

**STUDY DAY:
VOICES AND NOISES
MARCH 27, 2015
AUDIOVISUALITIES LAB, DUKE UNIVERSITY**

ABSTRACTS

“We Have the Real Truth to Communicate”: Vocal Sincerity in Fundamentalist Christian Church Services

Sarah Bereza (Music)

In sermons and an extensive written discourse on music, fundamentalist Christians affiliated with Bob Jones University (Greenville, SC) criticize vocal effects such as cry breaks, bent notes, and whispery timbres that they associate with the performance of sexuality. Like other social conservatives in the past, twentieth-century fundamentalists railed against the “animal” desires they heard in rock ‘n’ roll’s rhythms and vocal style, and today they continue to warn against sexualized vocal effects in various popular music genres. But though many of their concerns revolve around public expressions of sexuality, their focus shifts substantially when addressing how vocal music *should* be performed in church services. Fundamentalist vocalists are charged with “preaching a message” when they sing—that is, making faith and doctrinal truth intelligible to listeners. In the words of a fundamentalist sound engineer, vocalists “have the real truth to communicate,” so church authorities encourage them to avoid any practices (not just sexually-coded ones) that might distract from a song’s message. Vocalists are then faced with a challenge: how can they communicate their faith to listeners when more typical markers of vocal authenticity are prohibited? Drawing on my participation in fundamentalist church services and interviews with vocalists, I focus on three strategies vocalists use to address this problem: they use serious facial expressions (brows slightly furrowed), make eye contact with people in the congregation, and nod their heads slightly. These three strategies, especially the idiosyncratic head nod, are particularly visible because other bodily movements are discouraged (vocalists are ideally motionless from the shoulders downward while they sing). While these strategies are seemingly minimal in the context of a performance, they allow vocalists to communicate their faith in a way that they feel is sincere and does not distract from a song’s message.

ASMR: Affective Labor, Sound Tactility, and Spectatorship

Laura Jaramillo (Literature Program)

My paper will explore how the YouTube-based subculture of ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) opens up new avenues for thinking the spectator- performer relationship under late capitalism. ASMR videos can be said to represent a new kind of expanded sentience in the realms of audiovisual media consumption and production, one which challenges established theories of film’s capacity to audio-visually innervate the spectator (Benjamin, Marks). In ASMR videos, (predominantly) women perform simple

tasks or vocalize softly into the camera in order to arouse a tingling, euphoric sensation in the viewer's body. I focus on the most popular scenario, in which the performer enacts traditionally feminine care labor (nurses, massage therapists, make-up artists) aimed at the viewing subject. The roleplay serves to seamlessly integrate the manipulation of tactile, optical, and oral phenomenon into a plausible framework. Like pornography, ASMR mobilizes bodily affective labor, but what is spectacularized here is not the image of the performer's body, but the performer's manipulation of sound. Performers continually work to develop techniques to increase the spectator's ASMR response, using binaural microphones to mimic the materiality of the performer's voice in proximity to the spectator's ear. These videos reverse the traditional spectatorial subject-object dynamic of film theory: the viewer is the object of the performer's attention and what is being performed in gestural, tactile, and optical form is care itself. The ASMR community of YouTube has developed as a gift economy, with performers also being consumers' of other performers' videos, intertextually referencing each other's videos. Though some critics have understood ASMR as emblematic of the postmodern subject's alienated condition and affective lack, I claim the contrary, that ASMR, as a gift economy organized around care, represents a reparative form of spectatorial embodiment that has as yet only been latent in media technology.

Inhabiting The Acousmêtre; The Hidden Abode of Cinematic Production in *Berberian Sound Studio*

Yair Rubinstein (Literature Program)

This paper will explore the question of voice as a process of physical, embodied labor, and how vocal performance as an object of labor has been critically undervalued within film studies. While approaches such as psychoanalysis provide important contributions to understanding the role of voice in film, it nonetheless is limited by its need to locate voice exclusively through the prism of language and symbolic order. Kaja Silverman, for instance, situates the problem of voice in cinema as originating from the Western metaphysical tradition of identifying speech as the essence of presence, and therefore, underemphasizes the role that material processes of film production play in structuring cinematic experience. Peter Strickland's 2012 film, *Berberian Sound Studio*, provides an exemplary challenge to these settled approaches to the role of voice in cinema. Set in a 1970s-era postproduction studio, the film foregrounds the question of voice, particularly its occupation as a gendered division of labor in horror film production. Its female characters bear the physical and psychic burden of producing the majority of vocal performances, particularly the horror genre's paradigmatic vocal motif, the scream. Thus, the film's focus on vocal performance as an object of labor introduces new approaches to understanding the voice and its embodiment within cinematic production.

