

REFLECTIONS ON ECHO-SOUND BY WOMEN ARTISTS IN BRITAIN

by
Jean Fisher

Discussions of media-based art rarely include a substantial review of sound, whether it is used as a component or as the sole medium of a work. At its most effective sound is not simply laid on to provide a background unifying element to the flow of images or actions, but both collaborates in the production of meaning and extends the spatial dimension of the work. Sound evokes images; but it also positions the listener in a physical relation to the source of transmission, or in an illusory relation to distance (drawing nearer/fading away). There is an extensive practice by women artists that uses sound to explore the sociosexual implications of speech and audition. It is what this work has to say about the construction of female subjectivities that these notes attempt to address.

The inattention to aural experience in the construction of human subjectivity is undoubtedly coincidental with a general emphasis in critical debates on visual representation, an emphasis which is attributed to the priority given to vision in a Western culture dominated by patriarchal principles. Jacques Lacan equates this priority with the visibility of the phallus, rendering it the privileged signifier of potency under which all those constituencies deemed lacking - in terms of race, gender, class etc - are subordinated. Certainly, vision has a significant place in the classical founding myths of patriarchy. Oedipus' self-blinding is interpreted by Freud as 'castration' (the self's submission to the authority of the Father - Symbolic language); but it is worth noting that this shift towards a 'feminine' position of 'lack' simultaneously enables the hero to gain insight - access to an 'other' knowledge beyond perceptual vision. This visionary role is not, however, given equal

value in terms of gender. We might contrast the status held by the blind seer Tiresias, or the blind philosopher Sophocles, with that of Cassandra. Like Tiresias she is also a visionary and yet she is deprived of a legitimate speech: her utterances are dismissed as inconsequential mad ravings.

A similar depreciation of the female voice and a usurpation of its creative potential is to be found in contemporary media representations. I should like to draw attention to **Kaja Silverman's** analysis concerning the use of the woman's voice in mainstream cinema since, like the use of her image as visual spectacle, it aims to disavow and project the male subject's impotence, or 'symbolic castration', onto the body and voice of the feminine.¹ This female voice is denied its own utterances to become '*the site of a discursive impotence*' - his 'acoustic mirror'. As Silverman points out,² one rarely encounters a genuine female voice-over in classic film since this position assumes an omniscient or transcendental (traditionally male) author of the narrative. By contrast, the thrust of a good percentage of conventional psychosexual dramas is to make the woman confess, to reveal her 'true nature', as it were; (and is this not also the demand that Freud as 'father confessor' makes of his 'hysterical' female patients?).³ The extreme expression of this 'confession' is the extraction of an involuntary cry, confirming for the male subject his equation of the feminine with the body and nature (as distinct from the mind and intellect), and with the infantile (immature or meaningless speech). The female voice is conventionally synchronised with the image track precisely because it is as 'body as lack' that she is constructed in mainstream cinema, a

function that **Brian de Palma's** *Blow-Out*, 1981, knowingly exploits. *Blow-Out* is a postmodern reworking of the Orpheus and Narcissus myths of male creativity. Where, however, does this place women's creative practice? If Eurydice is rendered mute and Echo deprived of the right to be the subject of enunciation within the discourses of patriarchy, in what way can women be the producers of meaning and not simply its passive sign? Can 'lack' be turned to positive effect?

What can be said about Echo's prescribed position? According to one version, Echo's story begins with a maternal sentence. Hera is vexed by the nymph Echo's incessant chatter which distracts her from keeping an eye on Zeus' adulterous affairs. As a punishment, Hera prohibits Echo from uttering all but the last phrase of another's speech. Echo subsequently falls hopelessly in love with the beautiful but self-absorbed Narcissus. Some say he drowned in his own reflection; others say he metamorphosed into a lovely flower. In any case, like Orpheus, Narcissus presents a redemptive phantasy of male loss and regeneration: the artist/poet whose creative act springs from a denial and a usurpation of the generative role of the feminine (the 'maternal') in order to secure his own immortality. As for her, she may, through her expiratory breath, be the inspiration but not the producer of meaning. Thus, as Eurydice's body is relegated to the place of a liminal shade, so Echo's body fades away leaving a voice without ordinary speech that is, according to this patriarchal myth, nowhere in particular. Clearly her utterance is quite other than the authorial voice of being, since there is no being to speak of. But Echo's disembodied voice that speaks in others' tongues presupposes an additional function: it is also an ear. Echo becomes both audio receiver and transmitter.

