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The Female Voice in
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THE FANTASY OF THE MATERNAL VOICE:
PARANOIA AND COMPENSATION

It has become something of a theoretical commonplace to characterize the maternal voice as a blanket of sound, extending on all sides of the newborn infant. For Guy Rosolato and Mary Ann Doane, the maternal voice is a “sonorous envelope” which “surrounds, sustains, and cherishes the child.”1 Julia Kristeva conceives of it as a “mobile receptacle” which absorbs the infant’s “anaclitic facilitations.”2 Didier Anzieu refers to it as a “bath of sounds,” while for Claude Bailblè it is, quite simply, “music.”3 Michel Chion also subscribes to this general definition of the maternal voice, although he gives it a much more sinister inflection; within his account, that voice not only envelops but entraps the newborn infant.4

In this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate that the trope of the maternal voice as sonorous envelope grows out of a powerful cultural fantasy, a fantasy which recent psychoanalytic theory shares with classic cinema. The fantasy in question turns upon the image of infantile containment—upon the image of a child held within the environment or sphere of the mother’s voice. I have described this image as neutrally as possible, but in fact its “appearances” are always charged with either intensely positive or intensely negative affect; Rosolato, for instance, regards the “pleasurable milieu” of the maternal voice as “the first model of auditory pleasure,” whereas Chion associates it with the terror of an “umbilical night.”5 These contradictory views of the same image point to the profoundly ambivalent nature of the fantasy which is my present concern, an ambivalence which attests to the divided nature of subjectivity, and which underscores the fact that pleasure for one psychic system almost invariably means unpleasure for another psychic system. The fantasy of the maternal-voice-as-sonorous-envelope takes on a different meaning depending upon the psychic “lookout point”; viewed from the site of the unconscious, the image of the infant held within the environment or sphere of the mother’s voice is an emblem of infantile plenitude and bliss. Viewed from the site of the preconscious/conscious system, it is an emblem of impotence and entrapment.

By identifying the sonorous envelope trope as a fantasy, I mean to emphasize that trope’s retroactivity rather than its fictiveness—to indicate its status as an after-the-fact construction or reading of a situation which is fundamentally irreversible, rather than to posit it as a simple illusion. In other words, I intend to stress the ways in which the fantasy functions as a bridge between two radically disjunctive moments—an infantile moment, which occurs prior to the inception of subjectivity, and which is consequently “too early” with respect to meaning and desire, and a subsequent moment, firmly rooted within both meaning and desire, but consequently “too late” for fulfillment. The first of those moments, which can be imagined but never actually experienced, turns upon the imaginary fusion of mother and infant, and hence upon unity and plenitude. The second moment marks the point at which the subject introjects a preexisting structure, a structure which gives order, shape, and significance to the original ineffable experience. That preexisting structure is what Laplanche would call a “parental fantasy,”6 or what Deleuze and Guattari would describe as a “group fantasy”;7 it not only anticipates but exceeds the individual subject.

I will begin this chapter with the negative or dystopic version of the maternal voice fantasy, which I will extract in part from Chion’s La voix au cinéma, and in part from dominant cinema, and which I will read as a symptom of male paranoia and castration. I will then turn to what might be called the “operatic” version of the maternal voice fantasy, both as it has been theoretically articulated by Rosolato in “La voix: entre corps et langage,” and as it has been cinematically formulated in texts such as Citizen Kane, Diva, and (most complexly) The Conversation. Chapter 4 will address a third version of the maternal voice fantasy, and one with profound feminist resonances—that collectively “dreamt” by Kristeva, Robert Altman, Laura Mulvey, and Peter Wollen.

Like myths, [fantasies] claim to provide a representation of, and a solution to, the major enigmas which confront the child. Whatever appears to the subject as something needing an explanation or theory, is dramatized as a moment of emergence, the beginning of a history.
The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice

voice poses a threat to the one who occupies this subsequent temporal and spatial vantage; in short, to a fully constituted subject. But fresh questions arise: Who is this subject, and why should the relation of the infant to the maternal voice represent such a stress point?

Through the intentional miscitation from John I, Chion opposes the maternal voice to the paternal word, and so identifies the mother with sound and the father with meaning. He also situates the maternal voice in an anterior position to the paternal word, conferring upon it an original (if not originating) status. However, since the maternal voice is associated with the darkness and formlessness of the infant’s earliest experiences, rather than with the form-giving illumination of the logos, this anteriority implies primitiveness rather than privilege. Indeed, since “in the beginning” is a reference to Genesis as well as to John, the passage under discussion seems to suggest that the maternal voice could be justly compared to the chaos upon which the divine word imposed its order and illumination at the moment of creation.

