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Choric Sounds: The Intervention of Women's
Soundscapes in the City and Cinema

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This paper proposes that sonic mapping of space, sensibility and power structures through cinematic representation of urban places has subsequently taken on imaginations that have become part of socio-cultural and socio-political experience. Sound and image have combined, establishing a spectral environment that enables the viewer to engage both inner and outer worlds in embodied perception. Mary Beard notes, 'when written evidence for Western culture starts, women's voices are not being heard in the public sphere. ... an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species.'¹ Beard is of course not speaking of cinema, rather she is referring to the moment in Homer's *Odyssey*, specifically Telemachus' admonition of Penelope's presence in conversation, something he sees as an intrusion and not part of 'men's business' (*muthos*). Penelope's voice is silenced in favor of her son's male voice, and Beard uses this example to show how little has changed. Women's voices continue to be hushed or framed as disruptive in political and public spaces, on and off-screen. The quieting or silencing of voices is the denial of possible sonic worlds, the foreclosure of being listened to. As Salomé Voegelin argues, the act of listening is a generated action; as we listen, we participate and construct the very spaces, the human geography we are a part of.² If public listening to women's voices is impeded due to the hushing of their sounds, what alternative exists?

Cinema remains a site where the ambiguous interrelationship of space, publicness and politics helps resist censorship by creating alternative discursive practic-

1 M. Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto*. (London, Profile Books, 2017), 4.

2 S. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, (Revised Edition. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 24.

es. Women's sounds, inclusive of voice, song, tone, dialogue and gesture, therefore, are argued here to exist as inherently representative of difference, embodying potential for resistance and transformation. Michel Chion notes that cinema possesses a particular specificity, that, 'it has just *one place for images*,³ whereas sound has no such limit, no container. When sound and image form a unity, a relational structure takes over and sound becomes classified through its relation to image, diegetic or not. The creation of a sonic possible world therefore is inherently ambiguous. As Voegelin states, it is 'generated, by the listener and reveal[s] the contingent possibilities, sonic "extensions," of actuality in which they take part... through negotiation between your invisible world and mine.'⁴ Unlike sound experience that occurs in lived phenomenal space, audiovisual space is determined through its containment; how it is both bounded by the screen's frame (the literal edges or the imagined edge of the fourth wall) and processed (thought) by the viewer. We can listen to a film participating with its complex soundscapes (visualized, acousmatic or non-diegetic) anonymously, which is quite different to how we hear in real embodied life. In the cinema, our relation to sound is directed through localization – where we seek to link sound to its source.

This paper considers how the act of such linking might be conceived through three layers within an acoustic environment, and how they might interplay to enact resistance and difference. 1) The spaces where such sounds are formed and articulated; 2) how a textual system, such as cinema, comes to represent and create such spaces; and 3) how the exchange between these two forms 'choric soundscapes.' While my focus rests on the acoustic environment relevant to cinematic space, I also consider how the imagination of urban spaces contains broader examples of what I am referring to as 'choric sound.' As an indicative case study, I draw from Agnès Varda's *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1977), a film that represents the evolving friendship of two women in France against the backdrop of significant socio-political events concerning women's freedom and their fight for reproductive rights. I begin by sketching the relation between urban, public space and the significance of women's voice as challenge to the symbolic order of sound and power.

One Sings, The Other Doesn't tells the story of Suzanne and Pauline who navigate the difficulty of becoming a woman in 1960s France. Pauline, 17, inadvertently reconnects with Suzanne, 22, who is an unwed mother to two young children and pregnant with her third. Pauline sees how distraught Suzanne is with her situation and helps her get an abortion during a time when such acts were illegal. Pauline finds support through the collective knowledge of girls from her choir. Choral sing-

3 M. Chion: *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), 67

4 Voegelin, *Sonic*, 24

ing is heard as an acousmatic sound at the same moment Pauline speaks with a friend who tells her how to find an abortionist. It is the first time in the film that song is linked to a demonstration of solidarity. Women's voices at this point in the film, both in song and dialogue, begin to build a world of unity through care. The song, fleeting in its first presentation, is part of school, urban and institutional. It serves as a hint of the possible disruptive and liberating relationship that can occur between women and song that is to come.

