

I.

Walter Murch, the multiple Oscar-winning sound editor whose work in films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The Conversation* (1974) led to the widespread circulation of the term “sound design” within film circles, points to a paradox in the role of sound. The tremendous power of cinematic sound seems to arise precisely from its self-effacement: “by means of some mysterious perceptual alchemy, whatever virtues sound brings to the film are largely perceived and appreciated by the audience in *visual* terms—the better the sound, the better the image.”¹ Thus sound remains a handmaiden to the image, in spite of the vast advancements in sound technology in the last seven decades.

One rather convincing attempt to explain this self-effacement of sound appears in terms of the “transparency” argument. In this estimation, the self-effacement becomes a part of the general strategy of transparency, whereby classical narrative cinema erases the process of its production, presenting itself as “a slice of real life.” According to Rick Altman, two conflicting

**SOUND BITES:
FRAGMENTS ON CINEMA, SOUND,
AND SUBJECTIVITY**

by Bhaskar Sarkar

considerations came into play in the early years of sound cinema. On the one hand, there was the need for the intelligibility of dialogue, a need that persisted from theater. On the other hand, there was a concern about maintaining the acoustic fidelity of the pro-filmic situation, a concern that translated into a careful matching of sound scale to image scale. Early sound theoreticians and practitioners called for a “reality code derived from daily life, where small-scale people—distant individuals—have small-scale voices, and close-up people have close-up voices.”² In the 1930s, this daily life reality code of sound perspectives was superseded by the convention of reality provided by the theater, in which intelligibility was a primary requirement. Hollywood’s acceptance of the need for intelligibility led to a more uniform soundtrack, marked by an absence of the radical changes in volume that would be the outcome of more careful perspectival sound-image matching. As Altman puts it, “The construction of a uniform-level soundtrack, eschewing any attempt at matching sound scale to image scale, thus takes its place alongside the thirties’ numerous invisible image editing devices within the overall strategy of hiding the apparatus itself. . . .”³

This separation of the spectator from the realities of the pro-filmic situation allows for a greater level of manipulation: the spectator is available for more controlled subjective interpellation through the cues provided by the narrative. When we do have changes in sound volume and reverberation levels in classical cinema, they are motivated not by considerations of auditory perspective (match between image size and sound volume), but by the need to place the spectator in the position of a particular character. Altman points out that “point-of-audition” sound (analogous to point-of-view shot) puts us at a point within the diegesis, making us hear things as they would be heard by a character or a group of them. “We are asked not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us.”⁴ The whole point of such sound manipulations is to cement spectatorial identification with the characters; what is at stake is not a matter of perspectives, but the placement of subjects.

If the image displaces us constantly, Altman maintains, the soundtrack provides us continuity of scale—that is, more or less steady volume—as a stabilizing factor. Even as we are bombarded with fleeting images, the soundtrack offers a more continuous experience, providing “a base for visual identification.” Thus it becomes the agent that “authorizes” vision, the very condition of its possibility. “The identity of Hollywood spectators begins with their ability to be auditors.”⁵

< *Altered States*

II.

Such a classical paradigm of film “spectatorship” presumes and promotes a particular notion of subjectivity. The stress on intelligibility of dialogue has to be understood as an aspect of the overarching legacy of Enlightenment rationality: film sound—*qua* voice—gets harnessed primarily to establish rational human subjectivity. All other aspects of film sound, such as ambient noise and underscoring, become secondary.

The flipside of this model is the use of sound to evoke irrationality, an excess of emotion, or subjectivity in crisis. Incoherent dialogue, sudden changes in volume, overwhelming orchestral scores, atonal or dissonant music are common examples of formal manipulations of sound for such ends. While

these instances are found in classical Hollywood texts in general, they are more prevalent in precisely those genres in which human rationality/subjectivity is precarious. Thus there is the usual “creepy crawly” music of horror films, or the lush orchestrations of melodramas (fear or emotions overpowering reason). By the middle of the 1940s, Hollywood had become obsessed with psychological disorder, and there was a slew of films with characters exhibiting psychotic behavior.⁶ For example, therein was used to denote subjective turmoil in Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945). In Brahm’s *Hangover Square* (also released in 1945),



Bone’s climactic concerto performance in *Hangover Square*

the composer-protagonist Bone is driven to amnesiac, homicidal spells by discordant noises. In the final sequence, in which Bone finally finishes his piano concerto and performs it in a burning building, the music shifts back and forth between diegetic and nondiegetic: even as Bone’s creativity triumphs (he overcomes his psychosis and completes his concerto), the music underscores the tumultuous nature of his psyche, and the inevitably tragic end.

Cinematic representations of certain limit experiences have also drawn on similar conventions of the use of sound. Acute physical pain and death are two such experiences whose representation is tricky and often involves very conspicuous sound effects. For instance, the screams of a woman being stabbed in the famous shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) are replaced by violins played at a very high pitch. Brian De Palma makes practically an ontological claim in *Blow Out* (1981): that the screams of a woman being stabbed to death cannot be reproduced effectively by an actor. The protagonist, a sound recording artist by profession, looks for the perfect scream for a murderous shower scene (a spoof of the one in *Psycho*) in a slasher film. In the end he uses his murdered girlfriend’s dying screams—recorded unintentionally—for the scene. When experiencing extreme physical pain, there is very little difference between human beings and animals; the whole notion of a rational human subject becomes irrelevant at that point.

