

Chapter 15

Intermedial Voices

Intersections in Feminist Sound and Moving Image

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Abstract

This chapter explores the intermedial dynamics of feminist music and artists' moving image in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s. Through discussion of the Feminist Improvising Group and the use of their music in Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *AMY!* (1980), the chapter focuses on sound and the use of voice. It examines how intersecting artistic practices have complex intermedial dynamics, a situation which is, at once, enhanced by feminist reexamination of mediums and history. It observes how the sounded and recorded voice enables us to reenter narratives in/of feminist creativity, forging new connections between the past and the present.

Key words intermediality; feminist music; artists' moving image; Feminist Improvising Group; Laura Mulvey; Peter Wollen; *AMY!*; recorded voice; FIG

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The human voice begins within and travels outside the body and, as such, is a fundamentally intermedial act.¹ The voice is by nature disconnected from the person who spoke it, and the recorded voice in turn forges new connections across and over time. As both a unique spoken event and a recorded artefact it has different meanings and effects that depend on where and how it is heard. The voice as a concept recurs in activist and feminist politics in the form of a reassessment of language, being, and being heard, which are central to struggles for recognition and the reassessment of the intersecting structural biases (of race, class, and gender) perpetuated within culture.

The Feminist Improvising Group, also known as FIG (Figure 15.1) used striking free-vocal refrains in their music, combining live instruments with other sounds. Bizarre and innovative, humorous and intelligent, their multifaceted, unconventional performances were closely connected with feminist and socialist activism in the late 1970s. Its members connect with a wider network of art forms, including feminist experimental filmmaking via

(among other overlaps) their inclusion in the soundtracks of feminist films. This is a subtle convergence within and extending beyond the context of the Women's Liberation movement, indicating nuanced exchanges that are easily overlooked when histories are separated according to art form or subcategorised into feminist micro-subjects, processes that simplify this complex ecology, which encompassed concentric circles of overlapping activity (Lippard 1995). These overlaps are further complicated when we consider how, as Laura Mulvey (1979) wrote at the time, these cross-fertilisations were newly emergent and concerned with inventing new methodologies or uncovering hidden histories (to use Sheila Rowbotham's (1973) phrasing). Amy Tobin (2015: 113) emphasises that artists working in this intersectional context "shook the established tenets of old and new media alike, imbuing women's work with a mobility that constantly contravened the borders of museum, art school, gallery and cinema." Building upon these contexts, sound and music represent a significant and often overlooked sphere within this concentric ecology.

Despite the dual audio-visual nature of cinema, the topic of sound, though not neglected, is nevertheless not visible (and difficult to describe), like the complex cultural intersections of historical feminism. The replay of the recorded voice, much like feminist methodologies that critically reexamine the past, blurs boundaries between timeframes, re-forming them

in the present. The voice is a phenomenon with compound cultural associations within feminist discourses (Kristeva 1984; Silverman 1988; Cavarero 2005; Whittaker and Wright 2017), some of which informed the use of voices in Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s 1980 film *AMY!* (16mm, 32 minutes).² This feminist historical reexamination of the aviator Amy Johnson (1903–1941) merges sound and voices from the late 1970s with images from the 1930s and includes music by FIG. Through examination of both FIG and *AMY!*, this chapter explores the intermedial historical dynamics of the voice and how it can be reassociated with other objects, subjects, and contexts over time.



Figure 1: ‘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 (ID LC01565). Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library (2021).

Expanding Discourse and Intermedia

The “medium” was significant in art from the 1960s onwards. The development and use of new recording technologies in art at this time initiated new discourses that redefined such terms—including video, cassettes, and Super 8 film, all of which were more affordable and available beginning in the late 1960s. Following on from this, until recently, discourses on media/mediums have tended to dissect and separate technologies (e.g., film is often separated from video). By revisiting notions of “intermedia,” a number of recent studies (including this collection) have sought to break down these distinctions, acknowledging intersections between other elements (Knowles and Schmid 2020) and how countercultural underground practices from the late 1960s involved a convergence of media, mediums, materials, art forms, and writings. The concept of intermedia originally developed from writings by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins in 1965, who adapted the term from the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Higgins ([1965] 2021: 50) observed at the time, that the “best work being produced today seems to fall between media. This is no accident.”

