Retuning the Screen

*Sound Methods and
the Aural Dimension
of Film and Media History*

FilmForum/2020

XXVII Convegno Internazionale
di Studi sul Cinema
XVII International
Film and Media Studies Conference

Dipartimento di Studi umanistici e
del patrimonio culturale
Università degli Studi di Udine
DAMS/IMACS

Mimesis

Retuning the Screen

Retuning the Screen

*Sound Methods
and the Aural Dimension of
Film and Media History*

A cura di /edited by
Maria Ida Bernabei
Simone Dotto
Paolo Villa

FilmForum/2020

XXVII Convegno
Internazionale
di Studi sul Cinema
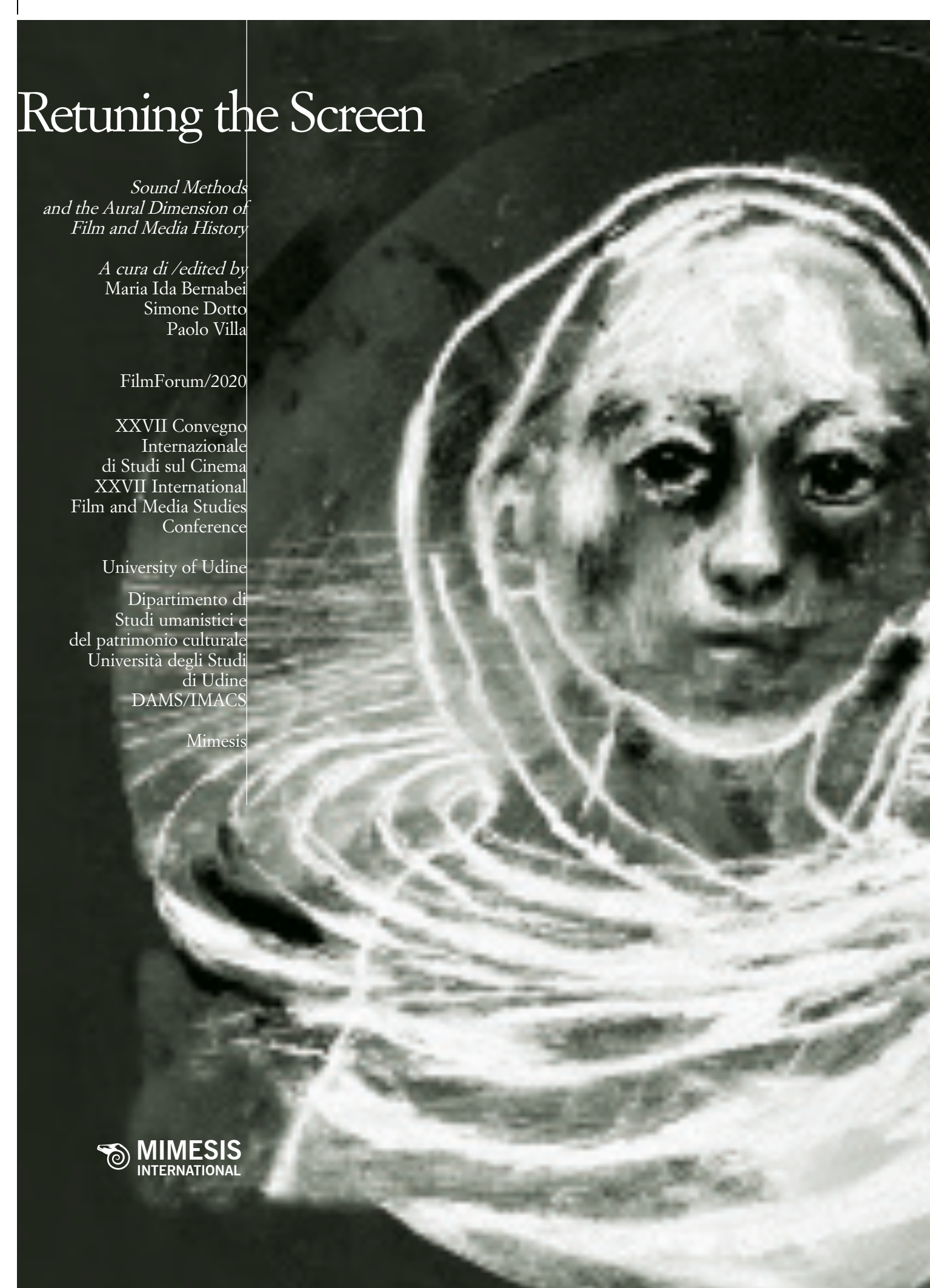XXVII International
Film and Media Studies
Conference