I want to pursue the significance of this function by way of what might, at first, appear to be an unlikely literary elaboration of the story of Echo (if only unconsciously on the part of the author) in **Bram Stoker's** late Gothic novel *Dracula*.⁴ It is the character of Mina who absorbs our attention, for she is the matrix of the plot to which all things collect and from which they are reproduced. Mina, described by the patriarch Van Helsing as having 'the mind of a man' (but nevertheless possessing those feminine weaknesses against which she must be protected), collects and disseminates information: she writes in hieroglyphic shorthand; she reads and transcribes the written and phonographic diaries; she listens to the men's talk and lends an ear to their emotional troubles; and she collates and reproduces everything on her typewriter. Later, in telepathic communication with Dracula, she becomes his ear and recorder as he flees his future assassins. Her role is thus centred on an economy of the ear, not of perceptual vision: she 'sees' and 'hears' what the men do not. In short, she encompasses those roles assigned to women in the capitalist economy or its fringes: typist, stenographer, nurse, psychic medium, psychoanalyst, etc - all ears, and typically connected to the technologies of communication.

In retrospect, we should not be surprised to find that, since the late '60s and the development of non-traditional forms of art, women artists have found a creative space through technological media, ranging

from the single-screen use of film and video, slide and sound projection, to multi-media performance and installation. Women's strategic use of a heterogeneity of media practices is not simply the result of their being less circumscribed by male-dominated aesthetic codes. Theories of female subjectivity were instrumental in challenging the modernist notion of stable and fixed human identities defined in relation to a privileged sovereign subject (white, middle-class and male). If an effective female practice was excluded from the history of modernism's static and autonomous object, it is in part because this ideal object, also circumscribed by a privileging of vision, served as a mirror for a transcendental ego: Narcissus is transfixed in a deathly relation with his phantasmised image through which, nevertheless, he misrecognises himself and others. If women's art practices turned away from this narcissistic investment in the ideal object, it was in part because they recognised its inadequacy as a model of subjectivity in a world of ever-shifting identities.

By contrast, time-based medium and installation strategies that insist on the mobility and accumulative experience of the viewer, introduce a temporal component to art production and reception. (Indeed, one of the legacies of '70s aesthetic debates, not however exclusive to feminism, was a Brechtian insistence of the active and critical participation of the viewer in the production of meaning in the work). This, in turn, opens the work to models of transformability: a potential to interrogate idealist illusions of coherent subjectivity, and to explore the mutability and heterogeneity of human identities. Hence, for those groups previously denied the right to represent their own experience, time-based functions provide the means for re-narrating subjectivity and transforming a sense of selfhood from the fixed categories of race, gender and class imposed by dominant culture. It is, therefore, a kind of narrativity that interests us here: Echo's oral-aural circuit. However, a cautionary note: I am not imputing an essential feminine to sound or narrativity, for this would distract us from the profound heterogeneity of women's experiences and their expression in culture. While we may all, broadly speaking, share the same language, our experience, and hence use of it, as gendered, class or ethnically defined subjects is by no means identical. The question is, rather, of the way the reproductive value of the female voice has been not simply suppressed but colonised by a language dominated by the privileged subject and positioned in its social discourses. While women have been essential to economic productivity ('labour' in both senses of the word), this role is rendered marginal in society's master narratives of productivity and creativity. It is also, therefore, a question of working through the stereotype of a feminine passivity to which, at first glance, Echo's repetition appears to conform. Given this non-place assigned to Echo, does her repetition always return language to a put (male) place of origin and its pretensions to transcendental meaning, or can it shift the ground of the sociosexual text?

It is precisely because we are dealing here not with nature but with language and its fundamental 'indifference' that subtle interventions seem possible. From this reflection on women's sound-work and female

authorship two interdependent concerns are of note: an interrogation of the discursive spaces occupied by the voice leading to a displacement of given terms of linguistic utterance, and the return of a repressed (maternal) economy. We might say that the 'other' written out of a dominant culture has an uncanny way of rising up in the very place from which it was evacuated - which is, of course, the demon that *Dracula's* narrative of patriarchal power seeks to pacify.