Two points are worth reiterating. First, the use of accentuated sound effects to denote a crisis of subjectivity is in the same spirit as employing uniform level, self-effacing sound for more stable subjects.

In both cases, sound becomes the index of ir/rationality. However—and this is the second point—film sound announces its presence (overcomes its self-effacement) when denoting subjective turmoil. We come across such overbearing use of sound even in the classical era, when there is excess of emotion, fear, psychic disintegration, or physical laceration. In such cases, the “transparency” argument does not hold.

III.

Cinema, and film theory, have inherited an epistemological tradition in which what it means to be human is imbricated with vision and visuality. For almost the last seven centuries, the idea of a human subject has been predicated crucially on the faculty of sight: somehow, the other senses of hearing, touch, smell and taste are considered more bestial, less human.⁷ It is not that human beings have superior eyesight than most other animals; it is more a matter of thinking of vision as a “nobler” faculty than the other senses. Descartes, for instance, conceded that “all the management of our lives depends on the senses,” and then went on to valorize sight as “the most comprehensive and noblest of them all” in the same sentence.⁸ In comparison, there is a greater skepticism about the sound cues that the ear—perhaps the second most important cognitive organ—absorbs: are these mere hearsay, or precious proof of reality?

The quattrocento perspective in painting, attributed to the genius of Brunelleschi the painter and Alberti the theorist, has worked in conjunction with the Cartesian conceptions of subjective rationality in philosophy to produce a paradigm—often referred to as Cartesian perspectivalism—whose influence and hold have been profound.⁹ In a parallel development, modern scientific thought has made a religion out of observability: hypotheses get refuted or accepted as theory on the basis of observed empirical evidence. The very moniker “Enlightenment” reveals the visual bias: knowledge is tied to the act of seeing, rationality and lucidity become coterminous. But how does this epistemological grafting operate? Both modern science and Albertian art share the concept of a “disembodied eye”—a fixed gaze that supposedly transcends the body and our involvement in material life. Based on the polarity between matter and consciousness, this disembodied eye is not incarnate but purely spectatorial. The human eye is an ideal prototype: it can see, but more significantly, it can see itself seeing; it can also see from the point of view of others. The rational subject of modernity is predicated on “his” ability to see, where seeing itself takes on a range of complicated connotations.¹⁰

IV.

An important aspect of the visual constitution of subjectivity is that our eyes not only can see, but are also able to see themselves seeing. The self-certainty of the Cartesian (male) thinking subject arises from seeing his own reflection in the mirror; he can then imagine himself with certitude as a seeing subject, gazing at the world.¹¹ This element of reflexivity distinguishes the eyes from the other cognitive organs, and parallels the operation of philosophy, which positions itself as meta-theory or meta-thought. As Peter Sloterdijk puts it: “The eyes are the organic prototype of philosophy.”¹² One could quote Descartes out of context to say that philosophy is “the most comprehensive and the noblest” of all disciplines. One could perhaps extend the quote to cinema, often regarded as the “most comprehensive” of all modern art forms, although such claims are becoming increasingly debatable in our era of new multimedia. And in the century-old history of cinema, it has been considered the “noblest” usually at those moments when it has turned the most self-reflexive.¹³ Of course, the reflexivity in Descartes implies an autonomous, pure consciousness, disengaged from history and materiality, which raises charges of monism; the emphasis is on *being*, not *becoming*. Cinema, when reflexive, registers the historicity of its own formation: the focus is on the process of its production.

Reflexivity can work to expose the ideological functions of seemingly disinterested cultural forms, by calling attention to the formal elements and the process of cultural production. But it can also

involve a level of disengagement, leading often to elitist solipsism (as, for instance, in much of high modernist art). Discussions of cinema (and the other arts) often proceed from assuming a polar opposition of transparency/reflexivity; one of these terms is valorized, depending on the ideological proclivities of the participants.

With film sound, the situation becomes a bit more nebulous: both transparency and reflexivity can be employed to shore up the same ideological construct of a rational human subject. Transparency of the soundtrack (undifferentiated scale, effects that do not call attention to themselves overtly) serves to establish rational, coherent subjectivity, while a disruption of transparency through more reflexive use of sound often evokes a breakdown of such subjectivity. By reflexive sound, I am referring to sound designs that are stylized and accentuated, so that audiences consciously notice them. In other words, reflexive sound calls attention to the cinematic apparatus, reminding us that film is an artifice. Thus even for classical texts that purport to hide their process of production, we can have reflexivity at the level of the soundtrack because of overtly conspicuous sound effects.¹⁴ In such cases, there is always a sense of lack (of stability, of reason), or of abnormality (madness, hysteria) in relation to an idealized construction of subjectivity.

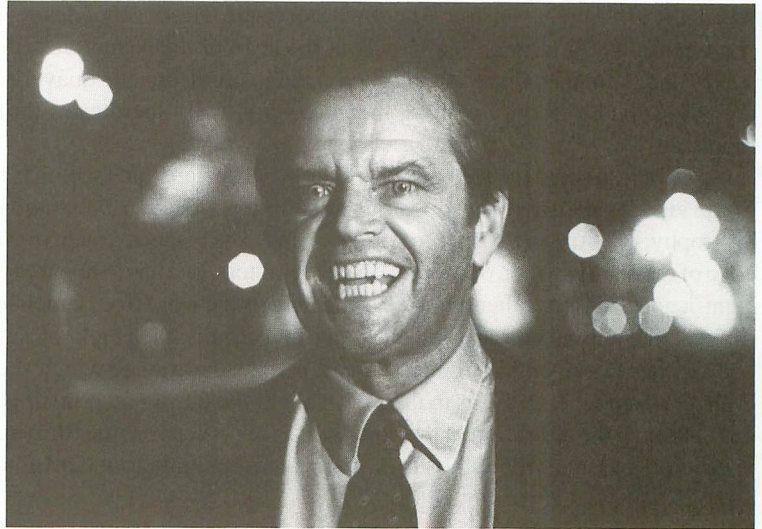
V.

