex describes the shape and movement of the films themselves: "it is my contention that certain indices of signification—linearity and time, rather than circularity and space—have been erroneously privileged as primary in the construction of narrative meaning. [...] [C]ontradiction is formative, rather than hierarchized—both directions move simultaneously in a dynamic expression of difference."<sup>27</sup>

Sjogren employs this change in focus from the visual to the auditory and the linear to the maelstrom to make a larger intervention into the topic of female subjectivity. By rejecting the masculine model of the image, we can create a more capacious understanding of how characters are locked into a scenario that "reduces desire to objectification."<sup>28</sup> Although Sjogren's work recuperates female subjectivity, this critique of the scopic drive in film

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>26</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Britta H. Sjogren, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 14.

studies and in cinema also makes room for a reevaluation of our biases toward the image as the prevailing source and site of perspective(s). Since *Brokeback Mountain* is in many ways a woman's film with male actors, this feminist recognition of sound's significance smoothly transfers to my analysis. *Brokeback Mountain* adopts the structure of melodrama to reveal the ways in which a homophobic and repressive culture stifles Jack and Ennis. As in Sirk's fifties melodramas, the characters in *Brokeback* are muffled by societal pressures, which prevent them from being honest with each other.

❖ **Re(ar)-hearing**

I will begin my analysis with a look at how the film's visual framing confines queer desire, but I will demonstrate how sound analysis complicates this argument. In Richard O. Block's critique of the film in *Echoes of a Queer Messianic*, this visual rendering of rear-sighted space, he argues, flattens the queer relations, trapping all possible queer futurities in the rear-view mirror. Block writes at length on the visual trope of the rear in the film, which translates in visual and epistemological terms. Block argues that this framing, which occurs three times in the film, is all that is afforded to Jack and Ennis, who are "seldom together and only together under the sign of imminent departure and doom."<sup>29</sup>



Figure 1. Ennis: rear sighted.

The logic of inversion is such that queer relations only make sense in (be)hindsight. Of course, sound is not exclusively limited to the posterior space. Nor is the film. Yet the space of the posterior as a space in which queer desire is closed off from any possibility of futurity seems especially arbitrary when we consider sound. The three-dimensionality of sound can help us banish the very idea of binaries of exclusively backward and

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<sup>29</sup> Richard O. Block, *Echoes of a Queer Messianic*, 113.

forward-facing desire. While the viewer may be looking through the rearview, the listener is necessarily hearing forward. So rather than offering a queer reading of sound technology, I would like to suggest that a focus on film's sound complicates the notion of (be)hindsight and rear-endedness. The moebius loop and the vortex, which I return to in my third chapter, are useful images to describe the spatio-temporal circuitous bind of image and sound, a bind that is always on the verge of being severed. These images also represent a methodology of sound that complicates linear, forward-moving narratives of progress and teleological modes of analysis.

In one scene, the double rearing that Block refers to creates a complex interplay of unlocalized temporality. This scene takes place twenty minutes from the end, after Ennis confesses to Jack that he won't be able to come back up to Brokeback for many more months. They exchange strong words and fists, in what ends up being their last fight. As Jack holds a crying Ennis in his arms, the scene fades into a memory, or a fantasy. In the summer of 1963, a sleepy Jack is staring down into the embers of a dying evening fire when Ennis comes up from behind and holds him, rocking him back and forth as he whispers and hums a mother's lullaby. As Ennis turns around to leave, walking toward his horse, Jack stares lovingly at Ennis as he mounts and trots away. The image of the lonesome cowboy fades into Ennis's weather-beaten pickup truck. Whatever hopeful longing Jack's face expressed is supplanted by a hardened grief for what could've been and what is now almost out of sight.

Without having read the script however, the viewer is in no position to identify this scene for certain as a flashback. The two successive shots of Jack staring at Ennis leaving suggest that the scene is tied to Jack's subjectivity, yet this is not like any scene we have watched before. The scenes of tenderness between Ennis and Jack usually emerge from and within violence, whether it's bloody noses or espionage through Aguirre's binoculars. In her short essay on the film, Dana Luciano writes about the scene in terms of melodramatic time and its un-localizability within the temporality of the film:

What Jack sees at this moment may well look like "love" to us. Yet we have never seen anything quite like the flashback image in the lived time of the Brokeback summer— though we will see its emptied-out afterimage later on in the shirts. The flashback marks a moment that cannot be securely located within Brokeback's sequence: we have no idea whether it is an "actual" memory or Jack's fantasy. In this sense, the flashback does not so much take as make the measure of love for Jack.<sup>30</sup>

The sound bridges from one scene into the next blur the temporal boundaries even further, making it harder to pin the scene to Jack's memory or his fantasy. Yet, it would be misguided to call these sound bridges examples of sound

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<sup>30</sup> Dana Luciano, "Love's Measures," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 2007), 108.

transcending the image. Just as Luciano argues, the image of Jack and Ennis embracing does not transcend time: “it ‘holds onto’ love while bringing its endlessly deferred possibilities to a close.”<sup>31</sup> The music may glide between scenes, yet the voices do not. The enclosed moebius strip continues to loop around itself.



*Figure 2. A flashback or fantasy of tender love.*

The screenplay’s description of the flashback offers some insight into this blocking decision: “Nothing mars this moment for JACK, even though he knows that ENNIS does not embrace him face to face because he does not want to see or feel that it is JACK he holds -- because for now, they are wrapped in a closeness that satisfied some shared and sexless hunger, that is not really sleep but something else drowsy and tranced.”<sup>32</sup>

If the screenwriters, and Proulx from which this description is taken almost verbatim, underwrite this rearing as a sign of Ennis’s repression, an instance in which queer shame sets the boundaries for looking, then how does the logic of sound play into this? As Edelman argues, turning one’s back on posterior space is a constitutive act. So, taking this scheme to the flashback would suggest that although Ennis may be the one avoiding Jack’s gaze, it is also Jack who avoids facing Ennis, the one occupying his posterior space. It is only once Ennis turns around and walks away that Jack can look at him. If we believe that this is a flashback (as the screenplay writes it) rather than a fantasy then this suggests its own temporal posterior space, a space which Jack recalls in a moment at which all possibilities of a future would seem null.

It is also worth questioning the primacy of the visually rendered body in all of this. What is it about Ennis seeing Jack for the man that he is and the queerness that he represents that is so troubling to him? Why is speaking to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Diana Ossana et al, *Brokeback Mountain*, SS 84.

him and holding him less of a reminder of his queer feelings? After all, the auditory is harder to dismiss than the visual; our ears don't have lids. Speaking to Jack from behind him is a tactic to evade the gaze. But this tactic is only possible because Jack doesn't speak. Given that this is a flashback from Jack's perspective, his return to this unmarred moment is a return to Ennis' voice. Ennis' affection and Jack's hunger for it hinges on speech, silence, and on the body as the origin of vocality.

It is peculiar that the screenwriters characterize this embrace as satisfying 'some shared and sexless hunger.' Whilst Block reads this as a direct negation of their queerness, it is worth postulating that the obstruction of exchanged looks is an attempt to maintain the illusion of homogeneity through the voice. Ennis's mouth, so close to Jack's ears, is impossible to block out. It is that from which one can't turn. Necessarily, as the moebius loop circles around itself, the binding of sound and image begins to fray in some parts.

The charade of homogeneity doesn't come without its obstacles or projections. It is not innocent that the intimacy that binds Ennis and Jack is Ennis's deceased mother. As he rocks him back and forth, Ennis tells Jack that he's "sleepin on [his] feet like a horse." This expression, which Ennis' mother used to tell him, reanimates his dead mother. This phantom presence structures their relation, both facilitating and cutting short their intimacy. Perhaps, this is the source of their 'sexless' hunger - if we are to believe in such a thing - for here their intimacy depends on the hetero union of Ennis's parents. Yet is it fair that any invocation of a heterosexuality should disturb queer love? The spectral maternal also further complicates the double-rearing since, for Ennis, this is a memory of his mother. If Jack is recollecting this moment of Ennis recollecting his mother, then this entire scene is a form of manifested internal subjective sound.

In the final scene of the film, the moebius loop unravels as the promise to and of sound breaks. Ennis's daughter (Kate Mara) visits Ennis, now living alone in his trailer. She brings with her an invitation to her wedding and the hope that he will take off work to walk her down the aisle. He agrees, risking his job for her because he couldn't for Jack. Once she has left, Ennis picks up the cardigan she left behind and goes to store it in the closet, which is where we see Ennis's shrine to Jack and to Brokeback Mountain. The two blood-stained shirts that we first saw hanging one inside the other in Jack's closet are now layered in reverse order. Ennis' plaid shirt holds Jack's denim shirt. As the score's guitar rouses, Ennis speaks to Jack through his shrine: "Jack, I swear. . ." Ennis's aborted last words echo melodramatic principles. In Sarah Kozloff's words, melodramas "dramatize the repression of

speech, the impossibility of using one's words to gain one's desire or to win recognition."<sup>33</sup> Some have suggested that this last scene is an avowal of gay marriage, as the words recall the vows that could never be spoken.<sup>34</sup> More skeptically, W. C Harris suggests that "heterosexuality and the society Ennis has avoided so long intrude into his last private space [...] coaxing him back into the straight fold with the proverbial ties that bind (parent-child affection and duty), requiring his presence at heterosexuality's central sacralizing, promulgating event (marriage)."<sup>35</sup>

The suspended speech act signals an inability to imagine what could be promised and thus what could be possible. Though we may offer guesses as to what words could follow, there is more productive work to be done in taking those three words for what they are: a speech act without another object. Ennis swears. What he is swearing about, we do not know. It may not be enough, but it is all he can muster. Block writes of this "vow that betrays nothing,"<sup>36</sup> as a foreclosure: "no semiotic can predict or register what is sworn."<sup>37</sup> Unlike the last name of the protagonist in Ophuls' *The Earrings of Madame De....* (1953), which is spoken but not captured by the microphone, Ledger's last words can never be heard because they are never spoken.

There is no confusion of back with front or front with back because the postcard and shirts, vestiges of his love for Jack, are themselves emptied of three-dimensionality. Ennis is confronted with Jack's death, a now hollowed-out presence. If in his flashback-fantasy Ennis lulls Jack into a longing slumber, then in this scene Ennis mourns the sleep from which Jack will never wake. Yet, his eulogy can't speak to his pain. As in all classic melodramas, speech is always too late or not enough. The line may be incomplete, but it is finished through the stirring guitar score. In that way, the film's score responds when Jack cannot. Jack's death creates a silence that the score is quick to recuperate. As a leitmotif, this score propels the story back and forth, overscoring the pathos of Ennis' (and Jacks') loss like a haunting. If the logic of inversion works such that it already presumes the horizon of (queer) death, then the leitmotif is another track in the moebius loop that, like the rear-view mirror, reflects backwards. It resuscitates Jack and Ennis' love affair over and over, echoing Jack's absence and fulfilling sound's space where his shirt cannot. Playing opposite the image's flatness is Ennis' voice. Every word he speaks to the shirts affirms his existence and Jacks' death.

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<sup>33</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue, Fulcrum.Org* (University of California Press, 2000), 244.

<sup>34</sup> Roy Grundmann, "Film Reviews: Brokeback Mountain," *Cinéaste* 31, no. 2 (2006), 52.

<sup>35</sup> W. C Harris, "Broke(n)Back Faggots: Hollywood Gives Queers a Hobson's Choice," in *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*, ed. Jim Stacy (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2007), 131.

<sup>36</sup> Block, *Echoes of a Queer Messianic*, 123.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 122.



*Figure 3.* Ennis buttons up an emptied-out shirt

#### ❖ **Double Entendres, Mumbling, and Attachments**

In the first section, my discussion of sound's ontology has come at the expense of sound's bifurcation. Yet, sound is not a one-way channel. To be produced, sound must be heard. Listening is thus an event of relating with the speaker and with our own listening practices. Double entendres are contingent on the double meaning being captured and understood. When gay in rural '60s America however, the apprehension of a second layer of signification (whether intentional or not) is not always desirable. In a cruising context, the circulation of euphemism and double entendre engage in a verbal risk management, in which the speaker must assess the listener beforehand. Yet, mumbled speech threatens double entendres' reception. How can one understand the signified if the signifier is garbled?

Block writes persuasively about the use of the euphemism in the film. Even for a film set in pre- and post-Stonewall America, it is striking how often the euphemism (i.e., the double entendre) appears as a linguistic device for conveying each character's illicit desires and camouflaged threats. As Block writes: "whatever isn't

explicit is explicitly homosexual.”<sup>38</sup> Much of the film’s queerness is contained (yet necessarily overflowing) within these euphemisms. These double entendres are not reserved just for one character. Jack, Ennis, Aguirre, Lurleen and Alma all mask meaning under a thinly veiled cloak.

Mumbling is situated within a liminal space between speaking and silence. Depending on how mumbled the speech is and your distance from the speaker, it can sound more like noise than language. Although Heath Ledger mostly speaks clearly enough without sacrificing intelligibility, the choice to mumble has been widely diagnosed as a sign of Ennis’ repressed queerness, as well as early childhood trauma. Yet, this too neat (psycho)analysis needs complicating. We can reconfigure his mumble not as a sign of repression, but as an optimistic, albeit shy, attachment to speech. It is not that he is repressing his desire, but that he cannot imagine a world in which his desire could be safely realized. The desire remains and his attachment to Jack is loyal and steady throughout the film, despite never committing to the cow and cattle ranch that Jack dreams up for them.

If we look at all attachment as optimistic, as Lauren Berlant does,<sup>39</sup> it can allow us to read Heath Ledger’s performance and the film as the expression of an attachment that never fulfilled itself. One of the main tensions of the film is Jack’s attachment to the image of a good life for the two of them. Ennis, however, witness to a gay bashing from an early age, knows all too well the impossibility of living while openly queer in the rural Midwest. Jack, dissatisfied with a “couple of high-altitude fucks once or twice a year,” wants more than what Brokeback Mountain can provide. Like many melodrama couples, Ennis and Jack operate on opposing poles of one another, both in love but neither able to act out its transformative effects in public. By inverting the thinking from repression to attachment, we can hopefully recuperate some of Ennis’s agency and reconfigure our understandings of supposedly repressed queer masculinity.

In *Cruel Optimism’s* chapter on the Dardennes brothers’ film *Rosetta* (1999), Berlant closely analyzes the scene in which Rosetta whispers to herself a “catechistic quasi-prayer”<sup>40</sup> in which she refers to herself in both the first and third person. This performance of belonging and sociability is, for Berlant, an intimacy which Rosetta shares with herself. At this point in the film, Rosetta has made a friend and through him gotten an under-the-table

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>39</sup> *The Unfinished Business of Cruel Optimism: Crisis, Affect, Sentimentality*, Lynch Lecture Fall 2020, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0alpPzhZI&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>40</sup> Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 162.

job at a waffle stand. After a long day, she lies in bed, whispering to herself the conditions of her fantasy of the good life. It is a fantasy which now, in Berlant's words, "*feels* possible to her and thus *feels* already like a confirming reality."<sup>41</sup> She whispers: "Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You found a job. I found a job. You have a friend. I have a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won't fall through the cracks. I won't fall through the cracks. Good night. Good night."

Outside of the purview of Berlant's analysis is the role of whispering in the construction of this intimacy. Yet surely the vocal mode in which intimacy is expressed has a great deal of valence on the shape of the attachment. This is not the kind of attachment that sends her screaming to the rooftop. She whispers because her attachment is too fragile and too private to declare at a higher decibel. The whisper also recalls an intimate domestic scene of a parent tucking their child into bed and whispering, "Good night." From what we have seen in the film, Rosetta's alcoholic and sexually promiscuous mother is incapable of voicing such an intimacy. Then, what if we saw the mode of speech as an expression of attachment itself?

Berlant defines attachment as a "*structure* of relationality."<sup>42</sup> These affective structures take on different shapes, yet Berlant does not relegate them to a specific mode or dictate how they should feel. These structures are not self-contained. For Berlant, the desire to sustain these attachments manifests optimism. Many queer theorists who have rallied against the anti-social turn, best exemplified by Lee Edelman, have turned toward hope and utopia as politically transformative and potentially radical; affects that can sustain queer subjects in the prison of the present.<sup>43</sup> Yet, the main difference between Berlant's work and these utopian projects is their temporalities. *Cruel Optimism* is present-focused rather than utopianism's future-orientation. In many ways, the melodrama of *Brokeback Mountain* relies on a future-oriented utopia that works to chart the course of social progress and tolerance. "That was then, and this is now, and now is better" is the echoing sentiment for many. As Heather Love astutely puts it, "*Brokeback* is a time bomb that blasts open the gap between contemporary ("gay liberalism") and retrograde ("the closet") gay culture."<sup>44</sup>

Although Jack is more obviously optimistic than Ennis in his desire for domesticity, looking at Ennis's form

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>43</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Love, "Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence," 57.

of optimistic attachments can allow a more capacious understanding of optimism. But first I must establish why such a reading is necessary. For one, Ennis Del Mar's very name suggests that detachment is his birthright. The word Ennis derives from a town in County Clare, Ireland. "Ennis" is the Irish word for "island." And "Del Mar" is Spanish for "of the sea." "Island of the Sea" doubles-down on Ennis's pathology. As Block points out, "he is "of the sea" or queer to mountain country, and apparently of Latino origin despite his porcelain skin."<sup>45</sup> It is established early in the film that Ennis is an orphan and a loner. After his parents "run themselves off the road" and the "bank took the ranch," Ennis was left with nothing. In a much later scene, he laments to Jack that, because of him, he is "nothin' and nowhere." This speaks to his stasis, not his regression. The hope of building a life is atrophied by his tethering to Jack and his belief in the impossibility of a queer life outside of high altitudes. Yet, if we follow the logic of his name then even *Brokeback Mountain* is an unstable attachment.