At this time many cooperative groups were established, creating collaborative artistic workshops and spaces that emphasised access to

technology along with showing and sharing works. As the 1970s progressed, many such groups actively blurred the lines between performance, music, writing, film, video, and art, creating artworks between “cinema, drama, music, and poetry,” the phrase written on the door of the Better Books bookshop on Charing Cross Road, where the London Film-Makers’ Co-operative (LFMC) was founded in 1966. Underground organisations and groups in this context emphasised boundary-pushing, collaboration, and nonconformity, boosting technological, social, and artistic innovations that were closely connected to activism (Holdsworth and Blanchard 2017).

This activism extended to free improvisation in the United Kingdom, which emerged as a musical technique and a genre during the 1950s, influenced by UK jazz groups connected with Music for Socialism (Holdsworth 2017). Artists developed alternative approaches to live performances, in which musicians played varied, unexpected instruments or objects, sometimes using nonconventional “scores,” diagrams, or sets of instructions (techniques also developed in Fluxus artworks).³ Instruments were often attached to contact microphones and favoured unconventional sounds and ways of playing. Practitioners tended to be critically alert to the established structures of the art form (e.g., notation, tone, scales, harmony, and other musical conventions), but also the politicised structures of culture and society (Born 2017). In free improvisation, the medium/instrument, its

use and forms of conventionalised play were completely reassessed, including vocals and use of the voice.

As more feminist discourses developed over the 1970s, female artists and artists of colour—working in a country with an overwhelming sense of the world established and projected by its colonial and imperial history—questioned preestablished canons and histories (Rhodes 1979) and organised into support systems, collectives, and cooperatives. This criticality did extend to language and mediums, but the term “intermedia” was not commonly used in the United Kingdom until more recently. Instead, concepts such as “expanded field” were used, which, as Rosalind Krauss wrote in 1979, provided “for an organisation of work that is not dictated by the conditions of a particular medium” (42–43). In experimental film and video, this engagement with the audience and physical space moved “beyond materiality to mobilize an ‘active spectatorship’ through performance, extending the experience of watching [and listening] into other spaces” (White 2011: 110).

Despite this transcendence, recent writings reexamining intermediality tend to focus on expanded performance (Barber 2020; Walley 2020). This emphasis means that the techniques of narrativisation that emerged in the mid-1970s, such as those of filmmakers like Mulvey and Wollen in the six films they made between 1974 and 1983, are perceived as

a move away from this “live” expansion (Walley 2020: 91). Yet live-ness was often fundamental to “new narrative” practices, such as works by performance artist Yvonne Rainer (Walley 2020: 94–99), who also participated in Mulvey and Wollen’s *AMY!* The use of sound in this film (Figure 15.2), whether recorded voices or music by FIG, enacts a peculiar reversal of this expansion, which drags live acts and other politicised spaces back into the filmic frame. Many discourses focus on how mediums record and store the human voice, yet the voice is a kind of medium in and of itself, an intermedial element that traverses both time and technology that, as discussed later, contributes to the overlapping timeframes cycled in *AMY!*



Figure 2: Still from Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *AMY!* (1980). Copyright Mulvey and Wollen. Image courtesy of Laura Mulvey.

Defamiliar Voices: The FIG

The women-only FIG was founded by composer Lindsay Cooper and vocalist Maggie Nicols with the musicians Georgina Born, Koryne (formerly Corinne) Liensol, and Cathy Williams towards the end of 1977. They were soon joined by Irène Schweizer and Sally Potter, who become core members.⁴ Their first performance was at the Music for Socialism Festival at the Almost Free Theatre in 1977 in response to the lack of women on this platform (Gray 2021: 41). The event involved a workshop which explored ways of subverting female stereotypes in life and on stage (41; Nicols 2021: 8). FIG developed an “extraordinary and eccentric style; along with musical and sonic improvisations, performances often entailed the anarchic and uneven use of visual, theatrical and elements that dramatized and parodied aspects of ‘women’s experience’ . . . with a focus on the subversive or hilarious enactment of mundane activities such as domestic labour” (Born 2017: 53). Nicols has described FIG performances as “completely irreverent”, a way of playing and performing that was “synchronistic with a women’s liberation movement giving birth to itself; we were part of it. You cannot separate the political movement from what FIG was . . . and the absolute joy of discovering that women were important” (quoted in Gray 2021: 42).