The opposition of the maternal voice to the paternal word attests to a quite remarkable sleight of hand, although one which has been so frequently effected within recent theory as to have become almost transparent. It attests, that is, to the displacement onto the mother of qualities which more properly characterize the newborn child. The conceptualization of the maternal voice as a “uterine night” of nonmeaning effects a similar displacement; once again the infant’s perceptual and semiotic underdevelopment are transferred onto the mother.

An astonishing amount of negative affect accumulates around the maternal voice in the passage quoted above, concentrating primarily around three images of enclosure: the images of a woven enclosure, an umbilical net, and a cobweb. It is through these analogous terms, I would suggest, that we can best grasp both the identity of the fully constituted subject for whom the maternal voice poses a potential crisis, and the motive behind the displacement of the infant’s verbal and auditory impotence onto the mother. All three tropes figure enclosure as entrapment and/or danger, and so represent interiority as an undesirable condition. In each case, that interiority is synonymous with the infantile condition. Trapped within the suffocating confinement of the mother’s voice, the newborn child resembles a prisoner or prey.

Within the theoretical narrative formulated by Chion, interiority is also identified with discursive impotence, and exteriority (at least by implication) with discursive potency. The child hears, but is not yet able to understand, and emits sounds, but is not yet able to make them meaningful. It is wrapped “inside” the sonorous envelope of the moth-
er's voice, but is still on the far side of signification. Access to the symbolic would seem to turn upon the transfer of the child from the "inside" to the "outside" of that envelope. (I must stress once again that this metaphor of drama unfolds from a time and place other than those occupied by the child—that it is riven through and through with retrospection.)

What is repressed within this narrative, but can be exhumed from a group of symptomatic details, is that since exteriority can be defined only through opposition to interiority, the child's shift to the "outside" of the "umbilical net" requires that the maternal voice be restituted "inside"—that the "container" become the "contained." We can see this inversion in the rhetorical slippage noted above, where the voice of the mother somehow comes to absorb the perceptual and semiotic immaturity which more properly characterizes the infant's condition.

This inversion becomes ideologically explicable as soon as we introduce into the analysis a number of the functions frequently performed by the maternal voice during the first years of childhood—the functions of language teacher, expositer, and storyteller. Psychoanalysis tells us that the mother's voice is usually the first to be isolated by the infant from other noises, and that it is by imitating the sounds she makes that it produces its own initial articulations. It is the voice (at least within a traditional familial scheme) that first charts space, delimits objects, explains and defines the external world; as Jacques Hasson remarks, it is also the voice that first introduces the infant subject to the Other.11

Last, but by no means least, within Western culture the mother is the most frequent narrator of nursery rhymes and bedtime stories. Because her voice is identified by the child long before her body is, it remains unlocalized during a number of the most formative moments of subjectivity. The maternal voice would thus seem to be the original prototype for the disembodied voice-over in cinema, as Chion himself acknowledges at one point in his book:

The first to display images is the Mother, whose voice, before the (eventual) learning of written signs, makes things become detached in a living and symbolic temporality. In the fiction of the fabulator and teller of stories in the traditional (voice-over) of the commentary, something always remains of this original function.12

It is astonishing that a cinematic device which thus carries within it the symbolic "trace" of the mother should have become the exclusive prerogative of the male voice within Hollywood film, while the female voice not only is confined to the "inside" of the narrative, but is forced again and again into diegetic "closets" and "crevices." I would like to suggest that this system of vocal conventions, like the theoretical formulation advanced by Chion, functions to reverse an imagined primordial situation in which the male child was wrapped in the sonorous blanket of the mother's voice, and was as yet unable either to distinguish or to produce meaningful sounds. In both the cinematic and theoretical paradigms, the discursive potency of the male voice is established by stripping the female voice of all claim to verbal authority. And in both instances that devestiture most pointedly negates the mother's earlier role as language teacher, commentator, and narrator. (Refer to the primordial situation as an "imagined" one because the drama of interiority and exteriority upon which it turns is obviously a deferred reading of the infantile scenario from a position fully within the symbolic—a position already structured by lack. The displacement I have just described transfers that lack onto its culturally sanctioned site, the female subject.)

The moment at which it becomes most evident that both the cinematic and theoretical formulations hinge upon the substitution of the mother for the child within the fantasmatic tableau is also the point at which their symmetry is most marked. The moment in question occurs during an astonishing passage from La voix au cinéma, a passage where Chion describes cinema as "a machine made in order to deliver a cry from the female voice":

The point of the cry in a cinematographic fiction . . . is defined . . . as something which rushes forth, generally from the mouth of a woman, something which is not, moreover, inevitably heard, but which above all must fall at a named point, explode at a precise moment, at the cross-roads of convergent lines, at the conclusion of an often alethic and disproportionate path—but calculated to give to this point its maximum impact: the film functions, then, like those big animating machines, full of gears and connecting rods, of chains of actions and reactions, here a machine made in order to deliver a cry . . . The point of the cry is an unthinkable point at the interior of thought, an inexpressible [point] at the interior of the enunciation, an unrepresentable point at the interior of representation . . . This cry incarnates a fantasum of absolute sonorousness . . . 13