Another level of attachment is meta-textual. The figure of the lonesome cowboy clearly finds a new, queer embodiment in Heath Ledger's Ennis. Yet, as Jack Halberstam has argued, the western cowboy has always been rooted in homosocial desire.<sup>46</sup> *Brokeback Mountain* does not queer the genre as much as reveal its innate queerness. The genre's hero, the strong silent type, has always been a set of contradictions and impossibilities: he embodies the civilizing and genocidal imperative of settler imperialism while also gesturing toward a solitary and utopian connection to the land. His self-sufficiency betrays a reliance on the figure of the Native American through which he defines himself in opposition. *Brokeback* does not reject the strong silent type outright, however. The film funnels its critique of the trope through an attachment to it. It revises the trope, but in the process also historicizes Ennis's queerness. Is Ennis strong and silent as a by-product of his repressed queerness? Or does his attachment to this figure open up the possibilities for non-hetero unions? Certainly, on one level, Ennis's quiet resilience is a direct foil to Jack's loud yearning; the type of role typically played by a woman in the classic Western. This is another way in which the film reproduces gender dynamics while folding them into a male homosexual context.

When he does speak, Ennis, in keeping with the strong silent type, is terse and sharp-witted. In fact, as mentioned previously, many of the characters speak in euphemisms and metaphors. As this film would have it, double entendre is gay cruising's modus operandi pre-Stonewall, or at least a major part of it. It is also the current

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<sup>45</sup> Block, *Echoes of a Queer Messianic*, 103.

<sup>46</sup> Jack Halberstam, "Not So Lonesome Cowboys: The Queer Western," in *The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. William R. Handley, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011). 190.

through which homophobia runs, as when Aguirre, their boss, refers to having seen Ennis and Jack “stem[ing] the rose” on the mountain. These open secrets depend on the audience’s foreknowledge that this is the “gay cowboy movie.” In that sense, there is something belated about a euphemism. By the time it is uttered, and its true meaning is understood (if it is), it is already past. They do not operate with the logic of a punchline but are precarious utterances that depend on the speaker and listener being subtextually in-synch. And even if the undercover meaning is apprehended, it does not mark the speaker as safe. In one scene, Jack’s offer to buy a drink for a rodeo clown who pulled him to safety is distastefully rejected.

Block points out, these inversions are transformative in how they shape meaning and in how they “open the back door” for queer sex.<sup>47</sup> Yet, the reliance on double entendres dwindles as the possibility of open secrets being lived out in open spaces is interrupted. These euphemisms migrate from the sphere of cruising to the mouths of bitter wives, like when Lureen asks Jack why it is that husbands “don’t never seem to dance with their wives.” This prompts Jack to dance with another man’s wife, dodging the bait Lureen left out for him.

These figures of speech are not fully containable. They leak out of their cruising and homophobic contexts and become one of the dominant modes within which the unbearable is expressed. For instance, the scene in which Ennis rejects Jack’s fantasy of a “sweet life” together ends with an illusion to bull riding:

ENNIS If you can’t fix it Jack...you gotta stand it.  
JACK (quiet) For how long?  
ENNIS thinks for a moment.  
ENNIS Long as we can ride it. (pause) Ain’t no reins on this one.<sup>48</sup>

The figure of speech does a lot of work here. By equating the “it” to bull-riding, Ennis recuperates his response to his fear as a gendered, necessarily masculine, kind of precarity. Resilience must operate within a traditionally masculine framework. Ennis’ use of this metaphor is especially curious given his initial skepticism of bull-riding. In one of their first heart-to-hearts Ennis asks Jack “what’s the point of ridin’ some piece of stock for eight seconds?” Jack responds that “money’s a good point,” to which Ennis laughs and replies: “True enough, if you don’t get stomped winnin’ it.” This last line rings loudly like a foreshadow of Jack’s death. Through bull-riding, Jack may have successfully improved his class by marrying Lureen, but he is stomped for “needin’ somethin’ [he] don’t hardly never get.” There is no winning a bull ride unscathed. Either Jack and Ennis are thrown off and stomped to

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<sup>47</sup> Block, *Echoes of a Queer Messianic*, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Ossana, McMurtry, and Annie, *Brokeback Mountain*, 54.

death, or they can scramble away from the bull's hooves. Whichever way, there is no getting out from under the violence.

At first glance, Ennis's "stand it" seems like the passive counterpart to "fixin' it." When "standing it" is standing the violent jerks of a dancing bull, suddenly it sounds much more laborious. This metaphor also detracts attention from the "it" and what "it" may refer to. We are meant to believe that the "it" refers to the dangerous, homophobic culture they live in, but their incapability to voice this much reveals an inability to articulate their entanglement. In the final scene, does Ennis swear because he can no longer stand it?

On one level these figures of speech are cover-ups, witty one-liners under which to hide intended meaning, yet they also reveal the instability of language. In the penultimate scene at the Twist's ranch, John Twist sarcastically refers to "anotha fella" who was going to split up with his wife and join Jack on the ranch. Is this the fella whose wife Jack told Ennis he has started an affair with? Or is it Randall, the foreman who proposed he and Jack "get away" together to a cabin on Lake Kemp? As Block says, "the ease with which the double entendres of the first part of the film could be read is no longer comforting."<sup>49</sup> If this euphemism for "anotha fella" is belated, then it shall never be fully understood. Though we witness Randall offering up his bosses' cabin to him and Jack, we never hear his response. It is only through his father that we learn that after Jack and Ennis's final fight, Jack came up to his parents' ranch and boasted of a new man with whom to start his cattle and cow operation. These euphemisms reveal counter-temporalities that are subsumed by the film.

How these double entendres are performed, amongst other lines, complicates these figures of speech and reveals another level of attachment. Ennis's mumbling has been widely diagnosed as a sign of his repression, yet as indicated earlier I am uncomfortable with such a swift and sweeping pathology. I would prefer to think of his mumbling as an attachment to speech. This is not to offer an uplifting narrative where there is not one or to reconfigure agency in counterproductive and opportunistic ways. Rather, I would like to reorganize our understanding of speech as necessarily gendered and psychologically predetermined. I would argue that Ennis is attached to mumbling because it allows him to live within the impasse of fully expressed speech and silence. In short, it allows him to survive. From the get-go Ennis' reserved temperament and accompanying mumbling is presented as disquieting and standoffish. Characters often refer to his introversion, as when Cassie, a waitress Ennis

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<sup>49</sup>Block, *Echoes of a Queer Messianic*, 119.

dates for a while, boasts sarcastically that her new boyfriend “even talks.”

In a scene from Jack and Ennis’s first summer on Brokeback, Ennis tells Jack the story of his life. The screenplay describes his opening up as: “ENNIS’S tongue loosens suddenly.”<sup>50</sup> This figure of speech suggests that Ennis’ reticence to speak is almost physiological. And when his tongue does loosen, it speaks in a tense, mumbling twang. It would be more productive to think of Ennis’ reticence to speak as an uncertainty of what his speech can produce. As a boy working on a ranch until age nineteen with only a year of high school, Ennis likely learned quickly that his body’s capacity to produce labor was more valued than anything he could say. It is fitting that Ennis’ first monologue to Jack occurs an evening before riding out to the sheep. Disclosure is not a part of his job description; leaving with him small pockets of time in between shifts to practice this thing called “making conversation.” According to speech therapists, mumbling is a form of inefficient speech production.<sup>51</sup> Taken in this context, Ennis’ inability, or lack of will to produce sounds effectively is a kind of defense against the material demands on him and his body.

Berlant writes about slow-death and obesity as “a self-medication through self-interruption.”<sup>52</sup> Slow death refers to “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence.”<sup>53</sup> Mumbling may not be the subject of social and political panic in the way that obesity is, yet it is a way in which Ennis resists compliance. The self-interruption is an example of what Berlant calls “agency [that] can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality.”<sup>54</sup>

When Ennis does speak, he does not speak with the full-voiced confidence of Jack. Nor is his speaking as outwardly directed as is Jack’s. It is as if this mode of speech was a self-soothing and intimate act. Perhaps critics have been quick to jump to this pathology because mumbling is situated in a zone of (vocal) ordinariness. His mumbling demands attention from the audience; a particular focus which results in a detachment from his words and a speculation of his internal state. He is not forthcoming, but that does not mean he is repressed.

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<sup>50</sup> Diana Ossana, Larry McMurtry, and Proulx Annie, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*, Nachdr (New York: Scribner, 2005), SS 15.

<sup>51</sup> “A Speech Therapist’s Musings on Mumbling,” Toronto Adult Speech Clinic, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://torontoadultspeechclinic.com/blog/2018/1/15/a-speech-therapists-musings-on-mumbling>.

<sup>52</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 115.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

## ❖ Mumbled Futures

In this chapter, I have established sound's ontology as a viable methodology for textual analysis. The moebius loop is a means through which to grapple with cinema's reliance on sound to suggest and construct off-screen space. The moebius loop presents itself as hermeneutics, in which vortexical non-linear thinking can complicate established reading practices within the visual regime. Applying this methodology to my analysis of *Brokeback Mountain* and to Heath Ledger's performance reveal the complexity of making arguments about queer futurity within a visual framework. Moreover, my use of *Cruel Optimism* does not so much regain Ennis Del Mar's agency, as it carves out a space of potentiality. It may be that the move toward psychological realism in acting allowed for more nuanced characterizations, yet the tools of analysis that emerged from this stylistic shift are clearly insufficient. Referring to Ennis' mumbling as a sign of repression closes the door on the attachments that his speaking yields.

*Brokeback* offers little to no queer future, but there is optimism to be found in Ennis' voice and elsewhere. The most hopeful scene in the film is Jack's memory of the two of them in front of the campfire. Thrust between their last fight, this scene offers little sustenance for Jack or Ennis, but their voices carve out a small, imperfect space of desire.

To imagine a future, we must look backward.



**Chapter 2**  
**Black Skin, What Voice?: Listening to Race in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled***

“Delacroix isn't very black; his accent makes him sound like Franklin Pangborn as a floorwalker.”  
-Roger Ebert, *The Chicago Sun-Times*

“Pierre is a disturbing if labored caricature. At once suave and stuffy, he speaks in a phony, pseudo-academic voice that's slightly prissy and determinedly above it all.”  
-A. O Scott, *New York Times*

“The second voice that you heard sounded like the voice of a black man; is that correct?”  
-Christopher Darden to a witness in the *California v. O.J. Simpson* (1995)

❖ **Failed Illusions**

In their Introductory courses, students of cinema are often told that cinema does not capture unmediated reality, but rather it is built upon illusions: the illusion of movement induced by twenty four frames per second and the illusion of actors' immortality delivered to the present through films of decades past. These illusions sustain in part entertainment's feeling of escapism, in which cinema presents “what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized.”<sup>55</sup> Many filmmakers have used their art to critique the concept of the camera as an arbiter of truth and a producer of utopic affects. Julie Dash begins her film *Illusions* (1982) with a quote from Ralph Ellison's essay “The Shadow and the Act”: “To direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, image with reality. In the beginning was not the shadow, but the act, and the province of Hollywood is not action, but illusion.” When bolstered by racist replications and misrepresentations, cinema's feeling of utopia congeals into an affect of optimistic disillusionment for viewers like Dash and Ellison. Cinema does not always feel like utopia for everyone, but somehow it feels like it ought to.

Essential for my discussion is the illusion of voice and body speaking synchronously. This illusion necessitates that we ignore our knowledge of post-production and the existence of the screenwriter (in fiction) in order to preserve this illusion. The sound theorist Rick Altman proposes that we think of the soundtrack as a ventriloquist who creates the illusion that sound is produced by its dummy, the image, by moving the dummy's lips in synchronicity with the words.<sup>56</sup> This separation of voice from body (and the illusion of their tethering) is rendered more urgent and cogent with the intersections of race and gender performance. However, as Pooja Rangan argues,

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 20.

<sup>56</sup> Rick Altman, “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980): 67–79.

Altman's proposal doesn't account for audiences' biased listening practices.<sup>57</sup> There is no innate connection between vocal timbre and race, yet cinema's ventriloquism perpetuates a belief in this connection. Vocal timbre's relation to race is the result of encultured vocal practices that we accept as essential in how we reproduce them ourselves and listen for them in others' voices. The listener is the glue who binds the ventriloquial voice to the body.

At the centre of Spike Lee's 2000 satire *Bamboozled* is Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans), born Peerless Dothan and son of a stand-up comic, who is a Harvard-educated TV Executive. Delacroix is stuck in a contract with the overwhelmingly white CNS Network, working under a racist boss named Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport). His only ally is his assistant Sloan (Jada Pickett Smith), a Black woman who acts as the moral compass of the film. She denounces both the racist CNS Network and the "pseudo-revolutionary" diatribes of her brother's underground rap group The Mau Maus, led by Big Black Africa (Mos Def).

Dismayed by the network's lack of good entertainment for Black audiences and its recycling of racial stereotypes, Delacroix and Sloan concoct a deplorable pitch that they hope will both get him fired and betray Dunwitty's racism: a minstrel show, starring "black actors with blacker faces." Delacroix casts two street performers named Manray (Savion Glover) and Womack (Tommy Davidson) as leads for the show and renames them Mantan (in reference to the '30s-'40s Black comic Mantan Moreland) and Sleep'nEat (named after Willie Best, also a Black comic actor) respectively. Yet, the plan backfires when Dunwitty responds enthusiastically to the idea. The resulting show becomes a bonafide smash hit and Delacroix loses sight of himself, defending the show in public and in private. Thirsty for fame and awards, he drinks the network's kool-aid, leaving the craggy dregs of satire behind. In a violent finale, Sloan, whose initial devotion to Delacroix's plan devolves into disgust for both the show and its creator, accidentally murders Delacroix in a fit of fury. As he bleeds out on his office floor he plays a VHS Sloan made for him: a montage of minstrelsy in Hollywood through the decades from *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) to *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), accompanied by Terrence Blanchard's sorrowful trumpet. Drumming up a direct line to the film's present, Sloan's tape ends with a shot of Mantan smiling through sweat with his "fire-truck red" lips and wide eyes. He is another punchline in Hollywood's shameful running gag. Then, Delacroix

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<sup>57</sup> Pooja Rangan, "The Skin of the Voice: Acousmatic Illusions, Ventriloquial Listening," in *Sound Objects*, ed. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Duke University Press, 2019), 130–48.

recalls his father's advice as his last words: "Always keep 'em laughing." A chorus of laughter joins him in his own before the credits roll.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film was not a critical success when it was first released. Many critics lambasted the film's heavy-handed messaging, some even questioning why Lee had made a film about minstrelsy when they considered it a thing of the past. But Lee's filmmaking favours urgency over understatement. His complex, often convoluted, interpersonal relationships and plot devices don't resolve themselves neatly in the end, preferring to twist and tighten around an epicentre of racial tension and distrust.

Like *A Face in the Crowd* (Kazan, 1957), *The Producers* (Brooks, 1967), *Putney Swope* (Downey Sr., 1969), and *Network* (Lumet, 1976), the satires Lee grafts from, *Bamboozled* stages a polemic on black representation and racism in the United States within the corporate-cum-creative industry. Where *Bamboozled* crucially differs from its precedents is in its satirizing of the satirist. In this way Delacroix is a stand-in for Lee himself. Indeed, many critics accused Lee of reproducing the very images he is railing against in *Bamboozled*. This criticism is valid, but misses the mark in that Lee's own accountability is in part what makes the film so compelling. What begins as a satire on the prevalence of racist television blossoms into a satire of Delacroix's corruptibility. As Ray Black aptly puts it, "Delacroix the satirist becomes Delacroix the satirized, the joke becomes the yoke and the laughing becomes the final fatal payment."<sup>58</sup> Invoking the title of Ralph Ellison's essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Black argues that Delacroix "becomes the joke with the yoke strangling him."<sup>59</sup> The bamboozler becomes the bamboozled. Despite its poor initial reception, *Bamboozled* has recently seen a resurgence of interest with some now calling it Lee's "most powerful film."<sup>60</sup> Yet much of this renewed interest from cinephiles and film studies scholars has drawn on Lee's destabilization of racial identity and the prescient (or for some, prophetic) social commentary.<sup>61</sup> Few have delved into Pierre Delacroix's voice, despite its uncanniness.

The excerpted reviews in the epigraphs reveal a consistent struggle to characterize the sound of blackness. The last epigraph, which I borrow from Nina Sun Eidsheim, is from the O.J Simpson trial. Christopher Darden, himself a Black man, was the co-prosecutor in the case. This context reveals the high stakes of assuming the

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<sup>58</sup> Ray Black, "Satire's Cruellest Cut: Exorcising Blackness in Spike Lee's 'Bamboozled,'" *The Black Scholar* 33, no. 1 (2003), 20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Darren Arnold, *The Pocket Essential Spike Lee* (Harpenden, UK: Pocket Essentials, 2003), 2.