FIG's performances used costumes and props and engaged with politics through farce, questioning both the status quo of society and the egalitarian ethos of improv communities, an approach rooted in a socialist politics that, nevertheless, excluded many. Georgina Born (2017: 36, 41) explains that their music reflected the distinct "micro-social" spaces of musical performance. This connects with Tobin's (2015: 112) description of intersecting feminist artistic practices in the 1970s (via Hannah Arendt's concept of the "space of appearance"), which describes "a mobile manifestation of power, supported by the speech acts of the participants. Group members are connected by first rendering themselves incomplete through their openness to others and are bound together by mutual 'interest'" via co-habitation and speech in spaces.⁵ Like expanded cinema, FIG saw performance as a two-way "co-productive process" between audience and musician (Born 2017: 33) that directly channelled awareness of wider contexts and politics.

The personal became political through the coproductive interactions between FIG musicians and the audience and the centrality of the voice in this interaction. The free vocal sounds of Nicols and Potter were part-sung and spoken, using poetic lines and subversive statements alongside sounds resembling speech, paralinguistic half-heard words, communicating through tone and pitch and rhythm. Multiple singing and spoken voices merged,

tuned, and changed with each other and the instruments—with strings, cello, piano, and breath-like exclamations from bassoon and oboe. Humour-laden improvisations were often combined with laughter among the audience and performers alike, a coproductive approach to “music [that] necessitate[d] an expansion of the conceptual framework of social mediation” (Born 2017: 43) beyond notions of the individual and collective as binaries, and which echoes the wider feminist social re-formations to which FIG was connected.

FIG came together just as other organised spaces and groupings dedicated to improvised music were being established in London, such as the London Musicians’ Collective (LMC). In 1976, the LMC moved into the same building as the LFMC. Although both organisations were separate physically and institutionally, there were overlaps, and they were neighbours in this building for over a decade (Holdsworth 2017). FIG vocalist Sally Potter was a member of the LFMC and went on to make influential works of feminist performance and cinema (including 1983’s *The Gold Diggers*, scored by Cooper), indicating that the concentric connections between experimental feminist practices extended beyond art forms as well as mediums into other spaces.

As a challenge to the seemingly egalitarian yet highly professionalised improvisation community, FIG opened their process to women at all levels of musicianship. The ensemble usually performed with

as many as eight improvisers, including white, Black, lesbian, straight, working- and middle-class women, channelling the anarchic ethos of punk music (also emerging in London in 1976) with left-wing meeting formats, overt comedic mime, and audience participation. At times, they received hostile responses from audiences, and their performances tended to take place in spaces very different from the LMC or improvised music venues (including cinemas, see Figure 15.3), including female-only concerts and on one occasion a “gents” toilet (Nicols, cited in Gray 2021: 42).⁶ FIG’s coproductive performances engaged in “antiphonal” exchanges: back-and-forth, call-and-response passages with the audience. In these settings, antiphonal, live-improvised voices interrupt the tropes of song-singing and musical performance and the boundaries between performers and audience.

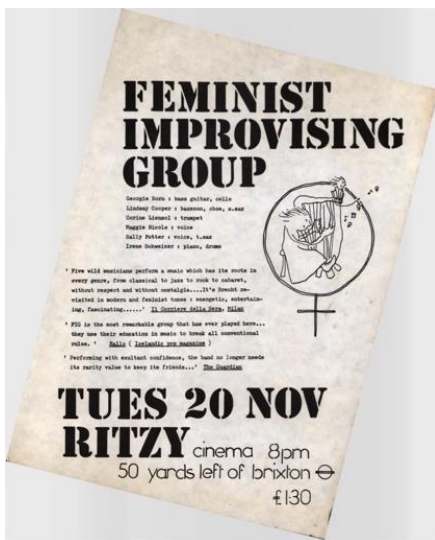


Figure 3: ‘Poster for [Feminist Improvising Group] FIG gig at the Ritzy in Brixton’ (illustrations by Potter). Source: Lindsay Cooper digital archive, #8578 (ID: LC01353). Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library (2021).

As they were performed largely in live coproductive contexts, recordings of FIG are rare, making their inclusion in film soundtracks significant.⁷ By inverting the embodied, sonic materiality of live interaction, recordings of FIG manifest a paradoxical performative gap that is also central to the voice itself. The voice implies and emphasises the subjectivities, inflections, and indexical characteristics unique to the body that produced/projected it out into the air. This self-inscription is rooted in our inclination to connect sounds to sources, a tendency given the name “causal listening” by Michel Chion (1994: 25). This causal inclination to identify a sound source means that the voice can be reattached to other bodies and objects, a situation of association that is fundamental to the effectiveness of voiceovers in film and video, speech sounds from beyond the camera frame (Chion 1999). Dissociated by the act of throwing, the voice betrays both utterer and receiver by connecting to something other. Yet it channels a veracity, an authority that does not correspond to straightforward notions of appearance (the visible), authorship, or authority. As Mladen Dolar (2006: 106) writes, the voice exists in a paradoxical state, an interstitial space of “inclusion [and] exclusion which retains the excluded at its core.” This external existence and parallel ability to connect with other sources is closely bound to the words we use to describe it. In English, the voice attaches “to” as opposed to “away from” other objects (including our

ears). The “ventriloquial voice,” then, as Steven Connor (2000: 42) describes it, exists in the space between pure vocalisation and the communication or expression of ideas—cleaved to one body, yet associating with another object.