I should like now to shift the location of this narrative to Greenham Common outside London where in 1981, thousands of women, from different social classes gathered to form a peace camp in protest against the installation of the 501st USAF nuclear missile base. The base was perceived as symbolic of a malignant military policy endangering the future of life itself. I should like to discuss two pieces of work that refers to this scenario: **Tina Keane's** single-screen video version of *In Our Hands, Greenham*, 1984, and **Alanna O'Kelly's** sound work *Chant Down Greenham*, 1988.⁵

In the visual component of her piece, Tina Keane takes up a primary metaphor in the peace camp: women's industry (productivity) as it works to form the matrix of community, yet its exclusion from the site of power. Images of a spider spinning her web are juxtaposed with footage of the women's activities - joining hands around and outside the perimeter fence of the base; weaving webs of wool to symbolise strength in unity; decorating the fence with family photographs and personal memorabilia. The soundtrack counterpoints the sounds of the peace camp with a woman's voice-over testimony of how she decided, independently of her husband's opinion, to march for peace, and her witness to the ensuing confrontation with the police. What emerges is the sense of euphoria and comradeship experienced by the women. Throughout the body of Keane's earlier work, her own childhood memories are woven with the encounters in language of her growing daughter, but continuity here entails not a repetition of the same but a constant attempt to reinscribe and remake female subjectivity across diverse social narratives.

Alanna O'Kelly's *Chant Down Greenham* is less an overt narrative than a tone poem, composed of uncompromising silences alternating, like Keane's piece, with the sounds of the camp - the women's wordless echolalia, their derisive whistling, their chanting and drumming, their laughter, and the noise of circling helicopters which, since the Vietnam War (or, at least, since *Apocalypse Now!*) has come to represent the chilling sound of military aggression. These sounds are orchestrated with a powerful keening (from the Irish caoine, or Caoineadh na Marbh - keening for the dead, which is traditionally part of women's duties at funeral rites). O'Kelly's menacing sustained expulsion of breath is less a cry of loss, however, than a rallying cry of defiance, to which the women's chanting and laughter becomes a chorus or echo of solidarity. This cry is therefore a reminder of the materiality of sound as it resonates through and connects bodies, revealing the socially unifying function of communal chanting. And it is through physicality that the work exerts its most powerful effect, for it not only hits us in the ear but also in the solar plexus. Hence, sound here is not simply the

carrier of a message; it figures the power of the voice and body to act beyond its subjugation to articulated speech and its reduction to physiology. O'Kelly's keening liberates the voice from the specularised body and reinvents it as political agency, alluding, among other things, to a refusal of the pacification of Irish identities effected through English colonialism.

In neither of the 'Greenham' works is the notion of the community of women, or communication among women, intended to homogenise differences under some universalising principle; in both cases singularity or personal witness is juxtaposed with communal experience, and one that is attached to a particular social and historical moment. A collective articulation of women's experiences reminds us that femaleness and female sexuality are historically and politically constituted.

Interference in articulated speech, with its insistence on the inscription of the speaker in linear historical time, is what Echo calls into play. Echo's repetition interrupts and fragments logical syntax, reducing a given utterance to an oscillation of phonetic signifiers disengaged from a determinable 'originary' meaning. Is this fracturing of symbolic language simply the sign of an incoherent 'madness'? Or is 'madness' what is produced in women whose own desires remain unnarratable? This is what seems to be suggested by **Sharon Morris's** soundwork *Everyday*, 1988, a litany of the mundane repetitive routine of the house-bound wife which periodically falls into delirious speech. However, that this fracturing of articulated speech may also provide a ground upon which to construct 'other' meanings is suggested by Morris's *The Moon is Shining on My Mother*, 1988. The piece begins with a woman's voice singing a Welsh language lullaby. Soon the voice doubles, then multiplies, slipping into a harmonic humming. From the repetition of the sound 'hum', formed by a simple resonance, two voices echo the childlike syllabic fragment 'ma-ma'. Then through a dialogical syncopation, vowels and consonants combine and recombine into a progression of syllables that form themselves into English and French words: '...a-ma...mum-ma...mur-mur...mur-der...mer-de...a-mour...ai-mee...me-me...'. From this Babelian play of phonetic differences a web of meaning-effects is spun out that speaks of the interruption of the mother tongue by the language of patriarchy, and hence the child's accession to subjectivity through separation, loss or desire for a maternal imaginative space. But in 'me' there forever lingers the faint murmur of 'ma-ma': 'The Moon is Shining on My Mother' is the song that fades to a memory.