Cinema is firmly entrenched in what Christian Metz called the “scopic regime” of the modern and thus upholds, in general, the concomitant subject of the Enlightenment.¹⁵ Film genres that revolve around relatively unconventional subjectivities are marked by a manifest dependence on their soundtracks: it is largely sound that takes on the function of intimating the *unheimlich*. Consider, for instance, the science fiction and horror genres where the narrative drive is propelled by both fear and fascination of the unfamiliar. In *The Fly* (1986) and *Altered States* (1980) the drama derives from the physical metamorphoses of the films’ protagonists and their attendant crises of identity. As Seth Brundle becomes the human-fly mutant, parts of his body disintegrate and he spits out liquefying enzymes: these processes are made overwhelmingly visceral for the audience through gurgling, scratching, and tearing sounds. When the main character of *Altered States* travels across different states of being, the soundtrack features an industrial cyclical noise that is tyrannical in its repetitiousness; in the final sequence, the volume is jacked up to simulate a blowout.

In the fecund sub-genre of werewolf films, sound is put to good effect in charting the physical and psychic predicaments of the human-beast. From *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) to the more recent *Wolf* (1994), physical metamorphosis is accompanied on the soundtrack by the crunching of bones, tearing of skin, and animalistic grunts and shrieks. These are tales that dramatize the imperilment of human reason by emergent savagery. *An American Werewolf in London* even refers ironically to this struggle. As David, the mutating protagonist, is about to turn himself in to the police, his girlfriend asks him to be rational and go to the doctor. He retorts: “Yeah, be rational. Sure. I’m a fucking werewolf, for chrissake!”¹⁶

Mike Nichols’s *Wolf* is not just a werewolf film, but also a social satire that takes on contemporary corporate culture. The takeover of a publishing company unleashes a struggle for survival that is remarkably feral. It is all the more ironic that the milieu is a business field whose enterprise is ostensibly cultural. In destabilizing the nature/culture, animal/human dichotomies, the film delights in drawing our attention to the importance of the other senses. As the middle-aged Will Randall turns into a werewolf and realizes his heightened sensory abilities, we feel his excitement, his new vitality. He smells his wife’s infidelity by recognizing her lover’s cologne on her. He can hear Laura (his new love interest) dry her hair over the phone; later he hears the phone ringing in Laura’s cottage, even as he stands outside. In what is perhaps the most memorable sequence in the entire film, he steps out of his office to test his sensory prowess. The building that houses the publishing company comes alive as the soundtrack fills with ambient sounds (the flushing of a cistern, the bang of a door, footsteps, the elevator). In a brilliant use of subjective

sound, we gain access to snatches of conversation and other diegetic noises through Will's ear. Of course, sound and image work together to create meaning (a point that Michel Chion, among others, stresses repeatedly¹⁷) in this scene: at the level of visuals, we get close-ups of Will's face, his arching eyes, his twitching nose, his cocked up ears.



Heightened senses: Randall becomes *Wolf*

The music in *Wolf* recalls the post-tonal experimentations of Debussy and Stravinsky. In digressing from the security of the tonic, Ennio Morricone's music underscores the corporeal tensions, inner struggles, the

mounting revulsion. The perturbing texture is produced through the use of several musical fragments that keep making brief appearances, and of motifs that consist of only a few notes. Over all this, we get a gothic lushness: after all, this is also a darkly romantic film. The score evokes colors and depth through the frequent use of sharps and flats. In the opening sequence, for instance, a descending chromatic scale accompanies the blue landscape and the pale moon: the night "shimmers" both visibly and audibly. The stage is set for the incursion and contagion of the human by the bestial.

The generic world of werewolf films can be seen as a cultural way of engaging our senses and repressed drives.¹⁸ In *An American Werewolf in London*, David takes refuge in a porno theater at one point, sensing one of his spells coming on. There he is accosted by the corpses of his victims and his dead friend. It is an underground space, outside the jurisdiction of sane, civil society that maintains a kind of rational order through repression, particularly of the body. The soundtrack of the pornographic film pervades the space, and as David turns into a werewolf in the darkness of the theater, his grunts mingle with the grunts and moans from the off-screen screen. The juxtaposition of sounds underscores the widely accepted equivalence of the carnal and the bestial.

