THE SINGING SUBJECT:
WOMEN AND VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

July 2005
Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Janeen Kirkham
July 2005
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisors, Dr Felicity Plunkett and Dr Jane O’Sullivan, for their guidance and encouragement during my time as a student at the University of New England. I am thankful for Dr Plunkett’s patience with awkward early drafts of my thesis chapters, and for giving me the time and assistance to develop my ideas. I am also grateful to Dr O’Sullivan for her interest and advice, particularly during the final stages of my thesis, despite her own heavy workload.

I would like to acknowledge the University of New England for awarding me an APA grant, affording me opportunities that I otherwise would not have had. I would also like to thank Jennifer Beale for her copy editing services.

My fellow UNE PhD colleagues, who are now also friends, have been an extremely important source of inspiration and information, especially once I became an external student. Thank you to Martin Mantle, for his thoughtful and amusing emails; Heather Attrill, for her motivating telephone calls, and invitations to stay at the Hobbit House; and to my dear friend Phoenix de Carteret, for her ability to say the right thing at the right time. Thanks also to ANU friends and colleagues for good conversation and restorative Friday nights in the beer garden.

To my family, I express my appreciation for their continuing encouragement and wonderfully indestructible love.

Most of all, I wish to thank my partner David Marshall, for his optimism, practical advice, unfailing support and good cooking. Thank you for your belief in me. I could not have done it without you.
Abstract

Questions surrounding ‘voice’ and ‘being heard’ are defining ones for feminist, psychoanalytic and film theories pertaining to women’s subjectivity. However, visual aspects of film have dominated discussions concerning representations of women. Although theorising about film music and sound has increased in recent years, relatively little work has considered the functions and effects of diegetic singing.

In ways similar to Laura Mulvey’s pivotal work on film representations of women as objects of the male gaze, Kaja Silverman’s theorising on the aural dimensions of female representation suggests women always remain ‘contained’ by the classic film narrative. Yet in contemporary cinema there are singing sequences that resist perceptions of women characters’ containment, suggesting that singing, as a potentially empowering form of communication, bears closer scrutiny.

Through close analysis of eleven contemporary films, in which diegetic singing or its representation plays a pivotal role, this thesis fuses film music and sound theories, feminist psychoanalytic film theories and textual analysis, to consider in detail particular girl and women characters as singing subjects, the aural dimensions of the female homosocial, and how singing and songs work as an expression of a character’s subjectivity. An investigation of performance and gender performativity, and singer ‘types,’ provides a structuring framework from which to consider whether singing is a transgressive and transformative action for female characters.

A diverse range of singing sequences in which a solitary woman sings, or a woman sings for another in intimate proximity, or women sing together in collective situations, cultivates acoustic spaces in film that expand the possibilities of women’s expression, analogous to the aims of écriture féminine. These are spaces that have the potential power to disturb the phallocentric dominance of language suggested by psychoanalytic and feminist film theories.

Understanding the singing subject opens up new ways of considering women’s representation, and how the singing voice allows acoustic authority for women to transgress both cinematic containment and patriarchal hegemony. Singing can be both disruptive and empowering. In the films that I discuss, it is women’s collective singing that results in the most positive consequences for female expression.
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