The fact that the voice always exists external to our selves informs its depiction as a recorded phenomenon. In cinema, voices are often disembodied (as voice-overs), with uncanny associations, shifting origins, implying psychic fracture or ghostly apparitions. Voices can trick us and assume the role of unreliable narrators. These participatory states of inclusion/exclusion and potential misappropriation are why the voice as a concept is closely associated with the politics of representation and feminism. It is a signifier of authority or authenticity, yet it is questionable, shifting, and easily reattached or reassociated with an other. The voice is closely associated with both the inclusions and the exclusions to which we as humans are subject structurally.

Intermedial Voices: *AMY!*

AMY! includes multiple voices, which speak from outside the frame, beyond the event horizon of the images seen (Toufic 1996 48). One of Mulvey and Wollen’s last theory films, *AMY!* completes a trilogy along with *Penthesilea*

(1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) examining the myths, mythopoesis, and representation of women. Building upon these earlier works, *AMY!* explores ideas of heroine-ism via the story of pioneering British aviator Amy Johnson, the first woman to fly solo from Britain to Australia, in 1930. Conflating this earlier period with the later one (the end of the 1970s) in which it was shot, Mulvey and Wollen intersperse contemporary footage with archive footage, blurring the lines between past and present.

In *AMY!* voices and sounds are layered as carefully as the assembled elements of the image-track, with complex concatenations of image, archive, superimposed text, spoken word, sounds, and music. These are used to establish compound(ed) readings of the ways reality (and a person) can be signified and inscribed via the audio-visual. Although these methods and the many elements that come together in *AMY!* provide rich material for aural analysis, as do the writings of Mulvey and Wollen along with their other five films, discussion here will focus on scenes in *AMY!* that include music by FIG.⁸

Throughout *AMY!* the movement and juxtaposition of elements create a compounded time-space in which 1930 and 1980 converge. In Europe and the United Kingdom (UK), the 1920s were a time of avant-garde advancement, collaboration, and exploration in society, music, art, and culture. Then, in the wake of the worldwide effects of the Wall Street Crash

in 1929 and after the onset of the Great Depression in the US in 1930, there was a rise in Fascist politics, culminating in the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. For Mulvey and Wollen, the 1920s were a mirror for the political shifts of the 1970s, during which time arts, filmmaking, and music flourished, before a dark neoliberal turn to Conservatism in the UK heralded by the election of Margaret Thatcher to Prime Minister in 1979 (an antiheroine of sorts), just before they started making *AMY!*

In *AMY!* music and voices act as conduits connecting 1939 and 1979, both of which are tethered to the present of listening. The sound, like all Mulvey and Wollen's films, was designed by Larry Sider under the name Evanston Percussive Unit.⁹ In terms of music, the film can be divided into two halves, dissected by an extended map sequence in the middle (and described briefly later). The first half features the recurring sounds of FIG, whose otherworldly music and half-heard voices contrast with the powerful, clear lyrics and vocals of Poly Styrene, lead singer of the punk band X-Ray Spex used in the second half of the film. The start and end include bright, fast-paced xylophone music by La Troupe des Guinéens (from the record *Xylophones et chœur de femmes*) released in 1977 (and part of Mulvey and Wollen's record collection). We hear these percussive xylophones before seeing black-and-white archive footage from the perspective of a camera eye. The camera travels through a cheering crowd of people who wave into

the lens, welcoming Johnson back to Croydon airport after her solo flight from England to Australia in May 1930. As discussed by Esther Leslie and Nicolas Helm-Grovas, these opening elements channel silent and Soviet cinema of the 1930s, when Johnson undertook her flights, recalling the montage techniques of director Sergei Eisenstein—“exhorting, interrogating and inducing excitement in the viewer” (Helm-Grovas 2018: 275).¹⁰ The exclamatory tone and sped-up footage are made playful by the quick-paced percussive tones of the xylophones, which interweave several distinct lines of notes, adding to the pace of this opening section, echoing yet tonally different from the lively piano music that typically accompanied newsreels in the silent era during which the footage was originally shot. These silent-film origins are made more apparent by the contemporaneity of the sound, a reminder that recorded sounds, and Johnson’s own voice were not necessarily captured in the same way as her journey or exploits were via the media. Other newsreel footage from the time (not included in *AMY!*) reveals that when her voice was captured, it was heavily scripted and staged (stemming from the complex setups required to record sync-sound in the 1930s). In *AMY!* we see footage of her speaking, but we never hear her voice. Throughout the film, her personal experiences are set against more generalised depictions of Amy the heroine.