The transformatory potential of the werewolf genre is extended in a fresh direction in *The Company of Wolves* (1985). With its deliberate evocation of the Red Riding Hood narrative, Neil Jordan's film focuses on female sexuality, which occupies a position of alterity to rational social order. Through its multilayered narrative, the film depicts a constant struggle to contain and domesticate female sexuality, to harness it for the purposes of reproduction and child-rearing. The grandmother and the mother keep cautioning the young girl that she should never "stray from the path." Straying entails entering the netherworld of unbridled sexual pleasures, succumbing to one's own bestial self, cohorting with the "wolves." The struggle ensues at the onset of puberty, when young girls are about to mature and start menstruating; it is the point when they become aware of their potential as physical, sensual beings. At this turning point, it is possible to travel along different paths, to develop divergent states of being.¹⁹

The film spins multiple yarns that loop and dovetail into each other across time and space. Together, the stories constitute a fund of folk knowledge about alternative modes of sexual being, and the associated dangers. Rosaleen, the young protagonist, envisions different scenarios as the film drifts between dreams, myths, memories, and local lore. The narrations are practices of the imagination, through

which the girl finally constructs her own story/self. The onset of desire, the strirring of drives that are only semi-conscious, are suggested largely at the level of the soundtrack: the wind in the woods, the rustle of leaves and garments, muted strings and wind instruments, the quaverings of a Japanese flute. The call of the wild—the howling of wolves, the hooting of owls—permeates the film, staging a sonic return of the repressed.

Throughout the film, various characters declare that “seeing is believing,” reiterating the primacy of the visible. Rosaleen questions this assumption when her father kills a wolf, and cuts off a forepaw as his trophy, only to see it turn into a man’s hand. She wants to touch the hand, to check if it is human: at the edge of rationality, when one’s faith in vision falters, one has to resort to the other senses. Tactility becomes significant at various other points: Rosaleen feels the wool from which her grandmother knits the red cloak (it feels like animal hair and envelops her in warmth); the neighbor’s son and the stranger want to touch and kiss her (touch embodies the allure of being led astray, to which she surrenders). The faculty of smell is also evoked repeatedly, as in the early shot of the family dog sniffing outside the room of the pubescent girl. Through the evocation of the other senses of perception, the film (and the sub-genre of werewolf films in general) undercuts the authority of vision, and repudiates standard notions of rationality and subjectivity.

VI.

The non-human is conceptualized in films as that which is different from us and yet, in some ways, resembles us. We imagine for it a human-like presence and subjectivity, and this becomes fascinating in a terrifying way. The creature that comes bursting out of Kane’s stomach in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) is a hideous monster, yet in some ways it is like a human baby. The monstrous often remains hidden well into the plot; it is then signified mainly in terms of sound. In *Jaws* (1975), we do not see the shark until about half-way into the film, yet we are made to share its point-of-view in the very first scene. John Williams’s famous theme music becomes an index for the presence of the shark, ready for another attack, so that its return on the soundtrack generates an awful amount of tension and anticipation in the audience. The chants heard repeatedly behind the bedroom wall in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) come to signify occult rituals in the



Technical and sonic disintegration: Ash falls apart in *Alien*

adjoining apartment, long before we actually see the worshippers of Satan. In *Alien*, when Brett goes to get Jonesy the kitten, a skillfull blend of sounds and music creates a suspenseful scene; even before the cat snarls, we become aware of the alien’s proximity. Even when there is no particular sonic association, the sheer invis-

ibility of the (potentially) monstrous induces horror: the unseen (hence unfamiliar) babies of *The Fly* and *Rosemary’s Baby* produce precisely such an effect.

Sci-fi narratives about transmutation of characters often register the confusion over subjectivity through sound. In *The Fly*, as Seth turns into Brundelfly, his voice changes so much that the voice-activated computer cannot recognize it anymore. His crisis of identity, resulting in a loss of access to his computer, brings about a spiralling loss of control, which parallels the hastening disintegration of his body parts. In *Alien*, as science officer Ash falls apart, revealing that he is an android, he emits high-pitched gibberish to the accompaniment of the noise of circuits disintegrating. After being plugged back together, he can speak

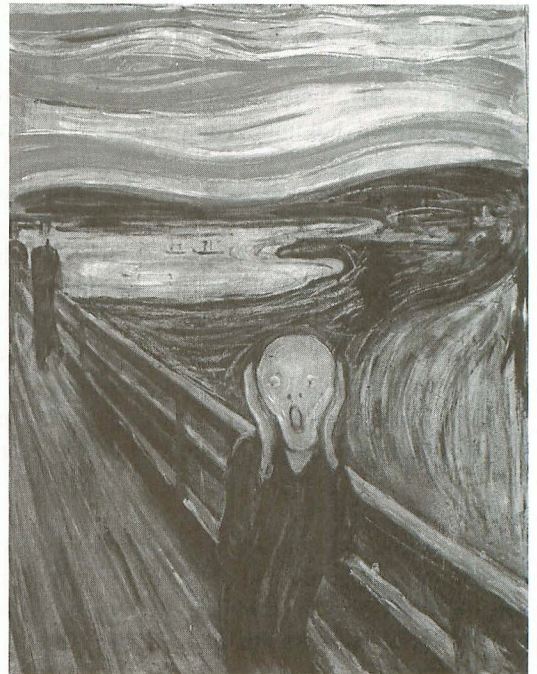
coherently again, but his voice comes out metallic, distant, robotlike. *Robocop* (1987), the reconstituted policeman, has a dream about the shooting of Murphy and wakes up confused and disturbed. His psychic agitation is conveyed largely through sound effects: the high pitched sound of robot movements, the sound of the suddenly hyperactive pulse recorder, the clanging of his metallic body parts against his seat, music, and the sound of gunshots. His memory haunts him in his sleep, partly resuscitating his past human self.