Again the high drama, the metaphoric excess, the sense of extravagant investment in the female voice. But now, at last, the agenda is out in the open: What is demanded from woman—what the cinematic apparatus and a formidable branch of the theoretical apparatus will extract from her by whatever means are required—is involuntary sound, sound that escapes her own understanding, testifying only to the artistry of a superior force. The female voice must be sequestered (if necessary through a mise-en-abîme of framing devices) within the heart of the diegesis, so far from the site of enunciation as to be beyond articulation.
or meaning. It must occupy an “unthinkable point at the interior of thought,” an “inexpressible [point] at the interior of the enunciation,” an “unrepresentable [point] at the interior of representation.” There is, of course, only one group of sounds capable of conforming precisely to these requirements—those emitted by a newborn baby. This, then, is the vocal position which the female subject is called upon to occupy whenever (in film or in theory) she is identified with noise, babble, or the cry.

The last of these sounds is regularly wrung from the female voice in films of the recent horror, stalker, and slasher varieties, but the textual example I would like to cite at this juncture falls slightly to one side of those generic (or subgeneric) categories. The film, Anatole Litvak’s *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), dramatizes one evening in the life of a woman who has been confined to her bed with a “cardiac neurosis”—an evening which ends with her murder.14 That woman, Leona (Barbara Stanwyck), gains access to the outside world only through her bedside telephone, which she employs constantly until her death. The remainder of the film consists of flashbacks which are activated in one way or another by the telephone calls. These flashbacks offer a very different view of Leona from that provided by the diegetic present; they show her proposing to a man who does not love her, coercing him into marriage, engineering their honeymoon, rifling through the contents of his wallets, and destroying the photograph of another woman she finds there, forcing him to move with her into her father’s house, and—finally—insisting that he adopt a purely titular position in her father’s business. The male character in question, Henry (Burt Lancaster), compares himself at one point to a “pet dog.”

Leona’s usurpation of functions which the film insists are a male prerogative is most dramatically rendered by an accelerated montage of her wedding and honeymoon, the parts of which are held together by her voice-over repetition of the words: “I, Leona, take thee Henry. . . .” Although this voice-over is not disembodied, it exerts enunciative authority over the images, not only organizing them, but in a sense “causing” them. Since marriage vows belong to the category of what J. L. Austin calls “performative” utterances15—utterances which effect or perform what they state—Leona could be said actually to assume possession of Henry with the words “I . . . thee take,” and so to generate the subsequent honeymoon celebration. Despite its brevity, this montage sequence enacts a major transgression in the vocal/auditory system of classic cinema, returning to the mother the symbolic mastery she exercises within the infantile situation.

This transgression does not go unpunished. Confinned to her bed, and made dependent for all her physical and psychic needs upon the disembodied voices which speak to her through the telephone, Leona is reduced through helplessness and anxiety to a condition of verbal and aural incompetence. At the beginning of the film, a faulty connection permits her to overhear a telephone conversation about her own murder, but she is unable to grasp that she herself is the intended victim. Leona responds to this overheard conversation with a series of hysterical calls to the operator, her husband’s secretary, and the police, not one of which exerts the slightest influence over impending events. A number of subsequent incoming calls emphasize her inability to get even a simple message straight.

Leona is thus placed in an analogous position to the fantasmatic infant. Sunk in “motor incapacity” and “nursling dependence,”16 she inhabits an envelope of sounds which remain largely indecipherable to her, unable to exercise linguistic control over her environment. Indeed, the telephone system which determines all of her interpersonal exchanges in the diegetic present is described by titles at the opening of the film in terms which are strikingly suggestive of an “umbilical net”:

In the tangled network of a great city the telephone is the unseen link between a million lives. . . . It is the servant of our common needs, the confidant of our inmost secrets . . . life and happiness wait upon its ring . . . and horror . . . and loneliness . . . and death.

Ultimately, Leona is asked to establish an even more intimate identification with the vocal status of a newborn child. Overcome with remorse at the last minute, her husband telephones her about her imminent murder, and urges her to run to the window and scream. Her hysterical “refusal” to do so leaves her completely vulnerable to the stranger, who a moment later extracts the requisite cry from Leona by wrapping the telephone cord around her neck.

Reversals of the sort I have been examining here would seem to be facilitated by the double organization of the vocal/auditory system, which permits a speaker to function at the same time as listener, his or her voice returning as sound in the process of utterance. The simultaneity of these two actions makes it difficult to situate the voice, to know whether it is “outside” or “inside.” The boundary separating exteriority from interiority is blurred by this aural undecidability—by the replication within the former arena of something which seems to have its inception within the latter. Rosalato refers to this replication as an