The percussive sounds and intertitle cuts of the opening section abruptly change, and Mulvey's voice is then heard, the sound echoing in a very different unseen room-space, asking about heroines. Played over the black and yellow intercut title text at the start, the sound arrives slightly ahead of the images to which it connects, comprising interviews with a class of students from Paddington College (on the Community Care Course), originally shot on video (with the faint sound of a carpentry workshop discernible in the background). A video monitor with curved edges can be seen in the frame (Figure 15.4), indicating that the 16mm film-stock camera used in *AMY!* was used to refilm the video screen. By contrast, the sound is immediate, coming to us through a different (closer), more direct channel. Each element, whether sounded or seen, is separated from its source.



Figure 4: Still from Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *AMY!* (1980). Interviews with students at Paddington College (Community Care Course) in the late-1970s. Copyright Mulvey and Wollen. Image courtesy of Laura Mulvey.

The interviewees discuss women working in engineering in the 1970s. One female speaker says they used to fix the family's television set. Her description of the image being "not quite right" reflects Johnson's sense of dissonance, voiced later in the film, between media projections of her as "Amy," which fail to acknowledge her abilities as a skilled mechanic and aviator. Although the interview voices are diegetically connected to the people who speak, the remediation between film and video screens creates a temporal distance between the moment of the shot and the replay of the conversations, reiterated by our hearing these voices slightly before seeing them. This sense of being out-of-sync reflects the use of voiceovers as well as contemporary music from the late 1970s by FIG and X-Ray Spex: a displacement that is also part of the process of recording, compounded by the voice itself. As Connor (2000: 7) explains, 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." This split between speaking and being recorded, between acting and perceiving the voice-act later, is significant to Johnson's struggles with depictions of "Amy, Wonderful Amy"—to use the words of a popular 1930 song about her by Jack Hylton and his Orchestra, which is heard in full towards the end of the film.

Throughout *AMY!* music adds distinct layers to the coexisting realities perceived by the viewer. The choice of music reemphasises the compounded slippage between 1939 and 1979. Mulvey and Wollen were familiar with the work of FIG and moved in similar feminist/social circles at the LFMC and via left-wing activism/writing, women's groups, and music performances in London.¹¹ We first hear FIG just after the interview scene, which cuts to contemporary footage of a wet London street next to the department store Peter Jones (on Sloane Square), where Johnson worked briefly (the sequence also includes yellow on-screen writing stating how much Johnson earned). The traffic moves as the sound of a bassoon plays, shifting between intricate scale movements and unstructured free playing, as improvised singing voices are heard, starting quiet and gradually getting louder. These sounds stop when the short street scene switches to an indoor setting at first focussed on a small chest of drawers. The shot is accompanied by the voice of the actor Mary Maddox, who plays Johnson. Maddox's voiceover—familiar from earlier films in Mulvey and Wollen's trilogy—reads words from a letter written by Johnson to a lover, whilst hands remove flowers and a pile of envelopes from the small drawers. Adopting a technique of movement that reflects rostrum shots across a map later in *AMY!* (a technique used in other films by Mulvey and Wollen), the voice stops speaking and the camera slowly tracks sideways across the

room. The voices and sounds of FIG are heard once again as the camera glides through space, first quiet and increasing in volume as the frame travels across the room and comes to rest on a fireplace. The sounds of FIG's vocal improvisations tune in and out. Sounds hum and harmonise with a piano and other sounds, becoming louder. The musical space of the scene is taken up either by Johnson's voiceover or the sounds of FIG; they are never heard simultaneously. The powerful musical noises made by FIG contrast with the silence of Maddox/Johnson, who then sits down on the floor beside the fire. The other-worldly, barely discerned vocalisations of FIG form abstracted words that are hard to understand, denying semantic identification. They indicate an expansive, unknowable inner world, which no one, not the viewer, Johnson, nor media/historical depictions of her can translate.