HAL, the famous computer of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), has a measured way of speaking in an unflappable voice; he seems more rational than human beings, completely bereft of feelings.²⁰ Sci-fi films present us with an interesting conundrum: androids are very much like us, usually made in our image. But they appear to belong to a higher level of rationality, unencumbered by emotions. Suddenly, the notion of reason as a marker of being human becomes tenuous. We have to scramble for a new criterion, and revert back to—of all things—emotion as an essentially human quality. In *Blade Runner* (1982), the android Rachel is worried about her ability to experience human emotions. It is not surprising that test audiences were unhinged by the multiple layers of voices in the early version of the film, released almost a decade later as the Director's Cut. To make the film's narrative more comprehensible, the studio added on a voice-over narration from Deckard; the grain of Harrison Ford's voice not only provided a sonic identificatory center to cling on to, but also humanized the character. Note, though, the long distance we have travelled from the classical model in which the characters' voices had to be intelligible to conform to a notion of human subjectivity with its emphasis on reason. Ford's voice surely stabilizes us, but also envelops us in a fuzzy assurance that Deckard is indeed human: the premium, now, is unmistakably on feelings and emotions.

VII.

Edvard Munch painted *The Scream* in 1893, just a few years before the inauguration of film as a medium of mass entertainment. A stunning expression of *fin de siècle* angst, it captures the tension and hysteria of the modern. The figure itself is an emaciated presence, overwhelmed by layers of lines—tangible sound waves of despair—that seem to incarnate its agonized cry. It is the articulation of anguish that takes precedence over the (human?) subject. This may be the most salient representation of sound effects in a visual medium. Such is the power of Munch's art that it cries out at us, breaking the silence and jeopardizing the distance that enables us to view paintings with a disembodied eye.

The Scream presages the cinematic convention, developed a few decades later, of representing modernity's discontents—especially psychic breakdowns—in terms of sound. We have already discussed this trope in 1940s' films like *Hangover Square*. In more recent years, specific kinds of sound cause psychotic afflictions, physical injury, and even death in *The Shout* (1979). In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), the character played by Richard Dreyfuss slowly “breaks down” as he keeps hearing the tune from the spaceship; his customary life is completely disrupted as a result of this obsession. The protagonist



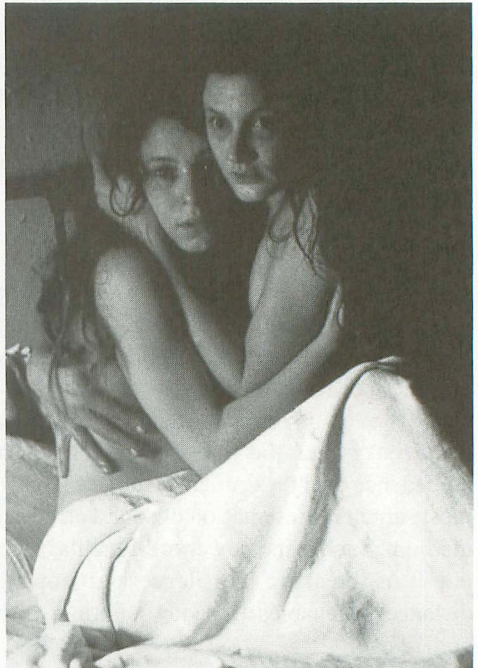
The Scream by Edvard Munch

in *Falling Down* (1993) feels trapped in his car, caught in a traffic jam on a Los Angeles freeway. The montage of sounds gradually builds up, until it becomes unbearable for him, and he stomps out of his car.

Repulsion (1965) chronicles the gradual schizophrenic collapse of a beautiful, young woman named Carol. We as audience are made to experience how it feels to go mad; much of that experientiality arises from the use of sound. Water drips from the tap, flies buzz over the partly eaten rabbit. The drip and the buzz engulf the entire apartment, and we have the sense of things spinning out of control. Sudden, loud, high-pitched, brief sound effects accentuate certain moments: when she imagines cracks on the wall; when blood drips from the head of the boyfriend she bludgeons to death; when her colleague discovers the head of the rabbit in her bag.

In an early scene, Carol is in bed, and she can hear the moans and whimpers of her sister having sex with her boyfriend in the adjoining room. Carol is both obsessed with, and terrified by sex, and all her fantasies/nightmares become rape scenarios. In the earlier fantasy sequences, we have a dissociation between image and sound, pointing to the gap between fantasy and reality; more precisely, we get objective sound (the ticking of a clock and Carol's jerky movements in bed) but subjective images (furniture propped against the door comes crashing down; her dress is ripped, hair tugged; she is turned over). In the last fantasy sequence, image and sound coincide: now we can see *and* hear Carol panting, as if, by now, the audience has also lost the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy.

The sound of water dripping from a tap has become a common cinematic motif signifying the gradual onset of dementia. The stifling, repressive atmosphere of an early-1930s household in a provincial French town is captured in *Sister, My Sister* (1995) mainly through the use of silence and ambient sounds such as the clink and clutter of crockery and silverware, the rustle of fabric, distant dogbarks, footsteps on a wooden staircase, and water dripping from a tap. It is an enclosed, feminine realm: we never see any men in the film. The only two male "characters," the photographer and the prosecutor, are heard on the soundtrack: they embody the voyeur and the voice of the law. But Madame Danzard, the mistress of the household in which the two sisters serve as maids, is an overwhelming patriarchal presence. Her watchfulness, her daughter's fidgety boredom, and the sisters' incestuous secret add up to a volatile world in which the air hangs thick with intrigue. The repression, the fecund sexual interludes, the slow neurotic disintegration and the final mayhem are made palpable through sound effects: the younger sister's hysterical screams, gasps, tearing of clothes, panting, moaning, thuds and blows, and a low drone of strings.