Song, as a formless form within the film,⁵ returns when we meet the two women ten years later in October 1972 at the Bobigny trial. Outside the law courts, women's voices disrupt and dominate the focus of the frame, shouting: 'We've all had abortions. Put us on trial!' and we hear Pauline, now Apple, sing that her body is hers and the choice when to have children should be for her to decide, alone.

Women's voices in Varda's film, whether through song or protest chant, alert the viewer to the possibility of different perspectives or attitudes in relation to normative, regulated spaces. Initially, Apple's protest song draws the viewer's attention to why the legality of abortion is significant for women, that the issue is about a woman's liberty to choose her own freedoms. Instead of *seeing* the protest as an embodied action, song permits the rationale to be listened to and located within urban setting. These variations of sound, song and chant serve as the intervention of women's soundscape in the film. However, there is the risk of this becoming an issue only spoken and heard about, and therefore belonging to, an urban acoustic environment. As Apple and Suzanne recount memories of their lived experiences during their time apart, either as voiceover, song or dialogue, the film begins to outline the contingency of experience to sounds, or more specifically illuminate how sonic experience is linked to one's phenomenal being-in-the-world. On Suzanne's parents' farm, under their disapproving, muting gaze, she speaks of 'frozen time,' and we are shown a world of silence and isolation, save from the sounds of the country: rooster crows, the chopping of wood, children laughing. Suzanne's seclusion in this farmland is juxtaposed against the urban spaces of possibility and social relation that form Apple's life. We might mistake the corollary of this juxtaposition between urban and country life as being negative if it weren't for the comparison with Apple's 'road tour' of political folk songs with her feminist group. Apple tells of meeting likeminded women 'on the street' before travelling to the suburbs to sing feminist songs such as 'I am woman. I am me.'

5 I am using the term 'formless form' in two respects. 1) To associate sound as a non-visual (formless) form that mimics the character of Kristeva's notion of chora as something that preexists the semiotic. 2) to follow Salomé Voegelin's important work on the continuum of sound, where she writes of the 'invisible possibilities of actuality' in relation to 'the demands of music to be without a form and yet make formless shapes that need to be inhabited in listening to build contingent forms and contingent contexts and figure out what they mean'. Voegelin, *Sonic*, 129



Fig. 1: Apple sings her protest outside the Bobnigy trial. Screengrab. *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (Varda, 1977, ©MK2)



Fig.2: The Orchids (folk group) sings their feminist songs in the countryside. Screengrab. *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (Varda, 1977, ©MK2)

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva offers an activist reinterpretation of Plato's idea of the *khôra*, from *Timaeus*, where she articulates the concept of the semiotic *chora* as the 'space' where the child acquires language still bound to the mother's body. It is postulated as a uniquely feminine domain. What Kristeva's notion of *chora* and Voegelin's idea of a sonic possible world highlight is the significance of sound as an intervention in lived experience, one that has the capacity to test established conceptions and leads to alternative ways of thinking about others as well as the juxtaposition between urban and rural spaces.



Fig 3 and 4: 'The cruise of abortion-ees.' Screengrab.
One Sings, the Other Doesn't (Varda, 1977, ©MK2)

As Apple writes her first song, indicative of her experience with other women in having an abortion, the musicality of score that morphs into diegetic song presents the possibility of unmaking and remaking lived experience; the song itself presenting the domain of abortion being an ambiguous experience. While in Amsterdam, the 'cruise of abortion-ees' reveals a connection between the psycho-geography of women being in 'the same boat.'

Yet on the train journey home, there is no more song, just score, and the women are shown travelling together looking pensive. They have shared the same experience of abortion in Amsterdam, but while their belongingness might exist as part of a woman's world and situation, their individual perceptions are unarticulated, permitted to remain ambiguous. Both Apple and Suzanne's experiences are represented through memory, stitching together sound, experience and time. The respective lives of the two women are interwoven to illustrate the difference between women and their situations. Suzanne and Apple exist as metonymies of possible directions of women (metaphorically conveyed through their corresponding travel on trains). (Fig. 5 and 6, p. 7)

Here, the relationship between sound and space functions as a possibility of semiotic *chora*. the term 'choric sounds' suggests an intermeshing of soundscapes, location and screen spaces enabling a call to action, that is, an appeal for activism in collective thought and corporeality. Cities in and of themselves cannot prescribe a definitive semantic text, but rather the materiality of the acoustic environment (such as Apple's song) is how women's sounds (voice, song, reflective narration) are able to be listened to, their situation heard.