Both singing and spoken vocal sounds in this scene echo the paradox of the voice as described by Dolar (2006: 106), who observes that it is constantly haunted by "the impossibility of symbolising" itself. This reflects the situation faced by Johnson, who outlines a conflict between her status as a heroine and her parallel status as an engineer and aviator (as described in the letters voiced by Maddox). The sustained hum of thoughtful activity implied by the music and voices of FIG gradually build to an unstructured cacophony of improvised sounds. These sounds channel tumultuous and

extreme emotions, becoming high pitched, singing indiscernible words.

There is a dissonance between seeing and hearing, between outward appearance and internal emotion, amplified by these juxtaposing image- and sound- tracks. Finally, Johnson places the letters in the fireplace and burns them.



Figure 5: Still from Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *AMY!* (1980). Mary Maddox as Amy Johnson. Copyright Mulvey and Wollen. Image courtesy of Laura Mulvey.

There is then a quick cut to a very similarly composed image of Johnson sitting in the same place, wearing different clothes, the sounds of FIG now gone. She sits on the floor silently making cocoa beside a fireplace, the pan heating directly on the coals. We then hear her voiceover once more, methodically listing the “daily drill” activities involved with

testing, greasing, and checking an airplane engine. The shot rests here as the voice speaks, before anticipating Johnson's move back to the desk, and slowly tracking this movement across the room. The voiceover finishes and as the shot moves the sounds of FIG return. Johnson sits at the desk once more, reading and planning, as music by FIG continues to play. The photo of a man on the desk in the earlier sequence has been replaced by a photo of a plane in flight (anticipating the footage of planes and birds in flight later in the film) and reflecting the shift in the phases of Johnson's life described in the voiceover letter extracts (Figure 15.5). The fluctuating sounds of FIG build to form a cacophony of crashing instruments and voices as the camera focuses once more on the chest. This time, Johnson's hand opens the drawers, now filled with screw-bolts and a miniature globe of the Earth, replacing the letters we saw and heard earlier. The sounds of FIG then carry over into the next scene, showing an old-fashioned blue propeller aeroplane parked in a hangar. Yellow text appears on screen—"Flying Dreams" (see Figure 15.2), "Financial Backers," and "Wakefield's Oil"—and the music fades as a black intertitle is seen, after which the film's central scene starts, tracing Johnson's journey across a map, pulling us away from this intimate, internalised depiction of Johnson.

The peculiar timelessness of the dissociated FIG recordings contrasts with the clipped voice heard during the map sequence. In this section, a

rostrum shot scans a map, charting the legs of Amy's journey, showing brightly coloured place names and the contours of an atlas, accompanied by the sound of a distant plane in flight. We hear the English-accented male voice of Jonathan Eden reading headlines from *The Times*, describing events all over the world in May 1930, when Johnson undertook her journey, political events that in some ways indicate the slow dissolution of the British Empire, the externalised conflicts we now know to be the start of decolonial history. Like the ventriloquised voice, in this film, image, voice, and source (text) elements are recombined, and voiceovers such as Maddox/Johnson's and Eden's create coexisting narratives that supplement the image-track. The different elements of the film ventriloquially connect, as voices are reattached to new (time) frames.

Voiceovers are, to use composer Pierre Schaffer's (1952) term, "acousmatic"; they are sounds disconnected from their source, which activate a form of "reduced listening," according to Chion (1994: 29). In this situation, auditors "quickly realize that in speaking about sounds they shuttle between a sound's actual content, its source, and its meaning" (29). Simultaneously, voiceovers have a paradoxical presence, existing in defamiliarised disconnection from the subject (the person who spoke them) whilst being remediated, reassociated with something else. The constant shifts between source, content, and meaning are emphasised by the fact that

many of the voices in *AMY!* read texts written by others, calling attention to the intermedial process through which stories are inscribed (and to which Johnson is subject). Voiceovers point to other sources, enacting an iterative re-enunciation of contrasting narratives on the experience of flying and the factual reporting of Johnson's journeys in the media. Among these voices, Yvonne Rainer reads a text written by Peter Wollen in which different extracts are merged into each other and sources become indistinguishable, including words by "Bryher, Amelia Earhart, Lola Montez, S. and Gertrude Stein" (*AMY!* film credits). During this section we see dreamily filmed skies, planes, and birds, which cut and repeat. In other sections we hear Katherine Wright, sister and supporter of the Wright Brothers, and Rainer reads a text by the poet H.D. which describes the experience of flying and seeing the land from above. Earlier, Wollen's voice describes a "philobat" (a term from psychoanalyst Michael Balint), a person who enjoys risk-taking and vertigo, which is heard over footage of the now deserted Airport House in Croydon (where Johnson started and ended her solo journey). Mulvey later discusses the symbolism of the heroine over a shot of 1970s Northcliffe House, where the newspaper the *Daily Mail* used to be based. These subjects are pitched forward in time. They speak words that are not their own. Complex and temporally uncertain, they involve a splitting that

characterises all voices but to which we as receivers are easily able to reattune, adapt to, and associate with what we see.