Fear and loving in *Sister, My Sister*

VIII.

Time and again, film sound emerges as the site of the other. Sound conveys the inscrutability of the unfamiliar, particularly of places—jungles (crickets, animal howls), deserts (wind, rattlesnakes), old oriental cities (bazaars, middle eastern music)—associated with otherness. The jungle in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) has its own sounds that test the American soldiers' sanity. The echoes in the Malabar Caves overwhelm Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* (1984). Interestingly, the original works of literature—of

which these films are adaptations—already expressed incomprehension and fear of the other in terms of sound. Indeed, if we go back all the way to the Sirens in Homer’s *Odyssey*, we come to appreciate the longevity of a tradition that considers sound terminally dangerous, and associates it with demonized others. Thus it is not surprising that the evil in *The Exorcist* (1973) originates in Iraq (and this, even before the Gulf War), and becomes associated with the snarls of two fighting canines: Satan, savage beasts, and non-Judeo-Christian middle-eastern cultures get lumped together. In a similar vein, I find a likeness between certain percussion sections in Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and the theme music from *Jaws*; the Stravinsky piece appears also to have influenced the Mexican tribal ritual dance sequence music in *Altered States*. One starts to suspect that the connection between a killer shark (savage beast) and tribal ritualists (primitives) lies in the so-called *pagan* flavor of the Stravinsky composition.²¹

One of the main characters in *The Shout* learns a deadly technique of shouting from an Australian aborigine magician; the shout he lets out kills any living being who hears it. In *Altered States*, the protagonist is interested in alternative states of consciousness. He goes to Mexico and takes part in a tribal mushroom ritual, in which all participants have the same communal trip. The music and the chanting constitute a large part of the ritual. In both instances, sound elements are central to local folk knowledge systems.

These are examples of traditions that are alternatives to the western thought system with its stress on visually oriented reason. They remind us that Enlightenment rationality is neither the best option nor the only one. It is normalized through certain constructions (such as the subject/object division and the matter/consciousness dichotomy) and by the privileging of vision. As Dr. Alezias points out in *Wolf*, Enlightenment rationality does not exhaust the possible ways of comprehending the universe. He raises the issue of possibilities that may not fit hegemonic notions of rationality, yet appear perfectly normal to other knowledge systems. Therefore he can appreciate and understand Randall’s ambivalence about being a werewolf: while it repels him, he is also exhilarated by the tremendous boost to his life as a sensual being. Randall’s new-found appreciation of the power of his dormant senses constitutes a repudiation of the ocularcentrism of modern western epistemology.

IX.

A common use of film sound is the expression of emotions, music becoming the access to the psyche. What is considered part of an interiority, and hence not quite visible, is brought out through underscoring. Another common use of sound is to establish the surrounding environment. Ambient sounds help us locate the characters in a material space, establishing a kind of physical contiguity with the external world. On the one hand, then, sound brings out what is internal to the subject’s body; on the other hand, sound also situates that body as part of a wider corporeality. Both these uses tend to transcend the boundaries set by the human body. Because of this transcendence, the idea of a human subject completely separate from the material flux of its surroundings becomes rather attenuated.

Descartes’s famous declaration—“this me—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is completely distinct from the body”—consolidated the idea of a radical separation between consciousness and matter.²² The corporeal world was reduced to a visual world, under the mastery of an autonomous soul (a disembodied eye, as omniscient as the divine eye of Judeo-Christian traditions). Because of the separation, the body’s surroundings became available for objectification and manipulation. Even the body of the subject could be objectified by his soul (the subject could see himself seeing, or doing other things). The particular ideas of (predominantly instrumental) rationality and knowledge, which the hegemony of vision helped to reaffirm, led to technological developments geared towards establishing mastery (over nature, over others) through manipulation.²³

In contrast, hearing (or touch, smell, taste) destabilizes the crucial dichotomies consciousness/

matter, subject/object. It reiterates the material connectedness of our bodies to the surroundings, and to each other. Light travels best in a vacuum, in the complete absence of matter. Sound, on the other hand, requires a material medium for its propagation. (Remember the wonderful logo from the marketing campaign for *Alien*: “In space, no one can hear you scream.”) It is a mechanical disturbance, that travels as pulsating waves through the vibrations of material bodies.

An epistemological consideration of sound thus brings back the corporeal and the intersubjective as central issues.²⁴ Embeddedness in, rather than the spectatorial distance from, the corporeality of everyday life nurtures very different attitudes and ethics. A recognition of our engagement and connect-edness negates the notion of a subject who surveys and manipulates (hallmarks of instrumental rationality) from a distance; instead it encourages a different kind of subjectivity characterized by a concern for the multiple and the heterogeneous, a subjectivity which is less aggressive, rigid, controlling, and more inclusive, democratic, caring. Perhaps we should note that the particular notion of vision that has been dominant is not the only form of vision that is feasible. It is possible to imagine alternative modes of vision, which are more at par with the other senses.²⁵ Such a reconfiguration of the perceptual faculties lead to alternative forms of knowledge and subjectivity.²⁶

X.