The notion of *chora* resists prescription; as a receptacle it 'is mobile and even contradictory, without unity, separable and divisible: pre-syllable, pre-word.'⁶ Its disruption occurs affectively in the articulation of space and rhythm. Further, Kristeva writes that 'all discourse moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that

6 J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 239, fn 13



Fig 5 and 6. Apple and Suzann travel in different directions. Screengrab. *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (Varda, 1977, ©MK2)



it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it.⁷ It is not productive (or perhaps even possible) then, to focus specifically on fixing particular choric sounds to related spaces; it is more productive to acknowledge their revolutionary signifying qualities. The formless *chora*, takes on attributes or properties of those forms that it attaches to; *chora* articulates the action involved in listening as opposed to prescribing a materiality of sound. As Voegelin states: 'Listening to sound, not as the attribute of the visible but as the action of its production descends deep into the core of the visual world, reaching beyond its certain shape into a formless form that is neither object nor subject but the action of their materiality formlessly forming as liquid stickiness that grasps me too but leaves no trace.'⁸ Voegelin is outlining the significance of ephemerality, or more specifically the importance of 'now' as an impression that occurs within listening, one that transcends the materiality of the sound itself. Women's voices may be what one hears but listening to their intentionality when spoken/sung in a public space is an altogether different and disruptive action.

7 Kristeva, *Revolution*, 26

8 Voegelin, *Sonic*, 2

Despite cinema prioritizing light, its potential as choric space depends on sound (and a number of sound forms: score; design; dialogue; effect) to be understood. How then to situate sound as an object that disrupts as well as makes possible a meaningful, or even activist, encounter? Kristeva's theorization is clear, that the movement of rhythm is gestural, playful, in that it is a pregnant space to be used for disruption. Motility then is dependent on ideas of what can become, a possibility of change or of the future, rather than a notion of motility being understood as ontological. This incongruity or ambiguity of sound and its function on/in the screen, when examined through women's voice, specifically song, narration, breath, and monologue, serves as an example of political gesture which both disrupts and is regulated by the surrounding textual fabric of the film. As Voegelin puts it, 'The acoustic environment is the world in sound and makes a sonic world. This world formlessly does what we think we see as a certain form.'⁹ Urban, public space as a possible acoustic environment is contingent and developed through the unseen relations between people, time, and things. Apple's singing gives way to Suzanne's ability to imagine her own self-determined future.

In Suzanne's voiceover, she outlines the events of the past ten years of her life as a reconstruction of situation, moving from despair to self-sufficiency. Varda's own voice as narrator stitches these two characters experiences, voices and intimacy together, highlighting the varying realities of the two women. After a financial setback, Apple is not able to continue her singing production and decides to leave Paris for Iran with Darius. There, she marries him and becomes pregnant only to realize that she has 'fallen into a trap' of the very domestic situation she used to warn against in her singing. Unhappy in Iran, Apple returns to France to have her baby. No singing takes place until near the end of the film, after Apple and Darius have parted ways and constructed a family of their own imagining (he has his son in Iran, and Apple is pregnant with their second baby, a daughter). Varda chooses to replace the urban location of Apple's feminist folk group with the countryside, and in so doing invites the possibility of a different association with lived experience. Apple has returned to the same folk group, taking up the same "battle songs" but they are not sung to the same audiences in the same places. What this variance articulates is the multiplicity of self, how different things can be if we let them. Therefore, despite the implied singularity in the Orchids' song 'I am woman. I am me,' there is the invisible temporality of how our perception of our sense of self can continually shift, always becoming something else.

9 Voegelin, *Sonic*, 9

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