University of Udine

Dipartimento di
Studi umanistici e
del patrimonio culturale
Università degli Studi
di Udine
DAMS/IMACS

Mimesis

MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL

Performing
Voices and Bodies

Claire M. Holdsworth, Indipendent researcher/University of the Arts, London

Ventriloquial Bodies. Reframing Ephemerality in Artists' Film and Video[1]

This contribution describes a research in-development, exploring the overlaps between experimental sound-making and independent film and video culture in London, between the late-1960s and late-1980s, with a particular focus on feminist artworks and networks. Discussion questions approaches to physical 'materiality' in the broadest sense, using the voice as a means to engage with and complicate discourses that emphasize visibility or invisibility in discussions of film and video, archives and performance to consider the materiality of the nonvisible – that is, the sounded voice and sound more broadly.

Taking-up Rebecca Schneider's questioning of ephemerality and the archive in "Performance Remains,"[2] discussion unpacks the ventriloquial dynamics of the voice as discussed by Steven Connor,[3] to consider the dual situation through which it both detaches from and reconnects to/with other subjects and objects. Focusing upon the intersections between early artistic performance, film and video practices, this research centres upon the act of speaking as opposed to the medium-specific materiality of technologies as often discussed in experimental film and media studies more broadly. This paper tentatively posits an alternative positioning of the language associated with film/video/performance archives, re-situating ephemerality as a state of constant transformation as opposed to dematerialised disappearance.

Works of experimental film and video, made both recently and in the past, often critique society and mass-media using archival material or found-footage in subversive ways. As Catherine Russell writes, such "archival film practices articulate an historiography of radical memory. The 'other reality' of these films is the ethnographic sphere of the image bank in which the body is the indexical sign of historical memory in a culture of amnesia."[4] In discourses on the archive and history, this shall we say selective amnesia, often fails to examine different bodies, particularly human ones.

Discussion today will reference the work of the Feminist Improvising Group – or FIG as they are often referred to – whose performances were used in the soundtrack a number of seminal feminist films in the late 1970s, which in turn, subverted history, opening spaces for the articulation of an historiography of radical memory, to use Russel's phrasing. Traversing the dual contexts of voice perception in the here-and-now, along with recorded sounds and images from the past – this paper considers practices at the intersection between media and disciplines, encompassing film, video, television; music, sound art and live performance – sometimes all-at-once.

Time-based artworks such as film and video – especially those that use multiple formats, and which become through looping, playback and action – have a sense of constant transformation that mirrors the critique,

the questioning, fundamental to the Left-influenced artistic contexts of film and video art, which are closely bound to activism and collective-action since the late-1960s.[5] Questions of language and the critique of the structural hegemonies of society, are likewise fundamental to these egalitarian dialogues – on race, class and gender, via the queer and feminist questioning of social superstructures in art and wider culture in the 1970s and 1980s.[6] However, even as art installations and interventions looped, cut, and subverted discourses on art the self and society, and the forms and formats of mass media, it can still be said that many of these works perpetuate an emphasis on the body and the gaze (albeit differently to the media they critiqued).

Immaterial bodies

As a researcher concerned with sound, I have been thinking about how words such as embodiment – and how ideas of the ephemeral in relation to history, and of the engendered body – are problematic and loaded. Taking-up Rebecca Schneider's questioning of canon, ephemerality and the archive in the essay "Performance Remains" (as well as her other later writings),[7] I have been thinking about the voice, the body, and recording, and how they are described in writings about history, about artworks.

The disembodied, recorded voice as a concept, has become laden with notions of past-presence that are often tied to a static, and dare I say morbid approach to the archive and performance as the physical – ghosts-tropes which are remediated over and again in and by machines, as one format records or is transported into an other.[8] Important to my thinking, is how the voice detaches from self when we speak, yet also crucially has the ability to causally reconnect to, or with, other subjects and objects.

Rather than obsessing over dematerialised disappearance, a situation often created by a fixation on the invisible voice or specific technologies in media and film studies, my research tentatively re-situates the meanings of the voice, of dis-embodiment, to explore a more liminal, transformative perspectives. In moving image, materiality all-too-often is over-bound with physical technologies as analogue and digital artefacts which bare aesthetic traces – madeleines, transporting sensory information into the future. Medium specificity is also an historical legacy of contextual Modernist discourses in art, particularly discourses on "Film as Film" or "video as video" in the UK during the 1970s.[9] Such canonised discourses can likewise carry forward misleading ideas, particularly in terms of intermedia – that is, artworks that use many media and do not exclusively align with one particular medium.[10]