<sup>61</sup> Ashley Clark, "Bamboozled: Spike Lee's Masterpiece on Race in America Is as Relevant as Ever," *The Guardian* (blog), October 6, 2015.

speaker's race. In conjunction with the reviews, this acousmatic question, as in the question of whose voice is speaking and how that voice is racialized, reveals the sticky (or "rigged" as Eidsheim describes it) evidence which implicates both the listener and the speaker in the event of the speaker's "sounding black." In a review for *The Washington Post*, Stephen Hunter writes that "Pierre's affectations – the fake French name, the effeminate vocabulary of gesture, the accent that seems to come from another planet, the \$4,000 suits – all bespeak the fact that his true personality is invisible. He is like Ralph Ellison's great hero, almost unseen behind the trappings that seem to define him."<sup>62</sup> My work in this chapter is to locate the layers that have rendered him a homogenous cluster of influences.

The work of Pooja Rangan and musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim demonstrates the need to reconfigure listening as a productive force in shaping the voice. Eidsheim's use of entrainment, the event of synching one's body with an external rhythm, such as tapping your feet to the beat of a drum, is a strong methodology for thinking through encultured vocal practices. Entrainment, which, for Eidsheim, encompasses listening and speaking practices, explains why listeners perceive certain vocalizations to be essential and innate. Speaking and listening cannot be bifurcated quite so easily: "We are always both singers and listeners, and [...] the entrainment of one of these modes are intertwined and, indeed, entrained through the other. I.e. when I sing, I also listen to myself and I also listen for how others listen to me. So while I'm physically entraining as a singer, it is very much informed by my entrainment as a listener."<sup>63</sup> Entrainment explains why we imagine such a thing as "talking white" or "talking black." Personally speaking, having been raised by white British parents, grown up in a predominantly white Anglo-Canadian neighborhood and gone to a predominantly French European high school, my speaking and listening are naturally a reflection of those social contexts.

In this chapter, I argue that Pierre Delacroix is a failed illusion. Delacroix fails to synch with expectations of blackness and masculinity, causing discomfort in audiences who expect blackness to reverberate within a specific range of vocal practices and styles. What is thought of as innate is in fact entrainment, thus Delacroix's failure to synch up to his father or his peers seems to function as evidence of a desire to exorcise his blackness.<sup>64</sup> Yet, Delacroix's style of speaking is not exactly white, insofar as it recalls James Baldwin. As a civil rights activist,

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen Hunter, "Bamboozled": Soul-Defying Success," *The Washington Post* (blog), October 20, 2000.

<sup>63</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim and Sarah Foulkes, "Entrainment Question," Email Correspondence. May 25, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Black, "Satire's Cruellest Cut: Exorcising Blackness in Spike Lee's 'Bamboozled.'"

Baldwin could hardly be accused of having such a desire. Delacroix's failure is then rooted in a belated synchronization: he synchs up too late, and not convincingly enough, to a public figure who represents a different period in American race-relations. As I will argue, Baldwin's status as an openly queer Black man complicates Delacroix's affair with Sloan in the film. Indeed, their relationship is a missed opportunity for Lee to present a fully-developed female character and, to crib from bell hooks, reconstruct Black masculinity.

Wayans offers a flamboyant performance that bursts the bubble of believability, bending his words out of shape and contorting his hands. Compared to Wayans' caricatures of whiteness on the TV show *In Living Color*, Delacroix is hard to read. Despite the comedic exorbitance of the film, it is often difficult to gauge whether Delacroix is supposed to be humorous or whether he is a funny-talking straight man. Overall, Wayans' performance is weighted down by too many signifiers to register as a satisfying illusion of Black masculinity. This is not to say, however, that his performance is not productive, for out of this failure emerge potent questions of gender, race, and sound.

Since the premise of the film hinges primarily on the visual register of blackface and minstrelsy, I would argue that the failed illusion of Delacroix's voice further exposes the illusion of an authentic blackness in both sound and image. This fantasy of essentialism is exposed through the film's satiric form and Savion Glover and Tommy Davidson's over-the-top minstrel performances in the film's minstrel show *Mantan*. By untethering the voice from the body and exposing the mechanisms of synchronicity and ventriloquism, we can better grasp the relational contingency of the body and the voice speaking as one.

The emergence of multitrack and surround sound in Hollywood created the illusion of sound and image synchronicity. Any subversion of the codes of synchronicity inevitably draws attention to this delicate balance. Giallo cinema and films like *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) and more recently *Sorry To Bother You* (Riley, 2019) have successfully mined the uncanny affects of synchronizing a voice to a body that doesn't appear to fit it. This process is facilitated by the double-casting of the role, and yet even if the voice and the on-screen presence are provided by the same performer, as is the case with Damon Wayans, this perceptual problem of synchronization persists. Inherent to the premise of eerie voice-image pairings is the undermining of expectations. One doesn't expect a 12-year old girl to have a deep, raspy voice. Similarly, Pierre Delacroix, a Black man, ought not to sound

“effete” or “prissy.” In that sense, Wayans and Lee disturb expectations of what a Black man, a Black protagonist at that, should sound like.

Critical race studies has long been tasked with conceptualizing race and racism without relying on biology. However, the claim that race is a social construction is inadequate, since many of these theories still rely on the skin as a marker of phenotype. I will be drawing on Goding-Doty’s provocations of race not as something one has, but as something one does; “an event of relationality,”<sup>65</sup> as she puts it. Rooting race in the event will uncover the relationality of listener and speaker in the event of blackness. She explains:

Rather than conceptualizing race as identity, phenotypic characteristics, or biological inheritance, my reading of race as relation suggests that race itself is an event. It is not just a relation, but an event of relating. [...] Race is a relation generated by the interaction of at least two bodies—it is the character and the outcome of their interaction, identifiable by what their event of relating has capacitated. [...] This is an articulation of race which emphasizes its relational, contingent, and processual nature, rooted in affect, toward the determination of bodily capacity.<sup>66</sup>

Producing “race” therefore depends on two or more bodies’ encounters with each other. Race does not exist outside of an encounter for it is *in* the encounter that race is produced. The “event” here includes the event of critical engagement. Though I am writing about Pierre Delacroix’s voice and its many social and political imbrications, I would also like to include myself, a white writer and listener, in this event of relationality. By doing so, I want to draw attention to myself as the listener as an active agent in the process of meaning-making. Similarly, Delacroix’s encounters with his father, his assistant and, I argue, James Baldwin, as events of relating, challenge pre-existing notions of race and produce new ones in their wake.

Goding-Doty uses affect theory to “orient[...] us to the notion that something emerges as and through the making-relate, the relate-tion or relating, of bodies that are actively being impacted by the relating they are doing.”<sup>67</sup> This “something” is the work of this chapter. Goding-Doty uses the term “affective horizon” to describe the limitations “imposed on the body's capacity to affect or be affected.”<sup>68</sup> Race is the modulation of a body’s affective horizon, whereby the horizon is a mechanism of control, for it “invents a virtual division which may never be grasped, but which instantiates itself as an object of orientation.”<sup>69</sup> The horizon may seem like a vague term in this

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<sup>65</sup> Christine Goding-Doty, “White Event Horizon,” *MONDAY* 4, <https://monday-journal.com/white-event-horizon/>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Christine Goding-Doty, “Virtually White: The Crisis of Whiteness, Racial Rule, and Affect in the Digital Age” (Northwestern University, 2008), 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

context, but as Hito Steyerl describes, sailors have long used the horizon to orient themselves, a practice which enables “colonialism and the spread of a capitalist global market.”<sup>70</sup> The horizon also shapes Western ways of seeing and thinking. A key example is the dominance of the linear perspective, which organizes our perceptions of history, time and subjectivity.

One of the most useful ideas emerging from Goding-Doty is the distrust of identity as a primary form of relationality with race and power. Identity is overdetermined, Goding-Doty seems to suggest, and therefore presents a conceptual roadblock, preventing the flow of new ways of thinking about race and its effects. This helps to frame how I am approaching race in *Bamboozled*: not as a fixed identity nor biological formation, but as a series of performative encounters and, to borrow Jose Estaban Muñoz’s words, the effects that “the recognition of racial belonging, coherence, and divergence present in the world.”<sup>71</sup> Delacroix’s performance doesn’t exorcise blackness, rather it diverges from coherence and enacts a less recognizable kind of racial belonging. Conceptualizing the performance of entrainment as an expression of agency reveals a broader understanding of race and racial mimicry.

#### ❖ **Out-of-synch or Synching Out?**

Before I delve into the performance, I will set the scene with a discussion on synchronization and dubbing in cinema, and alternatives to acousmatic listening. I will rely on examples such as Julie Dash’s *Illusions*, Otto Preminger’s *Carmen Jones* (1954), and Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You* (2019).

Most telling about the quotes I have cited as epigraphs is how the voice is positioned as distinctly not Black and not masculine. Stephen Hunter goes so far as to say that Delacroix’s accent is “from another planet,” which may be a reference to John Sayle’s silent protagonist in *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984). Yet, the question of what it is to sound Black is never answered, not even posed. In these epigraphs, identifying whether a voice sounds Black or not is as subjective as Justice Stewart’s obscenity barometer in the 1964 Supreme Court trial on screenings of Louis Malle’s risqué film *The Lovers*, in which the judge professed his inability to define hard-core pornography, coining the now-famous phrase “I know it when I see it.” In this context, I know it when I *hear* it does not stand up

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<sup>70</sup>Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *E-Flux*, no. 24 (April 2011), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

<sup>71</sup>José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (March 2006): 679.

to much critical rigour.<sup>72</sup> The production and reception of vocal practices are not arbitrary. Nina Sun Eidsheim redresses the hierarchy of listening and speaking when she argues for a new methodology of listening, for in order “to know voice we must examine the listening practices that structure voice.”<sup>73</sup> The acousmatic question never returns an uncomplicated answer.

One proposed solution to listening objectively has been reduced listening or acousmatic listening, in which the source of the sound is concealed from the listener so as to avoid the encumbrance of the visual. Chion’s term “acousmatic” derives from “the name assigned to a Pythagorean sect whose followers would listen to their Master speak behind a curtain, as the story goes, so that the sight of the speaker wouldn’t distract them from the message.”<sup>74</sup> This practice of veiling the Master from his students would take place for five years. This prolonged concealment “permitt[ed] it to function as a virtual screen or veil even after the actual screen concealing his body had been lifted.”<sup>75</sup> Pooja Ragan makes evident the method’s internal biases toward white, male voices, arguing that “idealized voices are heard as a screen that resists objectification even when their bodies are visible, whereas minoritized voices are circumscribed in advance as an objectified skin—even when they are acousmatic.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, when listening to minoritized voices, listeners look for evidence of the body despite its absence. Eidsheim has coined the term “acousmatic blackness” to describe “the perceived presence of the Black body in a voice that otherwise meets all the standards of a professional classical voice.”<sup>77</sup> Delacroix’s voice is confusing to critics and characters partly because his voice does not appear to them to be marked by his skin. Even without the visual reminder of the body, race is subsumed into sound and timbre. Indeed, the voice is always an extension of the body, but some bodies are allowed more opacity than others. So, if acousmatic listening is not the solution, how do we listen to voices without averting our gaze? And how to avoid the biases of dominant ideologies? Ragan proposes ventriloquial listening as one solution. She describes it as such:

To listen ventriloquially is to behold the bifurcation of a voice’s origins and its surrogate forms as one might behold performances of ventriloquists projecting their voices onto dummies. A

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<sup>72</sup> “I Know It When I See It,” in *Wikipedia*, December 21, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=I\\_know\\_it\\_when\\_I\\_see\\_it&oldid=995529624](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=I_know_it_when_I_see_it&oldid=995529624).

<sup>73</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), 27.

<sup>74</sup> Michel Chion and Claudia Gorbman, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>75</sup> Pooja Ragan, “The Skin of the Voice,” 134.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>77</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011), 647.

ventriloquial listener becomes perceptive to the seam between the embodied origins of voices and the surrogate bodies that voices conjure into existence. They take note of when the illusion succeeds, magically animating the dummy, and when the illusion fails, reasserting the thingness or the matter of the dummy body. Ventriloquial listening asserts the ideological work involved on the part of both the performer and the audience of these vocal and perceptual illusions.<sup>78</sup>

Which bodies does Delacroix's voice 'conjure into existence'? And why does his illusion fail? I would argue that because Delacroix channels James Baldwin, his racial mimicry is lost in a ventriloquial palimpsest. Wayans' voice, his performance of Delacroix's stylized voice and the voices his stylization recalls become indistinguishable from one another. One reason for the confusion and discomfort surrounding Wayans' performance is that imitation and ventriloquism pose a threat to the myth of vocal essentialism.

Entrainment is a useful term for thinking through mimicry. For Eidsheim, the power structure within which entrainment is performed is a more urgent critical task than any investigation into which vocalizations are "unconsciously entrained and which [are] deliberately performed." Eidsheim explains that "the issue is the fact that a timbre performed by one person is understood as essence (e.g., a so-called white timbre performed by a person understood as white), while the same timbre performed by another person is understood as an imitation (e.g., a so-called white timbre performed by a person understood as African American). In other words, the same timbral performance is assigned a different meaning depending on the power structure within which the vocalizer and listener are situated."<sup>79</sup> Every Black character in the film, except for Delacroix, is entrained to encultured timbres, therefore the essentialism of their timbres is never questioned. Eidsheim uses the term in a musical context, but this term is useful for film studies. It can help us understand when particular vocal performances resist or acquiesce to hegemony, as well as how these encultured vocal practices structure not just voices and listening practices, but the films themselves.

Eidsheim is quick to carve out the political potentials of entrainment, for synching up to, say, whiteness can also be synching out with blackness. In this definition, she recuperates the agency of the speaker. She writes that "what we have referred to as vocal 'mimicry of racial mimicry' may be connected to familiar positions, what Gayatri Spivak describes as 'strategic essentialism' and Jose Muñoz considers 'disidentifications.'" By closely examining entrainment's complex condition, we may conceive of certain uses of entrained vocal features such as 'technique and

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<sup>78</sup>Rangan, "The Skin of the Voice," 145.

<sup>79</sup>Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 31.

style.”<sup>80</sup> Then, instead of thinking of Delacroix as sounding white or not sounding black, reading his performance through the lens of style and technique will allow for a more capacious and nuanced understanding of how race is operating in and outside of his performance. Though I have referred to being in and out of synch, synchronization manifests in variations and degrees. One can imagine a miniscule delay in synchronization that only an alert audience member would be attentive to. Delacroix’s vocal delay from the image of mainstream blackness, however, is purposefully jarring such that even the spectator in the back row notices.

Writing on the history of synchronization, James Lastra reveals a misunderstanding of the relationship between sound and the image in early cinema. That the visual has always dominated sound is a fallacy, he argues. To suggest “that sound fell into a preordained slot” is reductive and is partially rooted in “naturalistic norms of later classical cinema.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, when we think of synchronization, we think of matching sound to the image of the moving mouth. Yet, in its production and exhibition, sound in early cinema fulfilled other non-representational functions. In fact, sound often threatened to “usurp the image” with sound technicians and performers’ “flamboyant displays of skill” in producing voices and sound effects. According to Lastra, these displays strained the relation between the sought-after realism that sound could provide and the cinematic attractions of the sound effects. Lastra’s historical work reflects how the harmony between sound and image that we have come to expect in North America from the medium is far from natural and fraught with tension.

Synchronization in cinema maps onto histories of racism and race relations. In her short film *Illusions*, Dash dramatizes the Black labour working behind the scenes to facilitate the illusion of white bodies in synchronicity. Mignon Dupree (Lonette McKee) is a light-skinned Black woman and the only female producer’s assistant at the studio. While overseeing the post-production of a film, she is informed that the sound operator lost synch during a musical number. They cannot get Leila Grant, the white star, to redo the scene, so instead they ask Esther Jeter (Rosanne Katon), who sang the original vocals, to return to the studio and sing in synch to the image.<sup>82</sup> After the recording, Esther recognizes Mignon’s ethnic heritage and confides in her. At the movies, listening to her voice mouthed by a white movie star, Esther closes her eyes and imagines that it is her on that screen “in a satin gown.” In

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>81</sup> James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 102.

<sup>82</sup> Incidentally, Ella Fitzgerald provides the vocals that Rosanne Katon sings along to.

order to embody her voice, Esther must listen acousmatically. As Rangan argues however, the illusion Esther participates in is a failed one, “the prospect of a (racialized) body whose skin threatens to assert its vocal presence, ‘outing’ or disacousmatizing the body even in its visual absence.”<sup>83</sup> She may be behind the screen, yet the perceived racialized timbre of Esther’s voice leaves its marks on Leila Grant’s white skin.

The unveiling of Esther as the voice behind the white screen leads Mignon to come to terms with her blackness and her place in the studio. She no longer wants to work as an assistant, overseeing musicals starring white actors, yet powered by black labour. “Now I’ve become an illusion. Just like the stories that are made here,” she says to Esther, “They think of me one way, yet I’m another way. They see me, yet they can’t recognize me.” The unveiling of the illusion of synchronicity incites her disillusionment.