The cryptolinguistic sign is central to the work of **Susan Hiller**. Her use of projected automatic scripts and wordless vocalisations alludes to what has been absented from the sociopolitical domain yet remains as a persistent trace or 'hallucination' at the borders of social consciousness. Hiller makes visible these seemingly marginal utterances as the very terms upon which dominant narratives are predicated.

Belshazzar's Feast/The Writing on Your Wall, 1983/84, specifically refers to storytelling; one version presents a cluster of video monitors arranged on the floor to

suggest a camp-fire.⁶ As we watch images of sparking lights develop into flickering tongues of flame, a woman's voice announces the commencement of an artifice: *'What the fire says, Take 1...'*. Thereafter we become engulfed in a mesmerising daemonic and indecipherable vocalisation whose exotic overtones suggest some other space or time. At intervals, a secretive whispering recounts newspaper reports of images of aliens transmitted on TV after station close-down, and the artist's young son Gabriel hesitantly attempts to describe the story of the cryptic and apocalyptic inscription that the prophet Daniel is invited to 'interpret'. *Belshazzar's Feast* is a reverie on the images of reverie as figurations of repressed unconscious desires. What we perceive as transmitted messages - in the fire, on TV, in the patterns of wallpaper, etc - are projections of our own imaginings. What appears as the 'inexplicable' or 'illogical' on the border of consciousness also marks the limit of the subject in socialised language - or the limitations of the latter to restrain desire. In *Belshazzar's Feast* vocalisation releases the vibrations of the libidinal body, and different stories of 'other' selves become audible.

Narratives proliferate; voices multiply, merge and echo one with another. No longer the stutters and paralyses of an unspeakable 'reminiscence'; no longer, also, the confessions extricated from Freud and Breuer's hysterical patients. Women's claim to an authorial voice, resonant with their own experiences, is a move to re-articulate an imaginary space with symbolic language, a move that transgresses the Oedipal demand that they accept their 'lack' with good grace. For Hélène Cixous this body called female is not to be censored, for to do so is also to censor its breath and speech. *'Write yourself'*, she exhorts, *'Your body must make itself heard'*.⁷ For Cixous also the female voice is an embodiment, not of Oedipal lack but of a reactivation of a pre-Oedipal desire for the Mother:

*'In feminine speech, as in writing, there never stops reverberating something that, having once passed through us, having imperceptibly and deeply touched us, still has the power to affect us - song, the first music of the voice of love, which every woman keeps alive...The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation...'*⁸

If Cixous's Voice of the Mother seems like a phantasy of a pre-Oedipal utopia, it is nevertheless articulated through a post-Oedipal experience. As political agency, perhaps we have to think it as a metaphor, like Hiller's 'automatic writing': something that insists in the interstices of symbolic language, that rises like the vampiric mist to contaminate it with its repressed desires. It is perhaps in this way that women's storytelling reclaims the oral traditions of personal and collective memory as counter-narratives to the homogenising and depoliticising histories of dominant discourses.

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Chant Down Greenham soundwork by Alanna O'Kelly, 1988

Footnotes

1. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988.
2. *ibid* p 165.
3. S. Freud and J. Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, The Pelican Freud Library, 1974, p 368.
4. Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Bantam Books, New York (1897) 198 f.
5. O'Kelly's piece is part of an anthology of sound works by women artists, *Sound Moves*, 1988, compiled by Sharon Morris and Michelle Baharier, and co-ordinated by Projects UK. The work could be heard on British Telecom from 4 May to 6 September 1988.
6. *Belshazzar's Feast/The Writing on Your Wall*, version installed at the ICA, London, 1987.
7. Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, translator Betsy Wing, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p 97.
8. *ibid* p 93.