Discussions sometimes attribute the canonisation of male practitioners to the fact that less works by female makers have survived.[11] Yet, the 1970s and 1980s was a key period of second wave feminism – when a great number of artists were making, working, and collaborating in film co-ops, arts labs and alternative spaces, bookshops and basements. Although not hostile, such discourses presume that artworks will survive, that they want to be archived, in many ways misunderstanding the life and nature of the original works, which were performances,[12] and closer to oral spoken or as Schneider writes and discusses, dance-based traditions of body-to-body transfer.[13]

Contrary to the connotations of physicality discussed by Schneider, and the authority of the archive (as discussed by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*),[14] for many feminist makers engaged in performance, sound-based and film and video experiments, the notion of afterlife was not necessarily implicit, nor part of the process – it was not always intended that works should remain.

Hearing voices

Although documents, writings and texts are particularly important to histories of artists' moving image, as many artists were also critics and writers, the recorded and sounded voice can complicate the relationship between

past and present, truth and fiction. When considering the authority, the veracity attached to testimony in a court of law, theorist Mladen Dolar observes that "the written word has no power if it is not preceded by, and based in, the living voice. The authority of writing depends on its being the faithful copy of the voice."[15] It is via root notion of vocal authority, that we now turn our attention from the archive to the complexities of live and recorded artworks in the archive and begin to think about the uttered and recorded voice.

The women-only Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) was founded by five musicians towards the end of 1977. The founding five included the composer Lindsay Cooper, cellist/bassist Georgie Born, trumpeter Koryne Liensol, vocalist Maggie Nicols and pianist Cathy Williams (fig. 56.)[16] Other core members included the musicians Irène Schweizer and vocalist and filmmaker/artist Sally Potter, who also made works of feminist cinema during this period, including *The Gold Diggers* in 1983 (which was also scored by Cooper) and later, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* in 1992. FIG would later collectively evolve into the European Women's Improvising Group (EWIG) in 1983 (founded by Schweizer). As well as these core members, FIG had a revolving and open, more collective approach to music making, and included white, Black, lesbian, straight, working- and middle-class women, in challenge to the established improvised music community of 1970s London (which was largely comprised of white men).

FIG opened their process to women of all levels of musicianship. Their theatrical, playful and satirical performances included costumes, props and engaged with politics through farce: questioning *status quos* not only of society, but also of the apparently egalitarian ethos of the improve and wider arts community at that time, rooted as it was in socialist politics. One of FIG's early gigs staged parodies around the role of women in society, incorporating domestic "found objects" such as vacuum cleaners, brooms, dustpans, pots – even, as one account describes, cutting onions on stage –[17] engaging in "antiphonal" exchanges: back and forth call and response passages with the audience.

With FIG, the personal becomes political (an important phrase for gender and race rights activists during this period) through their musical acts, but also through the centrality of the unrooted, improvised, paralinguistic voice in their performances. These free-improvising sounds, often led by Nicols and Potter, are at once uniquely vocal, connected to the bodies from which they came, but they are also otherworldly, destabilising, language, conventional melodic structures and rhythms, making non-sung sounds, speaking, stretching, and switching modes, as we will hear shortly. These voices are by-definition in a situation of disconnection, challenging understandings of music, instruments, performers and audience.

The voice is, to return to Dolar's phrasing, in a "most peculiar paradoxical position" as it is "the simultaneous inclusion/exclusion which retains the excluded at its core."[18] However, the recorded voice signifies a further temporal split. Recalling the terminology developed by composer Pierre Schaeffer in the 1960s, the recorded voice is "acousmatic" – a sound disconnected from source.[19] The inherent externalisation of the uttered voice is facilitated by the recording apparatus, which amplifies this paradox. Recordings of FIG, by inverting the embodied, sonic materiality of their live performances, manifest this performative gap, which is central to the voice itself.

Split conditions

The sounded voice exists in an inherently paradoxical state – disembodied and defamiliarized, yet nevertheless connected-to, baring aesthetic traces of its source, the person who spoke it. As literary theorist Steven Connor discusses in the introduction to the book *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, "I participate in my voice only by coming apart from it: indeed, it is only because I am always apart from my voice that such participation is possible."[20] Connor also observes that perhaps "the commonest experiential proof of the

voice's split condition, as at once cleaving to and taking leave from myself, is provided by the experience of hearing one's own recorded voice."[21]