The intermedial connection between written and spoken words and the ways in which voices are ventriloquised through mediums is central to the layered realities that converge in *AMY!* Singing and spoken voices perform different functions in the film. The voiceovers are connected to written texts and writings, whereas the singing voices and music are captured in the later moment, 1979. A later mirror camera sequence plays refrains of the X-Ray Spex song “Identity” (1979), and in another scene we hear the song “Obsessed with You” (1978). Contrasting with the otherworldly, unknowable sounds of the FIG voices heard in the first half of the film, in the “Obsessed with You” scene the lyrics are direct and discernible. The lead singer of the band, Poly Styrene, sings, “you are just a concept,” a “dream,” a “reflection,” a “theme,” a “symbol” of the “new regime,” as Maddox/Johnson walks towards the camera, angrily turning away from its gaze, then turning back and staring defiantly into the lens. Poly Styrene articulates the sentiments echoed by Johnson in her letters, connecting to her sense of individuality, and the grander narratives she resists. The music of FIG and X-Ray Spex resist narrativization by form and content, respectively, and contrast with the old-world nostalgia and oversimplified refraction of ‘Amy’ as sung by the male voice of Hylton.

This much older song is played in full over a static shot of Amy's equally still aeroplane, suspended in the Science Museum. The sentimentality of Hylton's singing voice seems absurd after hearing Johnson's letters, discussing how "publicity and public life" were "forced" upon her.

The final shots of the film use newsreel footage of Johnson speaking in public, but we do not hear her voice. Instead, we hear a voice from one of the college interviewees from the start of the film, discussing how heroines do not need to be famous. This image of Johnson ventriloquises the later women's sounded discussion. The recorded video-voice travels back as well as forwards through time. The politicised compounded context of 1930/1979 is emphasised and facilitated via the reassociation of this ventriloquised voice, fostering an exchange of feminist solidarity over and beyond linear timeframes. Through the voice, Mulvey and Wollen expand time and space, emphasising difference and manipulating conventional approaches to linear continuums of history, disrupting the flow of information, and creating a temporal dissonance through voices that denies historicism in the present.

Conclusion

As Rebecca Schneider (2001:101) discusses, performance practices that emphasise live-ness are often associated with terms such as "ephemerality,"

also used to describe gaps in feminist histories; these dialogues channel an ocular prioritisation via words such as “disappearance.” However, performance, actions, and live acts do remain, as Schneider outlines, “the scandal of performance relative to the archive is not that it disappears (this is what the archive expects) but that it *both* ‘becomes itself through disappearance’ . . . *and* that it remains” (105, italics in original).¹² In terms of music and performance, FIG enacted and subverted narratives of appearance and visibility in complex ways. Even though the intersecting feminist artistic practices of the 1970s and 1980s have been revisited in recent years (Jacquin 2017; Tobin 2015; Reynolds 2015, 2019), the representation of complex ecologies and overlaps among art forms, artists, and groups who are hard to place such as FIG, remain unmapped.

Notions of visible and invisible histories connect directly with FIG, a group whose works were performed live and who were rarely recorded. Recordings of FIG, by inverting the embodied, sonic materiality of their live performances, manifest the paradoxical performative gap central to the voice. This disembodiment is not purely physical, arising from the apparatus of the body; hearing the voice as well as recording it involves reembodiment through call-and-response, a hyperaware perceptive reinscription and signification at the moment of watching/listening. The levels of self-inscription subverted in FIG’s work call attention to the remediative process

through which such histories, and particularly stories about individual people, are inscribed.