As Cartesian perspectivalism, with its implications of an Olympian rational subject with disembodied eyes, has come under increasing criticism, film and other cultural practices—particularly video art—have sought to break away from that tradition. Experiences of marginalization and displacement (due to class, gender, race, colonization, sexuality, nationality/citizenry, age, physical capabilities . . .) produce subjectivities that require different strategies of representation; otherwise they are reified forever as unnatural, deviant, abnormal, inferior. Recent technological developments in audiovisual media are remarkably conducive to the representation of alternative subjectivities, even when they are struggling to come into being.

It is not surprising that sound, in its early years, followed the established models that privileged lucidity and intelligibility. But in recent decades, sound has come into its own, and now we see audiovisual forms that increasingly pattern themselves on sonic archetypes. Sampling, layering, distortions, feedback, reverbs are essential techniques and strategies in the sound recording industry. Nowadays, there are new paradigms of image construction that borrow these techniques. This is particularly true of the medium of video, which “looks back to the telegraph and the telephone—to the transmission of coded, electric signals across a wire. . . Its technology is essentially the technology of sound transmission, recording, and reproduction.”²⁷

Video is particularly suited to the representation of complex subjectivities that do not fit the rational model redolent with its universalist, and hence exclusionary, tendencies. Here I have in mind the feminist, queer, and postcolonial interventions of the last two decades. Lynn Hershman’s *Electronic Diary* (1988) stages the tenuous, provisional nature of her self—not only through halting, contradictory, incredible narration, but also through the elaborate manipulation of images whereby her corporeality appears in constant flux. In *Tongues Untied* (1989), Marlon Riggs tries to



Lynn Hershman's fluctuating corporeality in *Electronic Diary*

invent a voice for himself as a black, gay male, and to forge a sense of community for his compatriots. Riggs' video is an example of signifying practices through which emergent subjectivities can come into being. Several films by Atom Egoyan that negotiate transnational exilic identities—*Next of Kin* (1987) and *Calendar* (1983)—incorporate video segments. These are instances in which new audiovisual technologies have made possible the repudiation of the Enlightenment paradigms of rationality, knowledge and selfhood, and the articulation of fresh alternatives.

The digital revolution has brought the audio and visual components even closer. Sound no longer plays the second fiddle in audiovisual media; indeed, it has come to influence the visual aesthetic of many recent films. For instance, *The Nasty Girl* (1990), with its project of uncovering a collective counter-memory, *Jurassic Park* (1993), with its imaging of prehistoric entities, and *The Pillow Book* (1996), with its complex interweaving of memory, tradition, calligraphy, and sexuality, employ techniques (projected backdrops, digital imaging, multilayered frames that collapse into one another, ripple effects) that echo sound aesthetics and are usually associated with video art. An important effect of the digital revolution is the rapid disappearance of the ontological distinctions between cinema and video.

The continuing developments in communications technology will obviate many of the binaries that are at the core of the Enlightenment model of Man.²⁸ The Internet is already destabilizing the producer/consumer and subject/object polarities; as the powerful signifier of the World Wide Web forges novel senses of community and belonging, older notions of subjectivity will keep unravelling.²⁹ At this crucial juncture, one remembers the great democratic, liberatory potentials that Bertolt Brecht had imagined for radio way back in 1932.³⁰ Whether his wistful, utopian dreams will finally be realized in this new era remains to be seen.

For their comments and suggestions, I would like to thank Cesare Casarino, Bishnupriya Ghosh, Mary Kearney, Shannon Mader, Jim Moran, Bill Whittington, and Chia-chi Wu. Thanks also to Marsha Kinder for her insistence that I listen to films.

¹ Walter Murch, "Foreward," in Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) viii.

² Rick Altman, "Sound Space," in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992) 59.

³ *Ibid.* 61.

⁴ *Ibid.* 60.

⁵ *Ibid.* 62.

⁶ Bordwell quotes the critic Robert Nelson from his 1946 article entitled "Film music: color or line?" on this development in the use of film sound. Nelson writes that weird, chromatic effects became frequent because of "the vogue for films dealing with amnesia, shock, suspense, neurosis, and kindred psychological and psychiatric themes. The music counterpart of the troubled mental states depicted in these films is a musical style which emphasizes vagueness and strangeness, specially in the realms of harmony and orchestration." David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 34.

⁷ Why is it that we can look at strangers, but not lick or sniff at them? Jocelyn Moorehouse brings the point home brilliantly in her 1992 film *Proof*, in which a mother admonishes her blind son, saying that fingers are not like eyes, and he can't go groping all over.

⁸ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, trans. Paul J. Olscamp (Indianapolis: 1965) 65.

⁹ Martin Jay identifies Cartesian perspectivalism as "the reigning visual model of modernity"; however, he also stresses the need to recognize the presence of other visual paradigms within the modern scopic regime, such as that identified with the baroque. Thus we cannot reduce modernity's obsession with vision and visuality to Cartesian perspectivalism.

although the latter is the hegemonic model. Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," *Vision and Visuality*, Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture Number 2, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988) 3-23.

¹⁰ Jay has chronicled the strong opposition to this dominance of the visual in a wide range of modern thinkers (Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty). Indeed, in recent decades, such oppositional tendencies have threatened to take up center stage in western philosophical discourses (Levinas, Lacan, Derrida). See Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). But Jay has to recognize the persistence of a general ocularcentrism, even if only as a negative pole: "Whether we focus on 'the mirror of nature' metaphor in philosophy with Richard Rorty or emphasize the prevalence of surveillance with Michel Foucault or bemoan the society of the spectacle with Guy Debord, we confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era" ("Scopic Regimes" 3).