Of course, *Bamboozled* is a satire and *Illusions* is a period drama. Yet, I mention *Illusions* because it illustrates the ways in which synchronicity and dubbing can bolster social hierarchies while maintaining the illusion of one body speaking one voice. The film also stages an unveiling that spurs change. Mignon witnesses this act of dubbing, where she “see[s] beyond the shadows dancing on a white wall” and decides to devote herself to telling other stories on the silver screen. Does Delacroix have a similar revelation? Yes, however he doesn’t see such a stark uncoupling of sound and image. Since the conceit of Delacroix’s show is to cast “black actors with blacker faces,” the mimicry of racial mimicry is harder to identify and harder to eliminate.

Preminger’s *Carmen Jones* is an example of how dubbing reconfigured race, class and gender through revising operatic traditions, while nevertheless upholding white hegemony. Adapted from Bizet’s opera and based on the lyrics and book by Oscar Hammerstein II, *Carmen Jones* is a touchstone text in black representation in Hollywood. On the one hand, it propelled Dorothy Dandridge to stardom, earning her the first Oscar nomination for a Black actress in a leading role. On the other hand, as an all-Black musical, its segregationist logic was viewed as regressive by many including the NAACP. As Jeff Smith argues, *Carmen Jones* is situated within two distinct musical styles which map onto two social strata. Because they were not considered polished enough singers, Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte and Joe Adams’ singing voices were dubbed by white opera singers. More than that, Smith observes, the opera singer Marilyn Horne, performs vocal minstrelsy by singing in a sloppy, untrained

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<sup>83</sup> Rangan, “The Skin of the Voice,” 135.

style. The dubbing creates a Black “dummy” voiced by a white ventriloquist trying to sound Black. The film’s integrated soundtrack troubles the film’s status as an all-Black musical.

Smith is quick to point out that not all of the voices are dubbed. Pearl Bailey, in the role of Frankie, sings her musical number “Beat out Dat Rhythm,” despite her voice being less operatic than Dandridge’s. Bailey’s performance of the song plays into stereotypes of African-American culture as “earthier, more sensual, more libertine, more natural.”<sup>84</sup> Her skin is noticeably darker than Dandridge’s and her outfit, with its bare shouldered-dress, and matching turquoise earrings and bracelets “add[s] a touch of exotic ‘negritude.’”<sup>85</sup> Accompanied by Max Roach’s forceful drumming, Bailey’s swing number is a jarring contrast to the operatic style in the rest of the film. Then, Smith argues, it is not that Dandridge and Belafonte were “too black” to sing opera, rather the issue is that they don’t conform to the exotic lure of Black American culture. By selectively sundering the voice from the body, Preminger creates a politics of dubbing. The rupture of body and voice reveal a rupture between the forms of blackness that defy dubbing because of their primitive connotations and those that need to be reinscribed through whiteness in order to be screened.

Synchronization may not seem as relevant to *Bamboozled* as it is to *Illusions* and *Carmen Jones*, yet I would argue that this concept can help us understand the uncanniness of Damon Wayans’ performance. Pierre Delacroix is not dubbed by another actor, nor is the vocal track out-of-synch with the image, yet Pierre Delacroix’s is in and out of synch with social expectations of Black masculinity. Years later, *Sorry To Bother You* will synchronize a white actors’ voice (David Cross) to a Black actors’ body (LaKeith Stanfield) to playfully and pointedly illustrate performative whiteness. Stanfield plays a character working at a telemarketing firm, who is determined to rise in the ranks at the company. The implication of the double casting is that the white voice is from another body. Yet, “sounding white” is not a question of sounding proper or nasally. As Danny Glover’s character in the film instructs Stanfield’s Cassius, sounding white is “sounding like you don’t have a care. Got your bills paid, you’re happy about your future. [...] It’s not really a white voice,” he elaborates “it’s what they wish they sounded like.” Can encultured vocal practices be aspirational?

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 34.

Leshu Torchin argues that “to have another actor’s voice emanate from LaKeith Stanfield’s body makes material the estrangements that come with managing multiple perspectives and expectations.”<sup>86</sup> The synchronization is deliberately messy however, as the over-dubbing is not seamless.<sup>87</sup> In that sense, the vocalized whiteness is being imposed on the character; it doesn’t come from within. Moreover, what enables the effectiveness of the double casting is that Stanfield is an acousmètre to his phone clients who are unaware of his blackness. Only once he begins to adopt his white voice outside of work does a tension between his blackness and his performed whiteness emerge.

#### ❖ An Idio-synch-cratic Performance

Although Wayans’ performance in *Bamboozled* stands out as especially mannered compared to the other actors in the film, his history in stand-up and sketch comedy suggests Wayans has always played characters with troubled, if humorous, relationships to race and masculinity. In 1990 Keenan Wayans, Damon’s brother, created *In Living Color*, a sketch comedy show that ran for five seasons on Fox. The Wayans brothers were regular cast members, playing opposite soon-to-be stars such as Jamie Foxx and Jim Carrey. *In Living Color* strayed far from the congenial humour of “The Cosby Show” and “The Jeffersons.” Its satire was biting and it didn’t reserve its venom for only white folks. Black Americans were often the target of their derision, including Spike Lee. One recurring sketch in particular is compelling in how it depicts a Delacroix type, a Black man who doesn’t act black enough.

The joke in “The Brothers Brothers” is that Tom and Tom (played by Damon and Keenan Wayans), with their matching cardigans and high-pitched nasal speaking, act too white to be brothas’.<sup>88</sup> They’re Uncle Toms’ who defend slavery and play together in a country band in the style of ‘60s comedy duo The Smothers Brothers. The skits are repetitive, as Tom and Tom run through a list of ostensibly white attributes, including their love for The Beach Boys and their wish that Black folks would stop talking about racism. This is both a parody of whiteness and of whiteness performed by Black folks. It exists on a separate plane, however, from Wayans’ performance in *Bamboozled*. For one thing, Delacroix doesn’t appear to be mimicking whiteness, at least not in the way that The Brothers Brothers do. It is not even clear whether Delacroix is even meant to be funny. In interviews for the film, Lee and Wayans describe Delacroix as “lost” and “confused,” as someone who is “unsure of who he is, of his

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<sup>86</sup> Leshu Torchin, “Alienated Labor’s Hybrid Subjects: *Sorry to Bother You* and the Tradition of the Economic Rights Film,” *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (June 1, 2019), 35.

<sup>87</sup> Hunter Harris, “How *Sorry to Bother You* Found (and Used) Its White Voice,” *Vulture*, July 18, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Damon Wayans does a similar voice in the superhero spoof *Blankman* (Binder, 1994), in which an inventor fights crime in his predominantly black neighborhood.

identity.”<sup>89</sup> Although his inner confusion is apparent to everyone, his confidence and wealth shield him from his own delusions.

Within the structure of “The Brothers Brothers” sketch, there is never a question whether Tom and Tom are putting it on. However, characters frequently ask Delacroix why he speaks and acts the way he does. The joke of the Brothers Brothers is very clear since it dispels the myth of colorblindness by depicting Black men doing whiteness. In contrast, Wayans’ performance in *Bamboozled* operates on multiple overlapping planes, like a gallimaufry of signifiers, rendering it illegible to the audience.

In the first few minutes of the film, Pierre Delacroix introduces himself to the camera. “Bonjour!,” he says as he floats instead of walks in Lee’s signature double dolly shot, “my name is Pierre Delacroix.” He stretches out the vowels in his first and last name, faintly rolling his r’s in “Pierre.” Throughout his performance, Wayans often over-articulates a certain word, puts the stress on multiple words in a sentence or stresses a word too much, creating an unnatural effect. And sometimes, he seems to disengage from a line altogether. His rhythm is also strange. It feels at once both choppy and freewheeling, with the natural ebb and flow of human speech absent. If anything, it recalls slam poetry, which in many cases consists of a flowing delivery accentuated with hyper-articulated words. Given slam poetry’s origins in 1980s Chicago,<sup>90</sup> if Delacroix’s speaking is an attempt to sound more white, then the slam poetry association complicates his effort. As does the music that plays in the background: Stevie Wonder trills the chorus, “We have been a misrepresented people.” In the foreground, Wayans’s speaking echoes Stevie Wonder’s stylized vibrato. The lyrics act like a plea for change that Delacroix ultimately fails to act on. Lastly, the hand gestures that accompany his words exacerbate his mannered speaking. The tips of his fingers are adjoined, and his hands thrust forward with every word spoken. These are not natural speech patterns nor body language.



<sup>89</sup> Spike Lee, *BAMBOOZLED*, <https://www.criterion.com>

<sup>90</sup> Javon Johnson, *Kill*, Newark, New Jersey: Rutgers Univ

nswick, New

Figure 4. Pierre Delacroix's direct address

In his final line in his introduction, in which he laments the decline of quality television, Delacroix says: "People are tuning out by the minutes, which needless to say is bad for business." The first half of the line is subdued. It's as if he is saying this to himself, frowning at the camera. In the second part of the line, however, he drags out the words 'say', and punches 'bad' and 'business.' Breaking down human speech, Steve Lecky defines a "pull" or "pulled inflection" as that which is "is distinguished by a large pitch glide that is centered on one keyword - best illustrated by saying the word 'pow'. [...] In order that the "pull" be the undisputed primary stress of the line, it is important that the pulled inflection not be applied to other words in the line."<sup>91</sup> By pulling multiple words in one sentence, Wayans appears indecisive. He cannot choose which word to stress, and thus the essence of the line is drowned out by too many pulls. Damon Wayans' untethering from human behaviour is partly why Delacroix fails as an illusion. In a film populated by actors performing caricatures that are nevertheless believable, Wayans' line deliveries tip the scale too far off. Is this an expression of style and technique or is it a miscalculation? Can we conceptualize a strategic untethering in contrast to a strategic essentialism?

The characters in *Bamboozled* also respond to Delacroix's vocal mannerisms with confusion. In one scene, Delacroix visits his father, who goes by Junebug, at a comedy club. His father, played by comedian Paul Mooney, speaks in African-American Vernacular English suggestive of vocal entertainment. Junebug's voice proves that Delacroix's way of speaking is not learned from his parents. In fact, his father asks him "n\*\*\*\*, where in the hell did you get that accent?," a question which Delacroix deflects by asking him why he uses the n-word so excessively. When he rejects his son's suspicion that maybe he wasn't funny enough to make it big in comedy, Junebug repeats "They were with me." We know this to be true, for in the previous scene at the nightclub, his Black audience laughs uproariously at every joke. This, along with Junebug's line, confirms the feeling of synchronicity with his audience. Delacroix is with James Baldwin, but, as I will discuss later, his summoning of Baldwin is a posterior synchronicity. He revives Baldwin, but he has no contemporaries with whom to synch up.

Implicit in his father's question is another one: "why don't you talk like me?" The unposed question exists in the relation that constitutes Delacroix and Junebug. In that sense, the question implicates the asker. Junebug situates himself as having the voice that Delacroix should synch up to. It is through his father's listening that

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<sup>91</sup> W. Steven Lecky, *Vox Method: The Acting Process* (Montréal: CCDMD, 2009), 85.

Delacroix's voice is construed as out-of-synch. Delacroix has little choice but to deflect his father's question, for answering would mean admitting that his accent is not his own. The question operates similarly to the acousmatic question of "who is that who is speaking?," in that the question presumes an innate and unique identity. Yet, Junebug's question bypasses the acousmatic question because it is already contained within it. He is asking where Delacroix got the accent, because Junebug knows that Delacroix's voice is not innate or essential. The implication then is that Junebug's voice *is* authentic. Junebug, hearing through difference, naturalizes his own voice through alienating his son's.



*Figure 5: Like Father, Unlike Son*

More than just presenting a stark contrast in voices, the scene also reveals a tension in their respective gender performances. Junebug is painted as a ladies' man, who makes sexist jokes and marvels at his girlfriend's ass when her back is turned. This scene reveals the extent to which Delacroix is a foil to his father. Junebug is sexually uninhibited whereas Delacroix is much more conservative in his sexuality. The contrast is also clear in their voices. Occurring towards the beginning of the film, this encounter seems to mark the beginning of the end of Delacroix's moral acuity. His desire to not become his father propels him toward debasing Black performers and reproducing toxic tableaux.

Yet, if Lee shows a clear descent in how Delacroix presents Black men like Mantan and SleepN'Eat, Lee does not chart a similar journey for Dela's treatment of women. In the first scene with Sloan he blames her for not telling him about a morning meeting. He treats Sloan as a maid and, in a climactic scene, professes to her his regret

for “getting involved with *the help*.” It’s difficult to overlook the criticisms of Lee’s misogyny in his treatment of female characters and his failures to address the intersecting oppressions that Black women face.

Delacroix may not ogle women, yet his consistent mistreatment of Sloan suggests an unexamined misogyny. In “Reconstructing Black Masculinity,” bell hooks argues against a “monolithic standard of black masculinity,”<sup>92</sup> detailing how Black men’s acceptance of white patriarchal norms interrupts racial equality and contributes to the debasement of Black women. Lee has admitted to his past mishandling of female characters, which no doubt inspired him to create a woman as *Bamboozled*’s moral compass. Yet, Sloan is never characterized outside of her relationship to men. Her condemnation of Delacroix’s minstrel show is not informed by her experience as a Black woman, despite minstrelsy’s debasement of men and women alike. As Victoria Piehowski puts it, “[Sloan] is content to settle for her superior’s well-being in a sort of vicarious emancipation, and thus she strives to bolster Manray’s awareness at the cost of discussing her own subjugation under patriarchy.”<sup>93</sup> As Piehowski astutely points out, even after Delacroix is dead he gets the final word through voice-off, whereas Sloan is reduced to a crazed mess.

In the car on the way back from carrying his drunk father home, Delacroix recounts in voice-off his feelings toward his father. “Father was a broken man,” he says. “He had been a strong man, with conviction, integrity. Principles. And look where it had gotten him. I had to ask myself, did I want to end up where he was? Hell emphatically no.” The implication in Delacroix’s voiceover is that despite his father’s moral fortitude his failure in stand-up ‘broke’ him. Delacroix constructs his masculinity in opposition to his father and through his power over Sloan. Ultimately, Delacroix’s death at the hands of Sloan retroactively reinstates Junebug as the patriarch and a totem of Black masculinity. After all, Delacroix’s last words are his father’s: “always keep ‘em laughing.” Junebug’s refusal to sacrifice his values for the entertainment industry is certainly to be applauded, yet his treatment of women problematizes the film’s attempt to idealize him. Why doesn’t Lee dismantle the stereotype of the hyper-sexual Black man?

#### ❖ **Poitier, Baldwin, Davis, and Mid-Atlantic Blackness**

Perhaps the most accurate summation (and the funniest) of Wayans’ accent comes from Ashley Clark, writing for The Criterion Collection’s “The Current”: “Pierre is a walking affectation, brilliantly played by Damon

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<sup>92</sup> bell hooks, “Reconstructing Black Masculinity,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 1992, 88.

<sup>93</sup> Victoria Piehowski, “‘Business as Usual’: Sex, Race, and Work in Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 1 (2012), 15.

Wayans with clenched poise, indelible hubris, and a bizarre, clipped accent that, in the character's mind, presumably signifies sophistication but really sounds more like Kermit the Frog impersonating Sidney Poitier."<sup>94</sup> Though Poitier occupies a very different space than Baldwin, the argument is clear: Delacroix is a parody of middle-class, black respectability.

The allusion to Sidney Poitier is a compelling one since Poitier was a trailblazer for black representation in Hollywood. This representation was, however, often on Hollywood's terms. In a *New York Times* article from the late '60s, Clifford Mason diagnoses, what he calls, the Sidney Poitier syndrome as: "a good guy in a totally white world, with no wife, no sweetheart, no woman to love or kiss, helping the white man solve the white man's problem."<sup>95</sup> Mason seems to bemoan Poitier's character's absent heterosexuality as a key component of a Black man's identity. At that time in Hollywood cinema, Black men were either denied a sex life or painted as hypersexual, and thus a threat to white female purity. Mason seems to suggest that in order for Poitier to be palatable to a white audience, he needed to be stripped of his sexuality. A stylization of Baldwin would then appear to trouble the Sidney Poitier syndrome, since Baldwin was openly queer. However, Lee's insertion of a love triangle between Delacroix, his assistant Sloan and Manray affirms Dela's straightness. Without the love plot, Delacroix's queerness would be open to debate, if not assumed outright. Delacroix may summon Baldwin and thus invoke queerness, yet the love plot mitigates any assumptions of his sexuality. On the other hand, the love triangle does stage black male homosocial bonding through Sloan's debasement. There seems to be a parallel between the history of white minstrel performers switching to the bel canto style of singing (the international style during the minstrel era) as a means to assure the audience that the performance of blackness only went so far.<sup>96</sup>



<sup>94</sup> Ashley Clark, "Ba

<sup>95</sup> Clifford Mason, "

<sup>96</sup> Jacob Smith, *Voca*

Leisure.

2.