The ventriloquial voice then, as Connor discusses, is cleaved to one origin body, yet also able to associate with an-other – between sound and meaning, it also exists in the space between pure vocalization and the communication or expression of ideas, a similar liminal zone, inhabited by Nicols and Potters' voices in works by FIG. Significantly, as Dolar notes – the voice is constantly haunted by "the impossibility of symbolising"[22] itself. An invisibility that gives it further resonance with under-represented political subjects and made evident in example feminist films from the late 1970s in which recordings of FIG are included – notably Jonathan Curling and Sue Clayton's *The Song of the Shirt* (1979), and Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *AMY!* (1980). The paradoxical immateriality of the voices in these works, from FIG recordings and through the other types of voices they use (for example voiceovers) amplify the exposure of feminist "hidden histories" in these films.[23]

Present sounds, past voices

AMY! explores the story of pioneering British aviator, Amy Jonson, who was the first woman to fly solo from Britain to Australia in 1930. Conflating this period with the later one in which the film was made, Mulvey and Wollen intersperse contemporary video footage of interviews with women speaking about 'heroism' with archive footage, staged re-enactments, and rostrum scans over a map, charting the legs of Amy's journey and parallel political occurrences in the countries where she stopped. It uses photomontage *and* complex concatenations of image, archive, superimposed text, spoken word and music to compound multiple voices, multiple readings in and of the ways reality can be signified.

The sequences showing Mulvey sat in a domestic study enacting scenes where Amy planned her journey (fig. 57), indicates how the sounds of FIG are included – pointing to the sonic potentials of the voice in rendering split time frames, split subjects. In the scene, the camera tracks across this interior setting, as the vocalised, juxtaposing sounds of FIG are played. The peculiar nowhere timelessness of the dissociated FIG recordings, decidedly not of the period or context, and distinctly different from conventional film soundtracks, contrast with the events of history, the clipped voiceover charting events in 1930. This sonic, temporal split is used throughout the film, for example when FIG's antiphonal harmonies then give way to the anarchic power of Poly Styrene's singing voice, in a mirrored camera sequence that plays the punk refrains of the X-Ray Spex song *Identity* (1978).[24]

Thee uttered and peculiarly dis-embodied voices of Nicols and Potter (and Poly Styrene) as well as the voice-over sounds of Amy, represented by another voice, reading letters and lists, cross boundaries and timeframes. The levels of self-inscription in FIG's work, as yet another invisible historically underrepresented feminist subject (among the many feminist subjects collaged by Mulvey and Wollen), call attention to the remediative process through which such histories are inscribed, activating a complex and to return to Russell's phrasing discussed at the start of this paper, a "radical historiography"[25] that reflects the paradoxes of the voice itself – dis-associated yet baring traces of matter, substance – embodying people not only as subjects but also calling attention to them as humans, as complex, expressive selves.

The participatory state of inclusion/exclusion of the voice, and the potential mis-appropriation of it, are precisely why the voice as a concept, is closely associated with the politics of representation, with queer and feminist disruptive practices, with the inclusions and exclusions to which we as humans are subject structurally within society. This develops recent enquiries into embodied modes of feminist materiality, which actively aim to move beyond medium-specific dialogues.[26] As a lesser explored subject, the voice moves beyond the dominant images, the gaze so often critiqued in feminist theory. It is very different to and uses text and lan-

guage, and embodiment differently to concepts of materiality in experimental film/video of this period, and it is this different that I am exploring in my current research and writing on the intersections between feminist experimental sound and expanded film/video in the 1970s and 1980s.

Conclusions

The voice and what Connor terms the "vocalic body" represent a potentially different approach to embodiment and materiality – providing a much-needed alternative to the over-embodied, silent or over-speaking women of, for example, twentieth century Hollywood cinema, as described by theorists such as Kaja Silverman in the 1984 essay *Dis-Embodying the Female Voice*.[27]

In *Performance Remains*, Schneider complicates the many over-laden archival terms which heralded zeitgeists in art and music criticism in the 2000s – notions of hauntology, trace and dust as well as ephemerality, and over-codified notions of archiving, the past and history. This language often channels the ocular, ideas of seeing and particularly, the word dis-appear, but as Schneider posits, performance, actions, or acts nevertheless remain – they just remain differently.

Writings on the recorded, as well as the live voice often emphasize disconnection, disassociation – but a fundamental aspect of the voices' split condition, as the ventriloquists dummy indicates, is that the voice has the ability to re-attach, and to re-associate itself. This is at once the source of its power and affect, as revealed by its use in radio, television, cinema, but it is also what makes us question it. The voice as an adaptively re-embodied substance, offers a way of breaking epistemologies, objectified loops that over emphasise immateriality and the 'surviving' archive.