¹¹ Jacques Lacan's work has been the most notable and influential in putting to question such identitarian reflexivity as the basis of stable subjecthood. See, for example, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977) 1-7.

¹² Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 145. Sloterdijk continues, "A good part of philosophical thinking is actually only eye reflex, eye dialectic, seeing-onself-see."

¹³ Such an estimation is implicit in many excellent critical works of the 1970s and 1980s. See, for instance, Robert Kolker, *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). An extended discussion of reflexivity in film and literature is provided by Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985). Stam points out that reflexivity does not come with some preordained political valence or high-mindedness: advertisements can be reflexive and reactionary.

¹⁴ Of course, generic sound effects become clichéd over time: consider, for instance, the typical sound design in horror films. But greater familiarity with generic soundtracks does not necessarily render them transparent; even if we know what to expect, we still jump out of our seats at pivotal moments of bombastic sound effects.

¹⁵ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 61.

¹⁶ Interestingly, David's attacks are similar to Bone's in *Hangover Square* in one important respect: both characters are amnesiac about their murderous spells.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Chion (1994).

¹⁸ For a Freudian discussion of the case of the Wolfman, see Whitney Davis, *Drawing the Dream of the Wolves: Homosexuality, Interpretation, and Freud's "Wolf Man"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹⁹ In the Freudian paradigm, the clitoral sexual activity (the "red riding hood" metaphor) is the primary activity during the adolescent years; the young woman must then mature into the vaginal phase through repression and socialization into heterosexuality. Such a Freudian interpretation of the well-known tale provides the basis of the film, a project on which Jordan collaborated with writer Angela Carter, known for her postmodern readings of popular narratives.

²⁰ Data, the android in the popular television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, has a similar quality. Much of the drama in this show derives from Data's lack of feelings and the possibility that he may "learn" to become emotional.

²¹ The ballet is ostensibly about the fertility rituals of a primitive tribe in pagan Russia.

²² Descartes, *Discourse on Method* 28.

²³ Heidegger, among others, has been critical of this predatory tendency that operates in modernity in the name of reason. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977).

²⁴ Edward Branigan provides us with a useful discussion of the ways in which a spectator processes sound and image cues in film. But Branigan's take on the "epistemological" issue of film sound is strictly cognitive; he does not have much to say about the discursive aspects of film sound—the way sound produces particular subjectivities, or the underlying power relations. Edward Branigan, "Sound and Epistemology in Film," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47.4 (Fall 1989) 311-24.

²⁵ Heidegger, for instance, talks about an alternative mode of vision in *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962) 176. Jay describes this alternative concept as follows: "The more benign

version of sight, which refuses to stare aggressively at its object, is dependent on a primordial opening to Being which is *prior to the very differentiation of the senses*. After the differentiation, it is maintained by what in *Being and Time* Heidegger calls 'Umsicht' prereflective, circumspect vision. Here the viewer is situated *within a visual field, not outside it*; his horizon is limited by what he can see around him. Moreover, his relation to the context in which he is embedded is *nurturing, not controlling . . .*" (*Downcast Eyes* 275, my emphases).

²⁶ The ethicopolitical writings of Levinas are involved in precisely such a project of resuscitating a latent mode of vision. See, for instance, "God and Philosophy," *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 129-148. It is significant that Levinas' notion of "witnessing" involves, essentially, *listening* to the voice of the other.

²⁷ John Belton, "Looking Through Video: The Psychology of Video and Film," *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, eds. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 62-63. Belton continues, "It's an extension of the telegraph, the phonograph, Marconi's wireless telegraph, and the radio, not of photography or the illusion of movement." See also Roy Armes, *On Video* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

²⁸ As I write this concluding paragraph, aliens from the star system Vega are starting to make *Contact* in theaters across America. Astronomer Ellie Arroway has picked up some remarkably strong intergalactic radio signals on her headset connected to huge satellite dishes. Sound carries the intimations of intelligent life somewhere out there; but the signals have to be visualized on screens for them to be intelligible to people. Interestingly it is Ellie's blind colleague, with his gift for listening, who discerns the complex harmonic patterns that contain the data for building the transportation system. Robert Zemeckis's new film refuses to give in to either apocalyptic visions or blind religiosity, even as it questions the ability of empirical science to explain phenomena.

In its own populist way, *Contact* raises many of the issues that are the concerns of this paper. Ellie is an orphan; she has problems in getting close to anyone. Her loneliness has turned her to a search for intergalactic community. When she "lands" on the other shore, her contact turns out to be a simulation of her dead father. Her surroundings shimmer and ripple as she stretches out her arms and tries to touch anything. When she comes back with only recordings of static, authorities do not accept her account of her experience: they need hard empirical evidence. Scientific equipment meant for our realities fall short in realms of unfamiliar dimensions, and the film seems to suggest the need for fresh leaps of the human imagination to bridge the chasms of otherness.

²⁹ In recent years, many theorists have turned to rethinking the notion of community. See, for instance, Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

³⁰ Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," *Video Culture*, ed. John Hanhardt (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986).

BHASKAR SARKAR is a doctoral candidate in Critical Studies at the School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California. He is writing his dissertation on representations of the partition of India in films and on television. His essays have been published, or are forthcoming, in *Visual Anthropology Review*, *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Film Criticism*, *The Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, and several anthologies.