Figure 6: A Manray and Pierre Face-Off featuring Mantan and SleepN'Eat

Ultimately, Delacroix's straightness is at the expense of Sloan's construction outside of patriarchal norms. Moreover, through their sexual relationship with Sloan, Delacroix and Manray are in conflict with one another. Piehowski argues that Delacroix's "enjoyment of [*Mantan*] begins as the relationship between Manray and Sloan deepens. As Manray has taken possession of something that Pierre once owned, it soothes Pierre's anxieties about Manray's greater sexual prowess to have an outlet through which he can manipulate Manray."<sup>97</sup> Does this homosociality reinforce Delacroix's heterosexuality or does it queer it?

In a televised debate from 1965, Baldwin's opponent William H. Buckley accuses him of putting on a foreign accent. He declares that, "Mr. Baldwin can write his book, *The Fire Next Time*, in which he threatens America. He didn't, in writing that book, speak with the British accent that he used exclusively tonight; in which he threatened America with a necessity for us to jettison our entire civilization."<sup>98</sup> In the reaction shot, Baldwin raises his eyebrows as if in disbelief. The comment from Buckley is especially suspicious considering Buckley, an American who grew up in France, England and in the States, speaks with an idiolect resembling a mid-Atlantic accent. In its context, the remark sounds like an accusation: "how can you write about being Black in America when you don't sound American or Black?" The assumption that Baldwin is a fraud elides Buckley's own stylized voice. When is style read as aspirational and when is it read as destiny?

Baldwin was not a fraud. Rather, I would argue that his way of speaking has origins in Classic Hollywood. *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin's book on cinema, opens with a description of Joan Crawford. He watches her "straight, narrow, and lonely back"<sup>99</sup> as she walks down the corridors of a moving train in *Dance, Fools, Dance* (Beaumont, 1931). After the film, at a corner store, he notices a Black woman who, he thinks, looks exactly like Joan Crawford. People in the store laugh at his interracial recognition. It will take a while for Baldwin to see leading Black women on-screen.

Told by his father that he is the ugliest boy he had ever seen, Baldwin watches Bette Davis whose bulging eyes remind him of his mother's and of his own. "So, here, now," he writes, "was Bette Davis, on that Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping. I was astounded. I had caught my father, not in a

<sup>97</sup> Piehowski, "Business as Usual," 12.

<sup>98</sup> The Riverbends Channel, *James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965)*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w&t=2784s>.

<sup>99</sup> James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (New York: The Dial Press, 1976), 3.

lie, but in an infirmity. For, here, before me, after all, was a movie star: white: and if she was white and a movie star, she was rich: and she was ugly.”<sup>100</sup> Baldwin sees the contours of a familiar face on screen, thereby “undermin[ing] binary categories through the play of (dis)identifications.”<sup>101</sup> In this event of relating, Baldwin fractures traditional codes of identification and representability. What he sees on that Saturday afternoon are Davis’ eyes and his eyes, but what else does he take away? What else impresses itself onto his imagination?

Writing on Baldwin’s spectatorial engagement with Davis, Crawford and Sylvia Sidney, Patricia White contends that “the star is decomposed into a set of characteristics ‘dead-white greenish’ skin, forehead, lips, movement, that are disengaged from binary (sexual or racial) difference - characteristics that have been insistently recomposed in impersonations of the star.”<sup>102</sup> When listening to James Baldwin speak there is an eerie sense that his voice echoes the reverberations of these women’s voices throughout the cinema. He doesn’t have the voice I would associate with working class Harlem in the ‘60s. Then again, would posing the acousmatic question of his voice produce an innocent answer?

When I hear Baldwin’s voice, I hear echoes of the mid-Atlantic accent. The mid-Atlantic accent is regionless, as if originating from an island in the Ocean between England and America. It’s a blend of non-rhotic (not pronouncing the “Rs”) and hard “Ts” with the distinct goal of making the speaker sound proper and well-educated. The mid-Atlantic accent was adopted by elocution and voice coaches for actors, eventually coming out of the mouths of Carrie Grant and Bette Davis. Although it is mostly associated with white actors, Eartha Kitt spoke with an accent not unlike Baldwin’s.

By mapping at least a part of Baldwin’s stylization onto the mid-Atlantic accent, I mean to dismantle the belief that the accent indexes whiteness. That the accent was invented only shows how attempts to vocally render poshness was a performance and a ruse. Later in *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin details his experience of watching minstrel performers on the screen:

It is not entirely true that no one from the world I knew had yet made an appearance on the American screen: there were, for example, Stepin Fetchit and Willie Best and Manton Moreland, all of whom, rightly or wrongly, I loathed. It seemed to me that they lied about the world I knew, and debased it, and certainly I did not know anybody like them—as far as

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

<sup>101</sup> Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 201.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

I could tell; for it is also possible that their comic, bug-eyed terror contained the truth concerning a terror by which I hoped never to be engulfed.<sup>103</sup>

One can imagine a young Baldwin constructing himself against those slow-talking, Black comics he saw on screen. To tether himself to the voices of Crawford and Davis could open new possibilities for him as a Black man in the United States or in France, where he relocated in the 1940s, while simultaneously dismantling the notion of a gender or racially-specific voice. The criticisms of Baldwin's posh accent as put-on are a testament to the depth of the belief that voices signal our "real" selves. Baldwin's voice is not necessarily a betrayal of his Harlem roots. Rather, he claims the manufactured accent for himself and creates a space for other Black people to adopt the accent. Moreover, his adoption of the accent signals a global blackness, unconstrained by regional specificity and vocal hegemonies.

If Delacroix speaks in the style of Baldwin, he is not so much from another planet, to reference Hunter's review, as much as from another time. Delacroix's posterior synchronicity suggests a desire to revive the voices of Black uplift. Yet, is the issue with the style or with the strategy of this uplift? In the commentary, Lee explains how Damon Wayans came up with the idea for the pronunciation: "First it was cockney, but we pulled that back."<sup>104</sup> From the beginning, Wayans was placing his accent as foreign. An important distinction, however, is that cockney is a working class accent. Delacroix's accent is decidedly not working class. Would a cockney accent be met with more or less confusion? It would read as foreign, yet with less pretense of social-economic advancement. Settling somewhere in between East London and New York, picking up Baldwin on the way, Delacroix fabricates a voice that refuses easy classification and reflects back to his listeners' biases and assumptions. In Lee's voice-over commentary, he explains Delacroix's accent by saying that Delacroix has "never been comfortable being Black." I have detailed the numerous ways in which Delacroix is a failed ventriloquial illusion, yet I hesitate to diagnose Dela's rejection of dominant racialized, regionalized, and gendered vocal practices as a desire to exorcise his blackness. Whether calculated or not, why does synching out with these dominant vocal modes necessarily suggest confusion and discomfort?

### ❖ **Phonic Assumptions**

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<sup>103</sup> Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 19-20.

<sup>104</sup> "BAMBOOZLED Commentary - Bamboozled," The Criterion Channel, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.criterionchannel.com/bamboozled/videos/bamboozled-commentary>.

*Girl 6*, a lesser-known Spike Lee film from 1996, revolves around Judy, a Black actress who takes up a job as a phone sex operator. Her deep, lush voice and on-the-fly responses make her the most sought after girl at the agency. Contingent on her success, however, is her callers' assumption that she is white. In fact, in her training session, she is explicitly told that unless callers ask for it she must "be" white. Judy says nothing, but she looks unimpressed. She knows that if she wants to keep her callers on the phone she will have to subsume her blackness into a performance of whiteness.

This is just one of the many examples of Spike Lee staging hyper-audible sites of race. *Bamboozled* is exceptional in how Pierre Delacroix both resists essentialist claims to blackness and peddles harmful Black caricatures. What appears to be an unsuccessful performance by many has proven to be a compelling site for thinking through race and the performance of race. My close analysis of Delacroix's voice as a failed illusion has allowed me to step outside the binaries of good and bad performances, Black and non-black, masculine and feminine. The failed illusion is not rooted in Delacroix's desire to exorcise his blackness. Rather, his repudiation of the entrained vocal practices of Black American men and his self-presentation as a straight man who recalls James Baldwin, a queer writer from the '60s, blurs audiences' expectations of what Black masculinity should sound like. In that way, his stylizations test the limits (and the very nature) of racial intelligibility. Using debates and terms in sound studies has allowed a new way for me to conceptualize racial and gender performance, while avoiding the muddy waters of "authenticity" and "identity."

Many questions remain: why are some stylizations regarded as authentic indicators of racial identity while others are not? What emerges from the encounters between the encultured vocal practices of Junebug and Dunwitty and the affected vocal practices of Baldwin and Delacroix? Why, we should ask, does Delacroix's voice register so differently than Mantan and Sleep N Eat's, despite all three recalling white performative modes? Ultimately, these stylizations stretch the affective horizon of the racialized voice and unveil the sticky boundaries of affectability. The answer to the acousmatic question of "who is this?" largely depends on the skin of the voice. Yet, it is necessary to turn the question around on the listener, whose biases are absorbed into the question and confirmed by their answer. The event of listening is an event of relating, and thus is never neutral.

### Chapter 3 “Release and Return”: A Vortex of Performances in *The Master*

“It was [Darren’s] similarity to the dominant that rendered him pathetic and a provocation: the man-child was *almost* fit for school or work or service, could almost get his license, finally discard the dirt bike; too close to the norms to prove them by his difference, the real men — who are themselves in fact perpetual boys, since America is adolescence without end — had to differentiate themselves with violence”

- Ben Lerner, *The Topeka School*

#### ❖ Of Cults and Men

“I just want to tell you that I don’t consider that we’re dealing with a cult,”<sup>105</sup> Paul Thomas Anderson said in response to a question at the TIFF press conference for the film he wrote and directed, *The Master* (2012). Fascination with what some defend as a religion and others denounce as a cult is understandable, yet upon further reflection, *The Cause*, as it is referred to in the film, is likely not as outlandish to most contemporary viewers as it may appear to its detractors. Indeed, *The Cause* deploys methods that are not all dissimilar from those used at drama schools and by psychoanalysts. In the case of its subject Freddie (Joaquin Phoenix), these methods seem to offer some genuine guidance and catharsis, albeit tempered by the frenetic charisma of a cult leader (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman). I will argue that the film uses the emergence of Scientology to paint a portrait of post-war masculinity in the United States through the use of the voice and therapeutic methods. The voice is traditionally interpreted one of two ways: as an aesthetic object or as a vehicle for language. *The Master* showcases another interpretation of the voice as an affective object that requires the presence of the listener to empower the speaker. I will show how the voice is expressed and how it is used to yield influence.

*The Master* begins with Freddie in the Pacific during WWII. The only fighting we see, however, is wrestling between soldiers on the beach. We are offered glimpses of homosocial bonding, excessive drinking and his fierce libido as captured by Freddie’s simulated sex with a sandwoman on the beach. Back on solid earth, Freddie struggles to assimilate (back) into post-war American society. His drinking or, more specifically the making of his drink, takes up an inordinate amount of screen time. Not settling for beer or hard liquor, Freddie extracts a liquid from each space he is in, thus replicating and capturing the roiling wetness of the ocean to which he longs to return. He makes his drink from petrol, paint thinner, or photo processing chemicals; in short, whatever

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<sup>105</sup> TIFF Originals, *THE MASTER Press Conference | Festival 2012*, accessed June 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSjcDcpSOG4>.

toxic liquid he has on hand.

When he drinks, he is agitated and wild. In the first scene after being discharged, Freddie works at a photography studio in a mall. There, he beats up an unassuming customer who sits for a portrait. After a quick and dirty brawl, Freddie leaves and starts work at a cabbage farm. He makes his toxic beverage and passes it around to his fellow labourers, all of whom are Filipino. Only he does not inform these men that there is a method to getting drunk off his stash; there is a “smart” way to drink. A man (probably) dies, so Freddie legs it. Some time later, while walking on a pier, he notices a docked cruise ship. Freddie sneaks onto it, but when he is discovered, instead of throwing him overboard, Master, whose name is Lancaster Dodd but is referred to simply as Master, takes a shine to him and to his alcoholic concoction. From there, Freddie is brought into The Cause’s fold and hired as a bodyguard of sorts and becomes, in Master’s words, his “guinea pig and protege.”

On the boat, Freddie once again has a commander. He also has an impromptu and unlicensed analyst. In an early scene, Freddie submits to informal processing, whereby Master asks Freddie a series of questions, often repeating them, which go from the factual (“what is your name?”) to the profound (“do your past failures bother you?”). After the processing is done, he asks to go again with more questions, eager to submit himself to more “fun,” as he puts it.

On land, outside forces intervene in Master and Freddie’s union. Critics of The Cause (including Master’s son) and the police threaten Master’s legitimacy, forcing Master and his entourage to move around. Meanwhile, members of Master’s entourage question Freddie’s commitment to The Cause. “What if he’s beyond help?” asks Master’s wife Peggy (Amy Adams). Freddie and Master separate, only to meet once more, this time in England. Master tells him that if he leaves here, “I don’t ever want to see you again . . . Or you can stay?” By the end of the film, Freddie’s condition remains uncertain. Has he been healed by his connection to Master? Can he make his way without Master, any master, ruling over him? Or has he floated further adrift?

*The Master’s* structure is a departure from Anderson’s more rigorously plotted films. As Anderson has said in interviews, when you follow a drifter, inevitably the film will drift too.<sup>106</sup> Yet, the film’s inner logic is not so shapeless and meandering. Rather, it is shaped much like a vortex, propelled back and forth by intense affective

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<sup>106</sup> Paul Thomas Anderson, THE MASTER - PT interviewed by The Los Angeles Times’ John Horn, Video, January 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVmvirRubtA&t=190s>.

recollections and impulses. Not only is the film organized in such a way, but The Cause's methods are as well. Promising trans-temporal healing, The Cause uses hypnosis to transport subjects back in time to where they can heal past wounds.

The film stages two contrasting types of contemporary performances: one which evades language through mumbling; the other which evades criticism through charisma. In my first chapter on *Brokeback Mountain*, I argued against the consensus that Ledger's mumbling is an expression of his repressed queerness and instead read mumbling as a precarious and tentative attachment to speech. In *The Master*, however, Phoenix, who speaks through one side of his mouth, displays a different kind of attachment.

I would like to think of Phoenix's mumbling simultaneously as a desire to protect his words and as a disavowal of them, both as the character and as the performer. Mumbling interrupts intelligibility, creating a new kind of affect for the audience member who struggles to glean the meaning. Master, by contrast, uses his voice primarily as an aesthetic and affective object in order to disguise his language's unreliability. His skilled vocal performance commands attention, yet it offers a stark contrast to his written work. Emptied of charisma and oratorical prowess, his books reveal him as a fraud to many of his readers. Though they may be dissimilar in their behavioural and performative approaches, Master and Freddie are both post-war subjects with a desire to restore the past while looking to a future of greater possibility. A glance backward at the social turbulence of the fifties and the star personas of the era's cinema will allow me to better understand Freddie and Master in a historical and cinematic context.

I will use the image of the vortex as my organizing principle. The vortex is a powerful methodological tool in how it works against dominant modes of conceptualizing narrative time, while also being dynamic and multi-sited. In *Into the Vortex*, Britta Sjorgen articulates her approach to studying 1940s Hollywood films that use voice-off. The texts she analyzes are characterized by digression, not linear progression. They make use of flashbacks, delays and circularity, but, despite dominant views,<sup>107</sup> these devices do not function as means to "lock the female protagonist 'inside' the narrative."<sup>108</sup> She recuperates these vertical strategies as wrongly derided, and listens instead for what they can do:

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<sup>107</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*; Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*.

<sup>108</sup> Britta H. Sjorgen, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 15.

“Stasis and repetition need not be seen as immobilizing, paralytic influences on female characters within these films; rather, their deviational and often dialectical effect may instead provide a vigorous contrast to the lure of causal relations that inform forward narrational movement. In this sense, contradiction is formative, rather than hierarchized - both directions move simultaneously in a dynamic expression of difference.”<sup>109</sup>

I am using a feminist reading (or feminist listening) of sound to understand how masculinity is constructed through a “dynamic expression of difference” and performed on its way up, down, and from side to side while traveling through the vortex. I want to think of the movement of the vortex as a mediator of affect, which modulates and is modulated by Freddie and Master’s encounters with one another. The vortex will also help me in my analysis of the affect produced by the film. Beyond extracting meaning from the voice or analyzing the voice’s formal qualities, I will try to demonstrate how the voice both contains and projects the forms of the film’s affects.

Moreover, the image of the vortex is baked into The Cause’s methodologies and vocabulary. While hypnotising them, facilitators ask their subjects to repeat phrases such as “back beyond” in order to return them to the “pre-natal area” of their past lives (or is it to summon their past lives to the present?). At the end of a session, the facilitator releases their subject from the trance by saying “release and return.” This invocation of backward movement reveals the role of non-teleological horizons in healing processes. Indeed, the “back beyond” stretches the imagination of the past, for The Cause is not limited to traumas in the present lifetime, as is psychoanalysis. Rather, our memory, we are told, of past lives extends to thousands of years. “Our spirits live on in the whole of time, exist in many vessels, through time,” Master explains. He describes his “company” as the place where “past, present and future come together.” In order to heal, we must continually return to our past, while discovering its contours. The vortex’s inception knows no end, as it were.