Hence, this paper will investigate how Strickland's film unsettles traditional engagements of the voice within cinema studies. By emphasizing the voice as a process of labor, one that is embedded within a broader matrix of human labor, the film introduces understandings of vocality that extend beyond the figure of the individual subject, and

rather, as a set of material processes among many within the circuit of cinematic production.

“Wireless Encounters: Weather Calls Voices in Noises”

Zeynep Bulut (King’s College, London, Department of Music)

Electronic voice phenomenon - hearing speech sounds and fragments in wireless transmissions and background noises – draws attention to a talk with ghostly voices. Historically, telephone, radio and sound recording technologies have an impact on the idea of connecting with the dead, communicating with the spirits. We experience this phenomenon on a daily basis with different intensities. We hear false resemblances — what I call false alarm – between the sounds of human beings and nonhuman things, mobilized by the acoustic ecology and everyday auralities in which we participate. Psychoacoustic experiments demonstrate cases where we tend to be more attuned to voices in background noises, where auditory projection leads us to pick or make up speech sounds out of the noises. This talk will discuss such examples of EVP as explored in sound art and experimental music, and in schizophrenia and auditory hallucinations. I cross read the aesthetics of performing and the pathology of hearing ghostly voices to unfold the wireless encounters, the distributedness of voice between animate and inanimate things in everyday life. Both in experimental music and in schizophrenia, the experience of making speech sounds in noises, I argue, evokes an imagined realism of voice. By imagined realism of voice, I indicate the voices, which may appear with concrete names and bodies, not simply speaking within the hearing body but also speaking to/with/at the hearing body, instigating a sense of “this is not my voice.” Such split is perhaps there to have control over the atmospheric quality of voices. Hearing and performing voices in splits — seemingly as figures but also as matters, textures and unexpected encounters — as the weather calls, incites moods, affects and actions. The action, I wish to explore here, is how the illusory control over the atmosphere of a voice ironically decentralises presumed narratives of voice, how instead the split pushes forward the physical capacity of voice and aligns it with the affordances of sonorous bodies. Wireless encounters – false alarm – between what speaks and who speaks could then, I would imagine, encourage a new ethics of speech.

“Josefine, the Singer or the Silent Film Diva: Implied Sound in Kafka and Early Film”

Kata Gellen (Duke University, Department of Germanic Studies)

This talk will address how silent film and literary prose evoke sound within their respective media confines in comparable though not identical ways and for related ends. Most broadly, it suggests that if we cease to think about implied sounds in terms of the very thing they can never be—actual heard sounds—we begin to recognize what a powerful tool of literary and filmic expression they are in themselves. First, an analysis of several

short texts by Kafka alongside a sequence from Charlie Chaplin's 1921 film *The Kid* demonstrates the fundamental ontological instability of implied sound: soundless gestures can take the place of sound, or they can take the place of silent gestures (pantomime), and only an intermedial approach to implied sounds in literature and film can expose this uncertainty. Second, an analysis of silent voices in Kafka's stories, especially "Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk" (1924), and silent narrative cinema (especially Italian melodramas, featuring silent divas) shows how gesture, facial expression, and body movement do not simply evoke what cannot be perceived, the voice, but rather produce an architecture of the body that conditions narrative space. Filmic and literary space differ in fundamental ways, and yet both lend coherence and legibility to narratives that seem to revolve around absent and unverifiable voices. It is only by analyzing implied sounds across media that their the semiotic and aesthetic potential can be [abstract coming]

"Choralities"

Steven Connor (Cambridge University, Faculty of English)

The voice has often been identified with the assertion of idiosyncrasy or exception (The Chanting Crowd: 'We Are All Individuals!': An Individual: 'I'm not.' Monty Python, *The Life of Brian*.) I will try in this talk to wonder why humans (though not uniquely) feel urged to merge and magnify the individual voice through assimilating it to the voices of others. What are the powers, menaces and satisfactions of these singular-plural megavoices, in choirs, collective chants and other forms of what may be called *chorality*, that have become more familiar than ever in the mass spectacles ('audicles'?) of sport, entertainment and politics? To be sure, the choral voice can be dominative and demanding, for example in the urgent intransigence of the crowd baying in triumph or for vengeance. But it can also take more convivial forms, for example in the mollifying hum and buzz of conversation, or the sound of collective laughter. Is there an implicit relation between the individual voice and the collective voice it may seem to convoke? Does every individual vocality have a connection to a phantasmal chorality?