



## Voices without bodies

### Description

Question to Siri:

What's *The Wizard of Oz* about?

Siri: It's about some Dorothy, her intelligent assistants, and her little dog too. Some are not so intelligent, I guess.

All the world's a stage, wrote Shakespeare. Baroque architects arranged the urban environment as if it were a stage set. Now city inhabitants are more likely to experience the world as if through a cinematic frame. The miniature screens we carry around, along with animated billboards, urban screens, and projections, reinforce the sense that the world is mediated and assessed as if it were a film at least some of the time. Alongside the visuals, we carry soundtracks and voices.

The sound theorist **Michel Chion** bases his studies of voice in cinema on the concept of the *acousmêtre*: the acousmatic being, a voice whose source is invisible and unknown. In film this is the voice of the narrator, someone off-stage, or behind the curtain. For Chion, the *acousmêtre* conveys ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence in other words, authority.

The *acousmêtre* is all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Voice-over narration in documentaries and news broadcasts appears to inherit its authority from this tendency. As a hapless *acousmêtre*, the fated Wizard of Oz concealed his modest human frame behind a screen, using voice alone to project authority he otherwise lacked.

Chion also refers to the already **visualised acousmêtre**: a voice whose face we know, but do not currently see, and which often projects reassurance. The voice of a friend on the telephone has this function and, in 2013, so did the soothing, indefatigable quips of Siri.

The **commentator acousmêtre** is another category: a disembodied voice with no personal stake in the action. Comparable to the narrator of a news item or nature programme, it is also evident in public address announcements, whether live or recorded. This is close to what Chion calls the *radio acousmêtre*: a voice that does not have the option of showing its face.

The **complete acousm tre** is the voice to which we cannot yet attach a face, but which remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment. This is a powerful cinematic device. Directors play with the possibility of revelation, and with the suspense this creates what Chion calls the epiphany of the acousm tre. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is exemplary here: the acousm tre brings disequilibrium and tension.

There is an amusing scene in *The Big Bang Theory* in which Raj appears to meet Siri an impossibility, of course. The tension lies in whether Raj can speak back.

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## The grafted voice

To interact with Siri requires an up-to-date phone, a current operating system, and a live network connection. The voice is grafted on, and sometimes dropped out. We are accustomed to this with voices, which are frequently detached from the bodies they serve.

Cinema has long exploited this separation. Film rarely uses voices recorded at the same moment as images. Voices are added later, adjusted, spatialised, and synchronised in the sound studio. This post-synchronisation reveals the disjunction between voices and bodies, sounds and images. In some cases the connection is deliberately loosened, as in Fellini's use of voices that hang on the bodies of actors in only the loosest and freest sense, in space as well as in time.

Cinema depends on false attributions of vocal agency: dubbing, Foley editing, simulated vocal apparatus. Siri's adjustable gender and accent, and its occasional muteness, already hinted at this cinematic treatment of the voice.

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## Siri-alism

Algorithms simulate voices. Digital devices read documents aloud, announce nearby events, report on software processes, and provide navigational instructions. The detached voice is also menacing. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick presents the breakdown of the computer **HAL 9000** as an acousmatic event. HAL is an all-seeing, insistent voice. His dismantling is accompanied by a regression into childish speech a nursery rhyme revealing his digital substrate. For Chion, this is a strange death, leaving no trace, no body, and no echo.

The vehicle for this speculation remains the acousm tre a concept that recognises the voice as already disembodied, floating, cut, looped, muted, and grafted.

Question to Siri:

What's *2001: A Space Odyssey* about?

Siri: It's about an assistant named HAL who tries to make contact with a higher intelligence. These two guys get in the way and mess it all up.

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## Notes

- This post was originally published at the conclusion of the symposium *What is sound design?* at the University of Edinburgh.
  - It adapts material from a chapter written with Martin Parker on voice and space.
  - Page references are to Chion's *The Voice in Cinema*.
  - Slavoj Žižek observes that voice does not simply accompany the image, but points toward a gap in the visible toward what eludes the gaze. The voice marks absence.
  - Also see related posts on Speech impediment, Haunted media, and Displaced sound.
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## References

- Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*.
- Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.
- Richard Coyne and Martin Parker, *Sounding Off: The Place of Voice in Ubiquitous Digital Media*.
- Richard Coyne and Martin Parker, *Voices Out of Place: Voice and Non-Place in Mobile Communication*.
- Richard Coyne and Martin Parker, *Voice and Space: The Agency of the Acousmêtre in Spatial Design*.
- Slavoj Žižek, *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*.

## Category

1. Film and media

## Tags

1. cinema
2. sound
3. voice

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