Eugenie Brinkema proposes a new way of studying the affects in film theory that do not revolve around the critic’s spectatorial embodied responses to a film. She is not interested in an “assessment of how much a film can ‘affect, move, displace, jerk, tear at, mimetically instruct or unnervingly unsettle bodies or subjects.’”<sup>110</sup> As she says, “the marked stubbornness of the theoretical interest in how form affects spectators ultimately has made the study of affects in the history of film theory into little more than the study of effects.”<sup>111</sup> Instead Brinkema argues for thinking of affects as form: “the forms of affects instate themselves in and as cinematic structure and neither through

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>110</sup> Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 44.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 44.

psychologized characters who express emotion nor through corporealized spectators who consume it.”<sup>112</sup> The scholar must seek the affects in the text through close reading, rather than looking to the text to confirm their spectatorial response. What does this mean for performance studies? Would this approach require getting ‘inside’ the lines and the movements, in order to analyze the mechanics which lead to the spectatorial response? I propose that we theorize a more rigorous model of studying screen performance which does not overstate the spectator’s response or the performer’s intent. This can be done by observing how dialogue and movement are lifted from the page and reproduced by the actor. In short, I find my answer in Brinkema’s solution: close reading.

Since I am focusing on the sounds of Master and Freddie’s voices and situating them within a socio-historical context, it would be a mistake to only focus on Master/Hoffman’s and Freddie/Phoenix’s speaking skills without mentioning “preoccupation.” Voice and acting trainer Steven Lecky defines preoccupation and stresses its indispensability in a performance:

The lines are at the very base of all discoveries about character and emotion, and the actor must be in total control of the speaking of those lines. However, having lines directed at you, whether from stage or a large screen, is not what brings audiences to theatres. What an audience really comes to experience is the continual mercurial shifts in the energy that are typical of human impulses. [...] The speaking of text therefore attempts to deal with how we are feeling, at the same time as being coloured by that feeling. The state of being conscious of and involved in the feelings that underlay our intentions is called preoccupation.<sup>113</sup>



*Figure 7: Freddie’s Falling*

For Lecky, the actor’s task is to recreate human thought and emotion. Watching these two actors, we see thoughts

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 209.

<sup>113</sup> Lecky, *Vox Method*, 151.

come to Freddie/Phoenix and Master/Hoffman before those thoughts imbue the subsequent lines with their emotional energy. For Hoffman in particular, each preoccupation is modulated by what Master is thinking and feeling, hence why Hoffman is able to deliver such specific and varied lines. Every line he speaks and every gesture he makes are deeply preoccupied, which is the kernel of his charisma.

Although “preoccupation” is not a term used by theorists or acting professionals, its position between affect and emotion is especially useful for writing about performance. If, by Jonathan Flatley’s definitions, emotion is something inside that is expressed outwardly and affect is something “relational and transformative,”<sup>114</sup> then what about the murky and layered convergence of the two? How do we write about the unabating and undefined pulses of energy that seem too inconspicuous to warrant the status of “emotions”? Preoccupation offers a more specific and capacious performance analysis.

#### ❖ Post-War Melancholia

In one of the first scenes of *The Master*, a military doctor asks Freddie to explain a crying spell he had. “It wasn’t a crying spell,” he says, “it was brought on by a letter I received from a girl I knew once. I think, I believe I suffered, what in your profession you call, ‘nostalgia.’ It was nostalgia that was brought on by a letter I received.” What is the relationship between nostalgia and melancholia? Freud theorized melancholia as a failure to mourn a loss. Flatley explains that for Freud, melancholia is a “psychic processing of subjective experiences of loss” whereby “an emotional tie is replaced by an internalization of the lost object.”<sup>115</sup> Nostalgia, on the other hand, recalls a longing for the past, which, according to Svetlana Boym, can lead to a desire to restore it or reflect it.<sup>116</sup> Nostalgia is what happens when one has not yet accepted the loss, when there is no object to internalize because it is still out there, waiting to be returned to. For Freddie, a self-described able-bodied seaman, returning to the sea would mean a return to war. This geo-political impossibility drives Freddie to find the feeling that he gets from the sea elsewhere.

The military doctor asks Freddie if this letter was from a sweetheart. It was not, he responds not so convincingly. He explains as follows: “The kid sister of a girl . . . the kid sister of a friend of mine I knew from back home. I received this letter and . . . [unintelligible] . . . [laughs] . . . I received a letter and I read it.” It is in this scene

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<sup>114</sup> Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>116</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia | Svetlana Boym,” accessed June 1, 2021, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html>.

in which Freddie's mumbling is the most pronounced. After he says "and," he is unable to verbalize the effect the letter had on him. He laughs, presumably at finding it so difficult to speak. He stops and restarts, rushing through the line so as to get it out without being overcome. In that moment, a fog of unintelligibility masks his words and transforms them into sounds. Does Phoenix's persistent mumbling stem from a belief that noise is a better vessel for preoccupation than words? That the affective charge of noise is greater than the affective charge of language?

When asked to recount a dream Freddie had of his mother, Freddie gets defensive and aggressive. The doctor insists that it is important he knows so as to help with Freddie's treatment. Freddie dismisses him: "You can't help in my treatment, you don't even know . . ." After looking down, he tells the doctor about a dream he had of his mother, his father, and him "back home, sitting around a table, having drinks. Laughing. It just sort of ended there." There is a delay and displacement of preoccupation in this line. Phoenix chokes down "laughing," but displaces his laughter onto the next phrase. Feeling the weight of this loss, Freddie ends the session. "Thanks for your help," he says in a sarcastic tone. The displaced laughter is a remnant from the laughter in the dream, but it also arises in reaction to the simplicity of the dream. How could a dream of a domestic scene stir him so deeply? Mourning creeps up on him, revealing itself in both tears and laughter. Freddie's dream of familiar togetherness is what brings him to tears, not the terrors and ruins of war. Freddie's loss twists itself around, for he longs for life before the war and life during the war; for the sea and the shore. In this way, Freddie's recounting of his dream illustrates the experience of loss, which can be mapped on to a wider experience of masculinity and post-war melancholia.

*The Master* draws many inspirations from John Huston's 1946 war documentary *Let There Be Light*.<sup>117</sup> In particular, Freddie's dream and his self-diagnosis of nostalgia is taken from two soldiers in that film. Huston records a group of soldiers who have suffered "casualties of the spirit" as they undergo treatment for eight weeks before returning to civilian life. The film was not released until the '80s, presumably concealed by the military because of its sombre depiction of PTSD.<sup>118</sup> *Let There Be Light* was unprecedented at the time in its representation of masculine vulnerability and its reconfiguring of the American War Hero type. That being said, the documentary is optimistic about the relatively rapid progression these soldiers make over the course of their treatment. Though

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<sup>117</sup> Mark Olsen, "Paul Thomas Anderson Reveals Unseen Scenes from 'The Master,'" November 5, 2012, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-xpm-2012-nov-05-la-et-mn-paul-thomas-anderson-the-master-unseen-scenes-20121103-story.html>.

<sup>118</sup> Gaylyn Studlar, David Desser, and John Huston, eds., *Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 27.

we hear a vet's stuttering dissipate and witness a soldier regain his memory back through hypnosis after an explosion left him unable to recall his name, contemporary audiences are left with a sinking feeling that their mental afflictions are far from cured. The military doctors seem more interested in helping the men disguise their visible signs of trauma in order to ease their transition back into the labour force, rather than to help the men understand their traumas.

*The Master*, made over 65 years later, constructs Freddie's masculinity in parallel to Huston's film, but with the affordance of a less puritanical culture. In an earlier scene in the VA ward, Freddie is presented with three inkblots. To every inquiry into what he sees in them, he responds that he sees "a lady's pussy" or "a cock upside down," or some variation of the two. More than departing from the image of the War Hero, this scene unearths a candid perversity in the transition to post-war life. In the following scene, Freddie's teary recollection of his dream reveals that he is not necessarily resistant to therapeutic methods, but rather he is recalcitrant and suspicious of the military doctor's cold insistence on divulging his torments. Freddie is at a standstill, caught between two currents of feeling. He cannot return to the past, and yet he cannot move forward.

The film stages the anxieties of post-war life, as loss and optimism rub shoulders. If WWII saw the presence of trauma in everyday life, then *Master* takes advantage of these fears. With his promise of transhistorical healing, *Master*'s project deploys therapeutic methods to summon up past traumas and rid patients of them. More than that, *The Cause* purports to be able to reverse the effects of technologies of war and bring world peace. Defending himself from detractor John Moore, *Master* passionately states his case: "[w]e are, all of us, working at break-neck speeds and in unison towards catching the mind's fatal flaws and correcting it back to its inherent state of perfect - whilst righting civilization and eliminating war and poverty and therefore the atomic threat." *Master*'s reaction to the traumas of the war is to erase them, one vulnerable soul at a time.

#### ❖ **The Fifties and its Male Stars**

The one date given in *The Master* is May 21st 1950; the date of the "Universal Congress of The Cause" in Phoenix, which is almost exactly a month before the beginning of the Korean War and two months before American troops entered the war.<sup>119</sup> Then, the film is situated specifically in a post-WWII context, which ushered in its own set of ideological shifts and optimistic affects.

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<sup>119</sup> History.com Editors, "Korean War," HISTORY, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/korea/korean-war>.

Steven Cohan tackles the troubled masculinity in fifties cinema in *Masked Men: Masculinity and The Movies in the Fifties*. Cohan argues that a great deal of the masquerade of masculinity has to do with hegemonic sexual regimes, which, in fact, are a mid-twentieth century creation. What we now think of as the hetero/queer binary “which organizes sexual categories around object choice and not gender status”<sup>120</sup> was not the dominant view in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which “masculinity was generally understood to be legible through a man’s gendered behavior, not his sexuality.”<sup>121</sup> For example, a man who had sex with men was not considered less virile so long as he played along with the gender norms of the time and, in historian George Chauncey’s words, “took the man’s part.”<sup>122</sup> As Cohan points out, although Chauncey argues that sexual preference and gender performance become intertwined only at the turn of the century it was class divide that brought gender and sex closer together. The emergence of the middle-class and corporate culture meant that more and more men were salaried, and therefore no longer working for themselves. Subservient to a boss or a hierarchy of bosses, many men felt their masculinity come under threat. Moreover, despite women taking on usually subordinate tasks, their presence in firms “seemed to feminize the culture of the corporate workplace and to diminish its status as a masculine domain.”<sup>123</sup>

The war also played a significant role in the “hegemonic standing”<sup>124</sup> of the middle-class. Writing about the interplay of sex and gender in the post-war context, Cohan writes that “[t]he war -- with its disruption of class divisions, atmosphere of sexual deprivation, and deflation of traditional heroism -- was a significant catalyst in breaking down ideological walls that had previously differentiated working-and middle-class men, in effect, bringing ‘gendered’ and ‘sexual’ conceptions of masculinity into greater contention.”<sup>125</sup> Cohan goes on to explain how, on paper, the military pathologized queer men and labeled them as deviant, yet they also permitted drag performances by men at camp entertainments and turned a blind eye to gay male sex. The end of the war and the years that ensued saw anxieties about gender, class, race and sexuality balloon into an irrepressible cloud under which characters like Master and Freddie each conducted their lives.

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<sup>120</sup> Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, Arts and Politics of the Everyday (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997)., xii.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York : Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 100.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>124</sup> Cohan, *Masked Men*, xiv.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

Fifties cinema and its stars are apt case studies to dissect hegemonic and divergent masculinities. The star personas of Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift presented their own gender trouble. Both stars presented themselves in stark contrast to the “normal” middle-class white man, best exemplified onscreen by *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Johnson, 1956). Brando and Clift were both “rebel youth” types, with Clift in particular presenting a moody intensity that masked his tumultuous private life and closeted bisexuality.

To this day, the fan and critical discourse on Brando suggests that his performance style typifies authenticity and naturalism. Yet, Cohan links this acting style with Brando’s gender masquerade, and argues that it was more calculated than natural.<sup>126</sup> His ripped shirt and rough posturing in Kazan’s screen adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) may have been, to some, an expression of untamed masculinity, but for Cohan this was the result of a purposeful objectification and theatrical self-eroticization.<sup>127</sup> Brando’s and Clift’s mumbling is associated with the Actor’s Studio’s method teachings. “[E]mphasizing inarticulate (and uneducated) speech and deeply rooted (and unresolved) emotionality,”<sup>128</sup> mumbling may have personified a brooding naturalism, yet this style was a performative rejection of the “hard masculinity” represented by John Wayne and Gary Cooper.

I would argue that Paul Thomas Anderson, well versed in Classic Hollywood and its poster boys, deconstructs the Brando and Clift type through pathologizing Freddie. Throughout the film, Phoenix holds his kidneys as if he had bent himself out of shape in an attempt to mimic one of Brando’s seductive stances. Freddie’s masculine masquerade is never presented as erotic nor especially desirable.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 202.



*Figure 8: Master does his best Wayne*

Master, on the other hand, appears in part to be modeled on John Wayne, albeit a more intellectual embodiment. With his stocky physique and controlled stares, Master connotes self-assuredness and strength where Freddie connotes neuroses. Cohan argues that Wayne's on-screen virility depended on his subordination of young men, most apparent in *Red River* (Hawks, 1948), which closes with the image of Wayne and Clift smiling at one another. This final shot, Cohan argues, "mak[es] the heterosexual pairing secondary in importance to the union of the man and the boy that originally seeded the story -- and the ranch."<sup>129</sup> A similar bond occurs in *The Master* in that Master always appears to have the upper hand over Freddie. However, the ending crucially differs. After Master fails to seduce Freddie into staying, Freddie sleeps with a woman with whom he tries out Master's questions. Has his bond with Master enabled him to assert his heterosexuality? Or does Freddie's mimicry of Master preclude Freddie's heterosexuality and instantiates instead a new expression of his attachment to Master? Either way, fifties history and cinema offers a vital context through which to read *The Master* and its gender politics.

#### ❖ **Freddie's Mumbo-Jumbo**

Freddie's rough mumbling is a strong point of contrast to Master's oral magnetism. I would posit that Phoenix's mumbling signals an attachment to acting as the rendering of unarticulated affects, in which words are casualties of a truthful performance. Phoenix is no stranger to the mutter. As of late, he has played many characters with an internal and indecisive vernacular. His characters come off as soft-spoken and easily bruised, as in James

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 219.

Gray's *Two Lovers* and Spike Jonze's *Her*. Along with contemporaries such as Casey Affleck and Kristen Stewart, Phoenix has turned away from intelligibility in search of a looser and less studied performance.

Intelligibility is a sound studies term. James Lastra identifies two models of sound recording that guide sound representation: "phonographic" (or what Lastra calls "perceptual fidelity") and telephonic (i.e. "intelligibility").<sup>130</sup> For the most part, narrative cinema and television prioritize the telephonic model. This model must be actively constructed. Intelligibility entails a manipulation of the environment in order for the source to be understood. To maintain the primacy of the voice, other sounds are minimized.

In *The Master*, Phoenix sabotages the telephonic model. His mumbling is aided in part by clenching one side of his mouth. In an interview with NPR, Phoenix explains that he found inspiration for this choice in his father: "My dad sometimes would talk out of the side; he'd clench down one side of his mouth. And I just thought it represented tension in this way, somebody that's just blocked and tight."<sup>131</sup> Phoenix, in fact, had his dentist fasten metal brackets to his top and bottom teeth to which he would tie rubber bands, forcing his jaw shut. The resulting performance achieves the intended effect: Freddie is tense and physically encumbered.

Phoenix/Freddie's performance of mumbling varies throughout. In the scene with the doctor, his mumbling is the most pronounced. His words slur together as if he is drugged. In later scenes, his speaking is somewhere in between a mumble and a whisper. Is this change due to Freddie's initial discomfort with articulating his inner life? Does Freddie mutter his words because he does not want them to be understood? Does Master guide him toward greater intelligibility? Perhaps, if Master does anything to help Freddie it is to compel him to speak. Freddie moves from non-intelligibility to mostly intelligible over the course of the film, although it is by no means a smooth upward slope.

There is a sense that Freddie/Phoenix is protective of his words, yet he treats them as obstacles to his preoccupation. In that way, he has the opposite approach to Master/Hoffman who uses his words as a vehicle for preoccupation. Phoenix makes heavy use of "inarticulates," which Lecky defines as "sounds and words that are not intended to be communicative and are the product of strong emotional responses."<sup>132</sup> These scoffs and grunts are

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<sup>130</sup> James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 139.

<sup>131</sup> Joaquin Phoenix, Phoenix To Self: "Why Am I Talking About This? ... Joaquin, Shut Up," interview by Terry Gross, Radio, January 21, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Lecky, *Vox Method*, 391.

in-line with cinematic depictions of rough and terse men. Anderson and Phoenix both play into that trope while simultaneously undoing it. Freddie is a strong silent type who can throw a punch at an unsuspecting jaw and drink anyone under the table, but these behaviours stem from pain not virility.

Freddie is vulgar like an animal which has not and perhaps cannot be tamed. He is destructive toward himself and anyone who provokes him. He is also destructive of his words. *The Master* depicts Freddie as a conflicted character, unsure of what he wants and hesitant to commit to anything. We can see this play out in his treatment of words. If he does not mumble, then he often speaks at close range as if speaking them fully would expose him in some way. The result is a prioritization of sound over words. I would argue that this re-hierarchizing is rooted in a belief that “truthful” (or, in essence, preoccupied) performances emerge partially from sacrificing the words. No doubt, Phoenix and his contemporaries modulate their approach according to each character, yet this pattern of mumbling speaks to a way of acting more generally.