When considering the concentric ecologies of feminist artistic practices that emerged at this time, Mulvey (1979: 4) wrote of how a “tension arises . . . between celebration of the past and taking it as a guideline for the future.” In *AMY!* the paradoxical immateriality of the voice amplifies the exposure of hidden feminist histories, yet the invisibility of the voice means that it can nevertheless be subsumed into grander “visualised” narratives such as those relating to “Amy” the heroine, whose voice is displaced. In this and other feminist films from the late 1970s¹³—including those of Rainer and Potter—voices and sounds act as conduits, another medium through which narratives can manifest. The sounded historical subject, whether it is Amy Johnson the aviator, *AMY!* the film, or FIG the group, activates a complex and “radical historiography” (Russell 1999: vx) that reflects the paradoxes of the voice itself, dis-associated yet connecting to new subjects and contexts. The voice itself parallels the peculiar ability of these pasts to manifest in the present anew.

The voice as a material, adaptively reembodying substance was and continues to be an important means of breaking and remoulding visually and epistemologically objectified loops in discourse, which overemphasise patrilinear conceptions of immateriality (and the surviving archive) as

opposed to reframing our relationship to the past, to artworks and voices that have the potential to reembody.

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Notes

¹ Thanks to Laura Mulvey for reading this chapter and answering detailed questions about the music and sound in *AMY!* Thanks also to Oliver Fuke for sharing research and to Nick Helm-Grovas and Stefan Solomon for insightful comments.

² Among these feminist references, Julia Kristeva's (1984) concept of the "chora" was particularly important in Mulvey and Wollen's theoretical approach to the trilogy of which *AMY!* is part, starting with *Penthesilea* (1974), then *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). The trilogy explores representation and mythmaking, which were also significant to the subsequent film *Crystal Gazing* (1981). For a more detailed account of the relationship between Mulvey and Wollen's filmmaking and theories, see Helm-Grovas (2018).

³ For example, the influential *Notations* score book co-compiled by John Cage and Alison Knowles (1969).

⁴ Artists involved with FIG included Frankie Armstrong, voice; Georgina (Georgie) Born, bass, guitar, cello; Lindsay Cooper, bassoon, oboe, saxophone; Françoise Dupety, voice; Koryne (formerly Corinne) Liensol, trumpet; Maggie Nicols, voice; Sally Potter, voice, tenor saxophone; Annemarie Roelofs, voice; Irene Schweizer, piano, drums; Angèle Veltmeijer, saxophone; Cathy Williams, voice, piano. It has been reported that musician Dagmar Krauss was involved in the foundation of the group. FIG evolved into the European Women's Improvising Group (EWIG) in the early 1980s. See Louise Gray's account in the *Wire* magazine (March 2021). A reply from Nicols (2021) is included in the subsequent (April) edition of the magazine.

⁵ Tobin (2015: 112, citing Rugoff 2005: 123) connects Hannah Arendt's (1958) "spaces of appearance" to Irit Rugoff's reworking of this idea as a "concept of power constructed in the 'space of appearance' through speech."

⁶ Ephemera and paper documents relating to FIG are housed in the archives of the University of the Arts London and Cornell University in collections on Lindsay Cooper and the London Musicians' Collective.

⁷ FIG released a self-published cassette of live performances in Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Reykjavík (1979; see Punk Music Data 2016). The recording “The Seventh Kiss” (1980) is available on *Resonate-Reverberate-Roar*. A recording from live sessions at the Logos Foundation in Ghent, Belgium, in 1979 is also included on *Another Evening at Logos 1974/79/81* (Sub Rosa 2015).

⁸ The techniques seen in *AMY!* include dual timeframes, split voices, and multiple contexts, building upon the earlier theory films in the trilogy (see previous note).

⁹ Larry Sider used the title Evanston Percussion Unit when recording video (and recorded the interviews with students at Paddington College in *AMY!*).

¹⁰ Esther Leslie discussed this at the retrospective *Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Beyond the Scorched Earth of Counter-Cinema*, curated by Oliver Fuke, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 12–22 May 2016. See also Helm-Grovas (2018).

¹¹ Mulvey and Wollen were introduced to Lindsey Cooper through a mutual friend, the feminist journalist and critic Mandy Merck. Whilst making *AMY!* they visited Cooper’s studio to discuss the film and listen to recordings. They were drawn to the ethereal sound of both Nicols’ and Potter’s voices. Cooper sent a short tape (approximately twenty minutes) of miscellaneous recordings for them to use in *AMY!*

¹² Schneider here refers to Peggy Phelan’s (1993: 146, cited in Schneider) discussion of “performance as disappearance.”

¹³ *The Song of the Shirt* (Jonathan Curling and Sue Clayton, 1979) was scored by Lindsey Cooper and includes sounds by FIG created in collaboration with two oral history projects, Women’s Aid and the Feminist History Project, with multiple voices reading historical accounts of the oppression of women.