

**THE SINGING SUBJECT:
WOMEN AND VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY
CINEMA**

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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

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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 phallogentric 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.

Table of Contents

OVERTURE: THE SINGING SUBJECT	1
FEMALE VOICES IN FILM	3
THE SPEAKING SUBJECT	15
SINGING IN FILM	21
THE SINGING SUBJECT AND GENDER	24
ACOUSTIC AUTHORITY OF THE FEMALE HOMOSOCIAL	28
OUTLINE	29
1. SINGING, SONGS AND THE FEMALE HOMOSOCIAL	35
AGAINST CONTAINMENT	37
MAKING A SPECTACLE	44
SPACES AND SINGING: MUSICAL INFLUENCES	49
SONGS	57
SINGING SPACES OF THE FEMALE HOMOSOCIAL	61
2. GENDER PRACTICE(S) AND THE BODY	77
PERFORMATIVITY	79
THE SINGING BODY	85
MASQUERADE, EXCESS AND DRAG	93
SINGING AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY	99
3. SINGING GIRLS, SINGING SIRENS	109
SINGING AND A GIRL'S POWER	111
SINGING AND SEXUALITY	131
THE DANGEROUS/ENDANGERED SINGING SUBJECT	135
LANGUAGE AND PERFORMANCE	143
THE BLUE LADY ONSTAGE	146
4. SINGING AND THE MATERNAL VOICE	159
BRILLIANT CAREERS: SINGING MOTHERS & THE DIEGETIC WORLD	160
DESIRE AND THE MATERNAL SINGING SUBJECT	169
THE MOTHER'S VOICE: 'SONOROUS ENVELOPE' OR 'UMBILICAL WEB'?	173
THE MOTHER'S SONG AND THE MEDIATED MATERNAL VOICE	183
'THIS IS SO OPERATIC'	187
ACOUSTIC MATERNAL ABANDON	191
AN EXTRADIEGETIC SONOROUS ENVELOPE	195
INTERIORS: PRIVATE SINGING SPACES	197
5. SYNCHRONICITY	205
VOICES AND MOVING LIPS	207
<i>MULHOLLAND DRIVE</i> AND THE LOSS OF THE BODY	208
SINGING TOGETHER	219
<i>MURIEL'S WEDDING</i> AND MUSIC VIDEO	226
CODA	239

APPENDICES	247
APPENDIX A – LYRICS TO ‘THE MAN THAT GOT AWAY’	247
APPENDIX B – LYRICS TO ‘SINGLE GIRL’	248
APPENDIX C – LYRICS TO ‘YOU & ME’	249
APPENDIX D – LYRICS TO ‘MOI JE M’ENNUIE’	250
APPENDIX E – LYRICS TO ‘THE PRETTY THINGS ARE GOING TO HELL’	251
APPENDIX F – LYRICS TO ‘J’AI MIS MON COEUR A POURRIR’	252
APPENDIX G – LYRICS TO ‘BLUE VELVET’	253
APPENDIX H – LYRICS FOR ‘IN DREAMS’	254
APPENDIX I – LYRICS TO ‘LOVE LETTERS’	255
APPENDIX J – LYRICS TO ‘SEASONS OF CHANGE’	256
APPENDIX K – TRANSLATION OF LIBRETTO FOR ‘UN BEL DI, VEDREMO’	257
APPENDIX L – NONA’S DIALOGUE FOR ‘UN BEL DI, VEDREMO’	258
APPENDIX M – TRANSLATION OF LIBRETTO FOR ‘CHE TUA MADRE DOVRA’	259
APPENDIX N – TRANSLATION OF LIBRETTO TO ‘CON ONOR MUORE’	260
APPENDIX O – LYRICS TO ‘MY ISLAND HOME’	261
APPENDIX P – LYRICS TO ‘DARK EYES’	262
APPENDIX Q – LYRICS TO ‘CRYING’	263
APPENDIX R – LYRICS TO ‘DANCING QUEEN’	264
APPENDIX S – LYRICS TO ‘WATERLOO’	265
APPENDIX T – LYRICS TO ‘FERNANDO’	266
BIBLIOGRAPHY	267
FILMOGRAPHY	288