Freddie/Phoenix’s mumbling is a kind of vocal discharge, like a less guttural retch or hiccup. Unlike retches, mumbling is not the product nor the subject of disgust. Yet, mumbling does share some formal qualities with the retch. Mumbled words are tiny revolts against intelligibility that work through an aesthetic of refusal. Brinkema writes of the retch that:

The overflow of vomit is not an excess of its inherent or essential meaning but, rather, a structural supplementarity in the relation of vomit to that “transcendent exteriority” by which disgust is not the opposite of the aesthetic but that which can never stand inside it (it cannot be swallowed) and thus never ceases to be expelled from it (it can only cause itself to be vomited). It is not sick’s content that is at stake but its supplementary form.<sup>133</sup>

For an attentive audience listening to Phoenix’s mumbling, the sounds force them to strain and to search for the words. In the rush to gather meaning, the audience is faced with the materiality of Freddie/Phoenix’s mutter. His dribbling words and tight jaw are challenges to identification. They force the audience to engage. Yet, Freddie’s disturbed carnality is not exactly inviting. Thus, the audience is stuck in a kind of impasse of identification. Between straining to hear and feeling repelled, the audience is left with a supplementary affect emerging from Freddie’s embodiment and vocal disarray. Once understood, these words exist alongside their form and cannot be disengaged from their retch-like delivery.

#### ❖ Master of Hypnosis

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<sup>133</sup> Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 127.

More so than Joaquin Phoenix, Philip Seymour Hoffman was known to develop a specific vocal timbre for each role. As Truman Capote in *Capote* (Miller, 2005), he speaks in an ultra affected, breathy quasi-Southern accent. In *Boogie Nights* (1997), also directed by Anderson, he plays Scotty, a laid back, SoCal dude. In all of his film roles, Hoffman's timbre is a central component of his performance. His control over his delivery and his coordination with his body are part of what makes him a compelling actor to watch and a fruitful case study. In *The Master*, Hoffman and Anderson's third collaboration, Philip Seymour Hoffman plays Master with a precisely controlled zeal for most of the film. Yet, in his scenes alone with Freddie, Hoffman's deep voice softens, preserving its rich tone.

Master presents himself as a renaissance man. When Freddie asks him who he is, he rolls a long list off his tongue: "I do many, many things. I am a writer, a doctor, a nuclear physicist, a theoretical philosopher. But above all, I am a man, a hopelessly inquisitive man, just like you." The preamble to "just like you" functions to impress and intimidate Freddie with his breadth. Although, as Claudia Gorbman astutely points out, Master's subtle mispronunciation of "nuclear physicist" as "nucular physicist" suggests that he is not one.<sup>134</sup> Already, Anderson and Hoffman sow doubt as to Master's legitimacy. And yet, despite his self-importance, his attention to Freddie reveals his ability and his need for a relational attachment.

In my last chapter I analysed the figure of the ventriloquist, as a producer of the illusion of body and voice synchronicity. Here, another figure emerges, albeit one with its own set of contradictions. Master is a hypnotist, but a charismatic one. He is quite literally a hypnotist, as well as being a figure who immerses his subjects in their unconscious. In a larger sense, Master controls the direction of the vortex. Flashbacks in *The Master* are all from Freddie's point of view, yet Master precipitates them. During their first informal processing, Master directs Freddie to answer a series of questions without hesitation and without blinking. This painful exercise brings Freddie to tears and leads him to shout his answers. Master asks about Doris, Freddie's sweetheart. He repeatedly asks why, if Freddie claims to love her, is he not with her? Master twice asks "Why don't you go back?," to which Freddie screams "I don't know!" with mounting rage. "Close your eyes," Master instructs. He does, after which the film cuts to a flashback of Freddie in his hometown. Master guides him through the flashback by asking him to recall

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<sup>134</sup> Claudia Gorbman, "The Master's Voice," *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (December 1, 2014), 11.

what he hears, what he is wearing, and so on.

Towards the end of the film, after Freddie rides away from Master on his motorcycle, Master calls him in a dream, interrupting Freddie's dark immersion in a movie theatre. On a visit to Master in England, Master sings to Freddie in a plea to make him stay. Freddie does not stay. Instead, he goes to a bar and tries out The Cause's processing questions on a woman named Winn (Jennifer Neala Page) in bed. The latent lustfulness of the questions comes to the fore.

Freddie's mimesis of Master's questions looks like a perfect resolution to Freddie and Master's wild waltz: Freddie has left The Cause, but he is on his way to becoming his own Master. However, that is not how the film ends. A shot of Winn topless astride Freddie cuts to a shot of another bare-chested female figure. On a beach in the South Pacific, Freddie lies next to a sandwoman that he and his military buddies have built. The image of Freddie and the sandwoman, filmed in profile, may suggest that Freddie has achieved peace. At last, he can lay down next to this woman, instead of pretending to screw her. Yet the sandwoman is constructed and impermanent by design. If Master has summoned Freddie back to his past in order to heal him, then he has also reminded Freddie of the irrevocability of the past. If you try to hold it, it will collapse.

However, when Master and Freddie are in the room together, Master seems like he might actually be helping. Outside of these intimate scenes with Freddie, Master's charisma disguises an empty vessel: a cult organized around the improvised hymns of one man. In the wake of the war, these two vocal planes contain within themselves two expressions of the experience of the fifties. On the one hand, the desire for interpersonal connection manifests as optimism. Why would one choose intimacy in the wake of such staggering loss? And on the other hand, the desire to alter the past through time-travelling hypnosis suggests an inability to accept the events of the past. When John Moore tells Master that The Cause's method looks "an awful lot like hypnosis," Master replies wittily that "this is a process of de-hypnotisation, if you will. Man is asleep, this process wakes him from his slumber."

Flatley writes of Freud's development of the hypnotic method as one in which the analyst became unable to dislodge himself from his or her subjects. This was one of the reasons that Freud more or less abandoned hypnosis in favor of free association, returning to hypnosis only to demonstrate "proof" of the unconscious. As Flatley recounts, "The dilemma for Freud is that in making himself available for identification and imitation in order to

allow the patient to repeat past emotions, he ‘could not avoid participating in what the hysteric was telling him,’ as Lacan noted.<sup>135</sup> And yet, for Master, this tethering is precisely what he wants. Flatley describes the method as the following:

The hypnotic method, which involved a light touch on the forehead and a suggestion—‘You feel sleepy,’ ‘You will remember,’ and so on—is basically an imitative identification between analyst and analysand. [...] Here we find what is surely one of Freud’s most interesting discoveries: in order to repeat or mime a powerful emotional event from the past, it seems that it is necessary also at the same time to have a mimetic relation to someone in the present.<sup>136</sup>

In other words, one cannot summon ghosts alone. The transference or mimesis of affect and language necessitates another speaking body in the room. I would speculate that Master is averse to psychoanalysis partially because he cannot bear sacrificing his place as a subject. Mladen Dolar describes the psychoanalyst’s silence: “[I]t is the analyst, with his or her silence, who becomes the embodiment of the voice as the object. She or he is the personification, the embodiment, of the voice, the voice incarnate, the aphonic silent voice. [...] It is the voice which does not say anything, and the voice which cannot be said. It is the silent voice of an appeal, a call, an appeal to respond, to assume one’s stance as the subject.”<sup>137</sup> The hypnotic method allows Master to maintain his subjecthood and invites Freddie to assume his own subjecthood through the voice.

Freud may have moved away from hypnosis, but he leaves behind an important question as posed by Flatley. If Freud saw it as his duty to keep himself from “the analyst’s tendency to fall into the emotion of the analysand,” then what if “this ‘falling into’ the emotion of the other was the cure?”<sup>138</sup> What if projection and transference were not collateral damage but generative and essential? Following on from my previous chapter’s contention that listening is a meaning-making event, how can listening become healing?

Master and Freddie’s first informal processing session is a rich point of comparison with Freddie’s interrogation by the military doctor. The scene starts when Freddie brings Master his latest concoction. They clink their piss-coloured booze before downing it in one go. Master sounds as if the drink burned a whole through his throat: he howls “Oh god!” a few times over while Freddie guffaws. Master takes a moment before turning serious: “I’ve been writing. Feel like I went under. Dark cloud rolls in. Opens up. Anxious to share new work. Would you

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<sup>135</sup> Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 56.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>137</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 124.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

care for some informal processing?” These disjointed fragments anticipate Master’s processing questions in that he may ask fully-formed questions, yet the relationship from one to the next appears arbitrary. The relationship between ‘anxious to share new work’ and Master’s question to Freddie suggests that the new work will be Freddie’s processing or perhaps that his new work will be tested on Freddie. Given that Hoffman does not produce a significant tonal shift between the two phrases, one can assume that they are closely connected.

Before he plugs the recording devices in, he asks Freddie a few warm-up questions: “how are you feeling, Freddie? Rested? Excited?” and so on. These informal questions do not make their way into the processing, but they prepare Freddie for the task of listening and responding. The session begins when Master hits the record button on his device. By recording Freddie’s voice, he is detaching it from his body, transforming it into an object. The recording technology is out of frame when the actors are in close-up, which draws the audience’s attention away from them. Yet, the whole time the device captures and records Freddie’s answers and Master’s questions. This presence of the technology is important for how it sets the tone for the scene. For one, there is a level of trust that the device affords. In the military hospital, the doctors jotted their thoughts down on paper. Their observations were their own, with no indexicality leading back to Freddie’s voice as proof. Although controlled by Master, the tape recorder puts Master and Freddie on more equal footing. The pen records the doctor’s deductions; the tape records the entire interaction.

Master asks Freddie a series of questions that he may or may not have come up with on the spot. The processing ends when, in answer to Master’s question “Are you unpredictable?,” Freddie farts and then falls about laughing. Master seems unimpressed, although he scolds Freddie only softly. He says, “Silly. Silly animal. Dirty animal.” Freddie apologizes to which Master offers his pardon. “It’s good to laugh during processing, sometimes we forget. Even if it is the sound of an animal.” This laughter, however, is key for a future scene in which Master announces laughter as the secret. When the processing is over, Freddie asks to go again. Master obliges, adding a layer of difficulty. He instructs him to, “without blinking your eyes, without fear and hesitation, answer as quickly as [he] can.” If Freddie blinks, it is an infringement, meaning that they must go back to the start.

The second session reveals the arbitrariness of the questionnaire’s organization. Master repeats questions of which the answers do not satisfy him and he asks follow-up questions which betray his curiosity. For instance, Master asks Freddie if he has ever had sex with a member of Freddie’s family. To his surprise, Freddie answers yes.

Master perks up. The shot cuts away from Freddie to reveal Master in muted disbelief. He asks the question again, but slower. Freddie gives the same answer. “Who?” Master then asks, to which Freddie replies “My auntie.” Master asks a few other questions, but circles back to Freddie’s Aunt again and again. He probes deeper, asking about Freddie’s parents and his abandonment of Doris, the love of his life. All the while, Freddie’s eyes well up with the strain of keeping them open. Master’s final question to Freddie asking why he is not with Doris pushes Freddie to scream “I don’t know!” This exercise is proof of Master’s power over Freddie. He controls him without even touching him. By preventing Freddie from closing his lids, he is subjecting his eyes to the ontology of his ears. His ears do not have lids; they are necessarily always open. In that sense, there is a displacement from the ears to the eyes. When he is permitted to close his eyes, he envisions Doris. In order to open the portals of the past, he must keep both ears and eyes open.

Freddie’s tears in the second processing present a compelling slippage between emotional and muscular discharges. Are they tears of sadness or of pain? Perhaps, they are like Marion’s single tear in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960). Brinkema argues against a reading of Marion’s tear as a symptom of her interiority. She insists, instead, that “Marion’s tear is marked by what it is not. It is not expressive of the emotions of a subject, not an external production of an internal state; it does not speak to either its emissive past or to its judged emotional future, and it is ripped from, and sits only ever so gently on the surface of, the body.”<sup>139</sup> Taken a step further, what if Freddie’s tears are like Master’s questions? Indeed, to analyze the choice of questions seems a misdirect. With their mix of deceptively straightforward and verbose specificity, the questions are besides the point. It is their form as questions, which by nature invite a response, that drives Freddie’s confessions. The voice, however, offers a slippage between muscular and emotional states. The voice is produced by the body and therefore is necessarily muscular, yet it is always coloured by an affective, emotional, and preoccupied charge.

Of course, I am being somewhat uncompromising. The questions themselves do matter. Rather, I am more intrigued by the frame that their repetitions and Hoffman’s performance create. The repetition of these questions recalls Lacan, who defined the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As Hal Foster interprets it, “the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it must be repeated.”<sup>140</sup> In that sense, Master cannot directly

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<sup>139</sup> Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 19.

<sup>140</sup> Hal Foster, “Death in America (1996),” in *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 73.

summon the real, he can only gesture toward it over and over again. Yet, this repetition does lead to Freddie's painful recollection of Doris. In that sense, the repetition is necessary for Freddie's hypnosis. Loss can only be



returned to once it has been repeated.

*Figure 9: Smoking to Clear the Air*

In the second session, Master keeps eye contact with Freddie the entire time. His questions come out quickly, as if being pulled by a string. In the first session, most of his lines end with a “pow,” meaning a pitch glide or “pull” centered on one word in a line of text, best exemplified by saying the word “pow.”<sup>141</sup> In the second processing, however, as the scene progresses, his questions mostly lose their “pow” and are replaced with a “mom,” which Steven Lecky defines as an extended open inflection.<sup>142</sup> This type of inflection does not allow for closure in the line. Listening to Master's rushed and flattened peaks creates a sense of unease, a sense that the vortex has been pulled and straightened out. Are these openings in the line ways to create space for Freddie? Or is this a reversal of the mimetic relation, with Master adjusting his inflection to match Freddie's internal state?

#### ❖ **His Master's Voice**

Michel Chion's interpretation of *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) as Kane's quest to become the master of voices offers a compelling parallel to the titular character's trajectory in *The Master*. Chion details how Kane establishes himself as the master of words by buying the New York *Inquirer* and hires journalists from a rival

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<sup>141</sup> Lecky, *Vox Method*, 85.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

newspaper.<sup>143</sup> Although his fortune was given to him through the written word in the form of a deed for a mine, his desire to be the master of voices leads to his demise. He forces his untrained wife into an opera career by building opera houses for her to sing in. As Gorbman points out, “Everything was given to Kane through writing, but in trying to remake himself through the voice he ends in failure.”<sup>144</sup>

Almost the opposite happens in *The Master*. Master is a compelling speaker and an entrancing leader. His line delivery and physical command are beguiling. As Gorbman puts it, “Dodd’s personal magnetism depends largely on his voice, which he uses to spellbind audiences, loosen the purse strings of benefactors, and pacify creditors. His followers not only hang on every word of his speeches and performances but also listen to recordings of his voice uttering pseudo-philosophical maxims.”<sup>145</sup> His voice is resonant and clear, as if he is unencumbered by the anxieties of the decade.

As the film progresses, Master’s legitimacy begins to crumble. He is imprisoned for embezzling funds and he begins to question Freddie’s allegiance. With Book II’s release (which is, in fact, Master’s earlier unpublished work printed afresh), Master has promised answers to the questions Book I posed. Yet, he has no verifiable cure to offer. In keeping with his methods, he returns to the past for answers. More specifically, his past processing session with Freddie. “The secret,” Master says, “is laughter.” But whose laughter? That of Master and his followers? His critics? Master’s revelation is clever in that it does not matter whose laughter it is. He has weaponized his own ludicrousness by turning his critics’ responses into their cure. The secret is not in words, but in the response to The Cause’s absent centre of reason. During the speech, Freddie looks up at him with all the hope and admiration one would ascribe to a God. Yet, when Master finally reveals the secret, there is a noticeable trace of betrayal that washes over Freddie’s face as Master locks eyes with him. If Lacan’s “Discourse of the Master” predicates that the Master steals from his slaves, then this Master has stolen his secret from Freddie.<sup>146</sup> A question remains: how far has laughter gotten Freddie?

During this speech at the Congress in Phoenix, Master also demonstrates his mesmerizing speaking skills. Master walks onto the stage to shouts and cheers, which he takes in for a moment before asking them to stop, saying

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<sup>143</sup> Michel Chion and Claudia Gorbman, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 89.

<sup>144</sup> Gorbman, “The Master’s Voice,” 10.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>146</sup> Jacques Lacan, [*L’ envers de la psychoanalyse: 1969 - 1970*], *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan 17* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991).

“You’re going to make me red all over.” A bit of humility is essential even for a cult leader. “Thank you, thank you,” he says to the crowd, stressing the second ‘you’ as if he is singling out every audience member. Master then jumps right into the promotion of his new book: “Book II . . . is about man.” Although most commonly thought of as a pause, the space between “Book II” and “is about man” is better defined as a “contact point.” Lecky defines this as “the place where the vocal cords meet just prior to springing into their vibratory cycle; the resting point before and between sound making.”<sup>147</sup> This ‘springing’ is key for it means that something is happening in the space between the words. It is not an empty space imposed on the line. Instead, “is about man” explodes out of the pause, relating back to “Book II.” These contact points build interest by suspending his listeners in the space between the words. Fortunately, Master (and Hoffman) do not overuse these contact points. Master/Hoffman draws the audience in without indulging in his own artistry.