Illustrations

56. The Feminist Improvising Group performing (c.1980). Left to right: Maggie Nicols, Annemarie Roelofs, Irene Schweizer, Georgina Born, Lindsay Cooper, and Sally Potter (Source: Lindsay Cooper digital archive, #8578. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. Image courtesy of Cornell University Library).
57. Still from Laura Mulvey (pictured) and Peter Wollen, *AMY!* (1980; copyright Mulvey and Wollen. Image courtesy of Laura Mulvey).

Notes

1   This presentation also builds on papers presented as part of the proceedings of *RE:SOUND: International Conference in the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology* (Aalborg University, Denmark, 20-23 August 2019); as part of "Module III: (Re)Synthesise, (Re)Frame, and (Re)Imagine: The Liminal Voice", *CTM Festival 2020 – Research Networking Day (RND)* (Kunstraum Kreuzberg, Berlin, 26 January 2020). A longer, more detailed version of the paper will be published as a chapter of the volume Stephan Solomon, Lucia Nagib (eds.), *The Moving Form of Film: Historicizing the Medium through Other Media*, Oxford University Press (forthcoming).
2   Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," in *Performance Research*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2001, pp. 100-108.
3   Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 43.
4   Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Duke University Press, London 1999, p. XV.

5   For an account see Margaret Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, British Film Institute, London 1999.

6   See Lucy Reynolds (ed.), *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image Contexts and Practices*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2019.

7   See also Rebecca Schneider, *Solo Solo Solo*, in Gavin Butt (ed.) *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Blackwell, Oxford 2005, pp. 23-47.

8   These ideas of the spectral voice and past presence are discussed by theorists such as Mark Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Zero Books, London 2014. They are also connected to discourses by Jacques Derrida. See Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," in *Diacritics*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1 July 1995, pp. 9-63; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* [1993], Routledge, New York 1994.

9   For example, in the UK via the exhibition *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film, 1910-1975*, Hayward Gallery, South Bank, London SE1, 3 May-17 June 1979. The catalogue was published by the Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1979. See also texts such as Peter Gidal (ed.), *Structural Film Anthology*, British Film Institute, London 1976.

10   For example, in early texts such as Dick Higgins, (1965/1981) "Intermedia," *LEONARDO*, vol. 34, no.1, 2001, pp. 49-55. This has also been taken up recently in studies such as Kim Knowles and Marion Schmid (eds.), *Cinematic Intermediality: Theory and Practice,* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021.

11   Dialogues in this vein are connected with projects and publications such as Sean Cubitt and Stephen Partridge (eds.), *REWIND: Artists' Video in the 1970s and 1980s*, John Libbey, London 2012.

12   As discussed in texts by artists such as Annabel Nicolson, "Artist as Filmmaker," *Art and Artists*, December 1972, p. 20.

13   See also Rebecca Schneider, "Limb to Limb: Archives, Interinanimacy, and 'Instructions for Becoming'," keynote Lecture, *Archives and Embodiment Conference*, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, 2019. http://events.arts.ac.uk/event/2019/7/4/Archives-and-Embodiment-Conference/http://events.arts.ac.uk/event/2019/7/4/Archives-and-Embodiment-Conference/, last visit 10 April 2021.

14   See note number 8.

15   Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, cit., p. 109.

16   Since this paper was presented in November 2020, the following article was published by Louise Gray, "Maggie Nicols: singing for change," in *The Wire,* no. 445, 2021, pp. 36-43. This article discusses the early founding of FIG, an account which was then corrected slightly by Nicols in a letter "FIG leaves," published in the following issue of the same magazine.

17   From 'Feminist Improvising Group', World Heritage Encyclopaedia, 3 March 2009. http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/feminist_improvising_group#cite_note-FOOTNOTE-Smith2004235-0, last visit 21 June 2022.

18   Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More,* cit., p. 106.

19   See Pierre Schaeffer, "Acousmatics," in Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

20   Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, cit., p. 5.

21   *Idem*, p. 7.

22   Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, cit., p. 106.

23   See Sheila Rowbowtham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It,* Pluto Press, London 1973.

24   See also the recent documentary *Poly Styrene: I Am A Cliché* (Paul Sng, Celeste Bell, 2020).

25   Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, cit., p. VX.

26   As discussed by Maud Jacquin in "From Reel to Real – an Epilogue: Feminist Politics and Materiality at the London Film-makers' Co-operative," *The Moving Image Review and Art Journal (MIRAJ)*, vol. 6, noo. 1-2, 2017, pp. 80-88.

27   Kaja Silverman, *Dis-Embodying the Female Voice*, in Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams (eds.), *Re-Vision. Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, The American Film Institute, Los Angeles 1984, pp. 132-133. See also Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema, Theories of Representation and Difference*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1988.