Here is the crux of his speech: “I have unlocked, and discovered . . . a secret . . . to living in these bodies that we hold. And ooooh yes, it’s very, very, very, very serious. The secret . . . is laughter.” His voice drops in pitch and his face slackens with every “very,” creating, as Gorbman puts it, “broad conspiratorial humor.”<sup>148</sup> When the bit is over, he juts his head up, looking at the audience from side to side. This joke is a necessary preamble to his thesis. His joke and the audience’s laughter is proof of his discovery. Laughter is intrinsically relational. This performance within Master’s performance solidifies Master’s presence as the leader of The Cause. Before he has even told his captive audience the secret, he has shown it to them. The contact points and pacing between his lines are also key here for how they leave room for the audience’s laughter. The secret to living “in these bodies that we hold” is relational and expressed through the voice.

When it comes to the written word however, Master falls short. The audience is never privy to his words divorced from his voice, yet there are a few key moments which point to his writings’ limitations. After his speech at the Congress, Master is approached by Helen (Laura Dern), a wealthy benefactor. She has been reading the new book and asks for clarification. “There’s a change,” she says. “You’ve changed the processing platform question. Now it says ‘can you imagine’. [...] If our previous method was to induce memory by asking ‘can you recall,’ doesn’t it then change everything to say ‘can you imagine?’” Master gives some hazy and asinine response. When

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<sup>147</sup> Lecky, *Vox Method*, 355.

<sup>148</sup> Gorbman, “The Master’s Voice,” 13.

Helen pushes for an answer, Master snaps. “What do you want!” Helen has been lured by Master’s charisma, but his words fail to fulfill her needs. Gorbman posits that perhaps Peggy is the author of Book II, suggesting that Master’s frustration at Helen derives from his not having read the book yet. This is a tenable theory, one which affords Peggy a greater agency, yet it could also be possible that Master, as his son suggests, “is making it all up as he goes.” Whether recalling or imagining the past, The Cause’s project is ultimately a hopeful one. Master strives to move through and beyond the atrocities of the war by addressing a wounded collective psyche, yet his dogmatic leadership and dubious promises prevent any sustained forward momentum.



*Figure 10: The Master and his attentive fans*

Master finds success through his ability to craft and imbue words with a prophetic quality. Yet, divorced from his voice they are not enough. In Master’s last scene, he sings to Freddie. We have heard Master sing before, but he has always been accompanied by a piano and a gleeful, dancing crowd. Alone with Freddie, he sings “A Slow Boat to China” slowly and with his eyes fixed on Freddie. Tears flow from Freddie’s eyes. Are these the same kinds of tears from the informal processing? Would tears of emotion suggest progress? Despite his emotional response to Master’s stripped-down performance, Freddie does not stay. Clearly, Master’s voice is not enough to hold Freddie there.

Master and Freddie are incompatible, despite being cut from the same cloth. Or, perhaps, they aren’t compatible precisely because they are so similar. Master admires Freddie’s wildness and Freddie is awed by Master’s gravitas. The two of them are constructed through a dynamic expression of difference, a difference which sends them off in opposing directions of the vortex.

❖ **“I’ll keep on changing partners till I hold you once more”**

I have positioned the voice in the context of psychoanalysis and hypnosis as a means to demonstrate the power of the voice to induce memory and healing. However, through Brinkema and Lecky, I have focused on film form and performance form, if you will, in order to root my analysis in a greater specificity. *The Master’s* contrasting performances reveal diverging approaches to preoccupation. For Phoenix, mumbling becomes the site at which language and affect rupture. His affectively-charged sound engages and reviles the audience. For Hoffman, preoccupation transforms the words into dazzling bursts of energy. His master’s voice is the lynchpin of The Cause’s optimistic project. And yet, it is not enough for Freddie.



*Figure 11: Man and Sandwoman*

I have focused my attention on the voices of two men. Yet, the women in the film occupy an important place. Peggy could be said to be the “real” Master, with the scene in which she masturbates Master in front of the bathroom mirror being a prime example. And Freddie’s absent mother, trapped in a “loony bin,” looms over Freddie and the film. Indeed, the final voice we hear in the film is not that of Freddie or Master, but Helen Foster singing “Changing Partners” on the soundtrack. We can imagine that this is the voice of his mother or Doris singing the words “we were waltzing together to a dreamy melody/ when they called out ‘change partners’ and you waltzed away from me.” Or perhaps, because the song is non-diegetic, this voice is out-of-reach. This voice is not locked inside the narrative or forced into objectification. Rather, her voice envelops Freddie, just as Master’s voice had before. The female voice renders Freddie’s longing more admissible; Master and Freddie’s tenderness and aggression ebbs and flows, as they release and return to one another.



**Conclusion:**  
**Still Listening**

*Listen:*

*The dark we've only ever imagined now audible, thrumming,*

*Marbled with static like gristly meat. A chorus of engines churns.*

*Silence taunts: a dare. Everything that disappears*

*Disappears as if returning somewhere.*

-Tracy K. Smith, "The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack"

The voices in the films I've analyzed are aesthetic, affective and narratological objects. In concert with the body, voices lift the words off the page and deliver them as if for the first time. If a director's task is primarily to command time, sound, and images, then the voice is sound carving out time. At the outset of my project, I thought that I would be studying voices in a vacuum. Confident that Chion's acousmatic listening would be the best method for gleaning meaning from the voice, I sought to separate the voice from the image. However, Pooja Rangan and Nina Sun Eidsheim's work in particular have alerted me to the politics of listening. The soundtrack is bound to the image, just as speaking is bound to listening. In my three chapters, I have demonstrated the value of listening to the voice, and the necessity of examining how we listen. More than a methodology, my work has sought to go beyond the impricesness of many performance studies to listen, word by word, to what the actor is doing. Indeed, I have sought to listen to technique. This has enabled me to go beyond qualitative judgements such as "authenticity" and "natural" to instead focus on the spectrum of masculine behaviour and performance styles. Each performance is embedded in a specific socio-historical context and performative style. They are all situated on a spectrum. However, the spectrum is not hierarchized in order of masculine to not masculine. Rather, some vocal performances are merely more intelligible than others.

When I began this project, I limited my research to male voices because I wanted to investigate the crisis of masculinity that seemed to be emerging in North America in online spaces like 4chan and reddit. I

was curious whether this crisis had been translated onscreen in some form. However, instead of tackling incel culture and toxic masculinity, my thesis has taken a broader view. I have listened to male voices not as a way to reinforce the gender binary. Rather my thesis has listened to these voices as a means to get outside of the binaries of male and female, queer and not queer, Black and not Black. Moreover, my project is rooted in a feminist approach to male voices. I have sought to find optimistic attachments without pathologizing vocal expressions or locking subjects in a prism of objectification. To return to my initial query, the crisis of masculinity in the voice is a crisis of synchronization. The male protagonists synch up to a belated or harmful voice from the past, which can resonate as uncanny or unintelligible.

In my first chapter, I situated the ontology of sound as a powerful, three-dimensional force that complicates teleological assertions of progress and queer futurity. Euphemisms and double entendres, rampant in *Brokeback Mountain*, are queer signposts, which eventually become subsumed by *Brokeback's* straight characters. Finally, I listened to how words were spoken. I rebuked the assumption that Ledger's performance of mumbling indicated his repression. Ultimately, I argued that there is optimism in listening backwards and in the very event of speaking. The second chapter takes a similar assumption about a voice and deconstructs it. I began by posing the question: if Pierre Delacroix doesn't sound black, then what does blackness sound like? Listening backwards to James Baldwin, Delacroix entrains his voice to the sound of the past. Finally, *The Master* rearticulates the troubled masculinity of the fifties through its staging of two contrasting performances. Phoenix, as the bellicose Freddie, mumbles in a different register than Ledger. Hoffman, as the controlling and entrancing Master, voices the optimism of the fifties. After the war's high body count, Master looks to the past for the cure of the future. A tightly braided thread runs through the thesis: only through facing collective or personal pasts can we hear the echo of the voice in the present.

In all three of the films, queerness is always present. It is either evoked or alluded to. Debates surrounding *Brokeback Mountain's* queerness continue to take place. Are Ennis and Jack subjects of a gay melodrama? Or, as Harry Brod argues, are they "bi shepherds, not gay cowboys"?<sup>149</sup> More passionate debates

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<sup>149</sup> Harry Brod, "They're Bi Shepherds, Not Gay Cowboys: The Misframing of *Brokeback Mountain*," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 14, no. 2 (March 1, 2007): 252–53.

rage as to whether *Brokeback* is the *right* kind of queer film.<sup>150</sup> In *Bamboozled*, Delacroix's voice and mannerisms are coded as effeminate and prissy. His invocation of James Baldwin throws into relief a queer connection. Finally, *The Master* stages two men's homosocial bonding and conflict. Freddie and Master are each like magnets orbiting around each other until they snap together. Yet, I hesitate to ascribe a transgressive quality to these films through revealing their queer subtexts. Rather than carving out a transformative political opening for queer subjectivity, I have tried to situate each of these films in the historical context of their respective period settings and in so doing complicate the historical distortions that time or neglect have flattened.

There are, of course, many ellisions. Although I have tried to engage diverse, contrasting methodologies, there are a number of other pathways that would suit my project and future projects on the masculine voice. On the topic of listening, Dylan Robinson's *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* is a crucial intervention in the field. Robinson's work pertains to performance art and music, yet his decolonial methods are apt for film studies:

[H]ungry listening prioritizes the capture and certainty of information over the affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound. Attending to affect alongside normative listening habits and biases allows us to imagine (or audiate) otherwise—to develop strategies for different transformative politics of listening that are resurgent in their exploration of Indigenous epistemologies, foundations, languages, and sensory logics; or, ones that are decolonial in their ability to move us beyond settler listening fixations.<sup>151</sup>

How do recording models of intelligibility and fidelity fit into settler listening practices? And how can we unlearn these listening practices? Can Brinkema's case for reading the forms of the affects make space for indigenous ways of listening and sound production? Indigenous methodologies would be especially fruitful for scholars working on sound in North American cinema, or any settler cinema for that matter.

Moreover, my attention to masculinity has focused on cisgendered men. Yet, vocal performances by transmen or masculine women is a rich terrain of inquiry. Vocal cues are a key part of how we try to categorize someone's gender. Normative gendered voices are culturally specific and not entirely biologically

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<sup>150</sup> David Leavitt, "Men in Love: Is Brokeback Mountain a Gay Film?," in *The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. William R. Handley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011). 27-30.

<sup>151</sup> Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

determined.<sup>152</sup> For instance, the fundamental frequency, a measure of pitch, varies according to gender, culture, age-group, and so on. If, in general, Japanese-speaking men speak with a lower fundamental frequency than English-speaking American men, then are the latter speaking outside Japanese gender norms and therefore less masculine?<sup>153</sup> The study of transmasculine voices bridges an important discussion of style. Many trans people undergo speech therapy in order to feminize or masculinize their voices. Clearly, the gendered voice is not natural or without style. Indeed, in the case of trans people wishing to pass as their gender, the voice's style is made to sound invisible. The voice synchs up with gender norms. If the voices in my thesis stand out partially because of a stylization, then how do we write about voices that intentionally don't stand out?

Linguist Lal Zimman argues that “[t]rans voices should push us to reconsider the very concept of the gendered voice. [...] What does it mean to have a “female voice” or a “male voice”? Does it mean expressing all elements of the voice in accordance with norms for a particular gender category? If so, this would suggest that not all cis women have female voices and not all cis men have male voices. If not, which precise characteristics determine the gendering of a voice, and where is the boundary between the possible categories?”<sup>154</sup> Given my chapter on the Black-coded voice, examining the vocal intersections of race and gender would be a worthy task. As the voice reveals, mimicry can be a pathway to self-reinvention and self-actualization. Although I have focused exclusively on the male voice, my findings and my methods are not isolated from female and non gendered voices. Instead, these methods allow for a more capacious understanding of how voices, whether gendered or not, situate themselves within the diegesis and a wider socio-historical context. Our expectations of female, male, and non-binary voices are never innocuous.

My discussion of race is limited to a film in which race is the subject matter. Yet, the whiteness in *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Master* is largely naturalized by the two films. Considering Ennis Del Mar's Latino name, Jack Twist's journeys down to Mexico and the Hispanic origin of cowboys, whiteness in the

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<sup>152</sup> Lal Zimman, “Transgender Voices: Insights on Identity, Embodiment, and the Gender of the Voice,” *Language and Linguistics Compass* 12, no. 8 (2018).

<sup>153</sup> Ikuko Patricia Yuasa, *Culture and Gender of Voice Pitch: A Sociophonetic Comparison of the Japanese and Americans*. (London: Equinox Pub., 2009).

<sup>154</sup> Zimman, 11-12.

film is fragile and always at the risk of being interrupted.<sup>155</sup> The casting of a white actor in a role that could have gone to a Latino performer seems purposeful and reflects on industry biases in 2005.

There are other actors and performances that are ripe for study. Michael B. Jordan's rise to stardom in the latter half of the 2000s saw him move swiftly from small indie films like *Fruitvale Station* (Coogler, 2013) to *Creed* (Coogler, 2015) and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018). These three films would make for a compelling case study given their widely varying budgets and the shared authorship between Coogler and Jordan. How does the performance of black masculinity ebb and flow throughout this trio of films? As is often the case, Jordan's acting adapts to the style and demands of the film. His diffuse and, what many would call, intimate performance in *Fruitvale* is a stark contrast to the theatricality of the Marvel Franchise.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, 21st century American actors such as Oscar Isaac, Adam Driver, Timothée Chalamet, Jesse Eisenberg, and LaKeith Stanfield would all make for compelling case studies given their contrasting performances of soft masculinity and their oscillation between blockbusters like the *Star Wars* reboot, for example, and indie dramas such as *Inside Llewyn Davis* (Coen & Coen, 2013) and *Night Moves* (Reichardt, 2013).

Another possible continuation of my research would be to situate performances in a specific socio-economic context. For *Film Comment*, Shonni Enelow theorizes a new style of acting which emerged in response to the 2008 financial crash and the proliferation of digital surveillance tools. This new style arrives in stark contrast to the more emphatic acting style of last century:

To risk oversimplification, Method acting dramatized the way that, in the middle of the 20th century, Americans saw themselves: held down by repressive norms or psychological blocks, but ultimately glorious, full-flowering individuals with rich inner lives and wellsprings of powerful feeling. In contrast, the new film acting shows us the micro-responses of people engaged in unspectacular strategies of survival, trying to get their minimal needs met by any means necessary."<sup>157</sup>

My chapters on mumbling were organized around the specific historical contexts of the '50s and '60s, but there are ways in which Phoenix and Ledger internalized their 21st century experiences of the world

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<sup>155</sup> Phil Livingston, "The History of the Vaquero," American Cowboy.

<sup>156</sup> I myself avoid describing his performance as intimate because I question the direct correlation between budget and performance, or between subject matter and spectatorial responses. Are these indie dramas described as "intimate" because we narrowly define intimacy as relegated to the private sphere, the standard milieu of indie dramas?

<sup>157</sup> Shonni Enelow, "The Great Recession: American Movie Acting Today," *Film Comment*, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/american-movie-acting-today/>.

and expressed them through the funnel of the period setting. Lauren Berlant's work on flat affect as deflated and reticent would merge smoothly with wider socio-economic performance contexts.

Another proposed direction for this research could explore specific vocal modes and techniques, such as voice-off, asynchronicity and acousmatic voices. Sjogren's *Into the Vortex* exclusively studies voice-off cinema in 1940s Hollywood Cinema. What about male voice-off in contemporary American cinema? Films such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese, 2013), *Big Fish* (Burton, 2003), or the films of Wes Anderson and Terrence Malick are ripe for study in this context..

It would be worth expanding on my second chapter's argument for a strategic asynchronicity, by examining how asynchronicity in contemporary cinema may, for example, offer counter subjectivities. Although more common in ethnographic cinema, in these films the image and the voice track resist coupling to render what Diana Allan terms the "asynchronicity of experience."<sup>158</sup> This technique has partially emerged as a response to the traumatic realism of documentary and political cinema, but experiments with synchronicity are happening in mainstream narrative cinema as well, with *Sorry to Bother You* (Riley, 2018) as the most notable example. If synchronicity creates the illusion of togetherness, then when critics and filmmakers refer to "giving voice" to the disenfranchised, a "compromised hospitality,"<sup>159</sup> as Allan describes it, takes place. How can asynchronicity distort the illusion of togetherness while making attachments to a present worth living in? By untethering the voice from the body, can we disrupt gender and racial binaries and devise new identity expressions?

I have tried not to reinforce binaries between listening and speaking; body and voice. More than anything else, this thesis proposes that we listen to the voice not because it is separate from the body, but precisely because it emerges from it. The voice lives outside the body and yet is coloured by our internal thoughts and feelings. By using not just our eyes but our ears as well, we can better attune ourselves to the spectrum of masculine behaviour echoing within the vibrations.

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<sup>158</sup> Diana Allan, "Acoustic Visions: Sounding Sense in Ethnographic Film," Conference Presentation, (McGill University, February 13, 2021).

<sup>159</sup> The illusions I am referring to are of body and voice speaking as one and of screenwriter feeding the performer lines; Allan.

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