

The Texture of Interiority: Voiceover and Visuals

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Abstract

*This essay concerns itself with the myriad ways in which the voice-over gets interwoven with other sounds within the final soundtrack of a film, and variety of reactions these elicit from the audience as auditors as well as viewers. Focusing on a few selected films like Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985), David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme's *Le Joli Mai* (1963), and Bob Rosen and Andrea Simon's *Fayum Portraits* (1988), filmmakers paying specific attention to the role of female voice-overs therein, it explores how the voice-over assumes the role of the heterodiegetic voice of a third-person narrator, or the first person voice of a character embedded in the film, and further, goes on to sometimes defy these definitions by addressing the audience directly in the second person. Voice-over narration in films range from representing the inner monologue of a main character that offers a limited point-of-view, to allowing the audience access to an omniscient narrator, which then allows the filmmaker to experiment with unlimited points-of view as well as with the time and sequence of the occurrence of various events in the film.*

More important, this essay also examines, how the materiality of the sounds in voice-overs, and the dynamic relationship the voice-over forms with other sounds, both inside and outside the diegesis, create a texture which enables a space for experimentation with regard to the specific goals of narration in a film. Toward this end, with the textual readings of the voiceover and its specificity, it engages with Deleuze and Guattari's seminal essay, "The Smooth and the Striated," to explore the ways we could think of texture in the context of the materiality of the voice and its valences as it weaves itself through other dominant sounds in the soundscape of a film, and more importantly, coheres the visuals to delineate the narrative, while simultaneously shedding light on the interiority of the characters.

Keywords: Voiceover, Sound Balance; Smooth and Striated; *Out of Africa*; Chris Marker; *Brief Encounters*; *Le Joli Mai*; Interiority; Texture; Soundscape.

Beginning with films such as Fritz Lang's *M* (1932) and William K. Howard's *The Power and Glory* (1933)¹ from the early 1930s, the voice-over—a cinematic device as old as the sound film itself—continues to be an important part of modern day cinema, creatively employed to great effect in a host of landmark films. These include Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948), Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Goodfellas* (1990), *Gangs of New York* (2002), and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The Tree of Life* (2011), Chris Nolan's *Memento* (2000) and *The Prestige* (2006), and Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), which has a homodiegetic voice-over that reflects the stream-of-consciousness style of the narration, and *Her* (2013),

and Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) to his recent *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).²

My paper concerns itself with the myriad ways in which the voice-over gets interwoven with other sounds within the final soundtrack of a film, and variety of reactions these elicit from the audience, as auditors, as well as viewers. Focusing on a few selected films and their soundtracks to analyze the voice-over and its dynamic relationship with other diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, I explore how the voice-over assumes the role of the heterodiegetic voice of a third-person narrator, or the homodiegetic first person voice of a character embedded in the film, and further, goes on to sometimes defy these definitions by addressing the audience directly in the second person. Voice-over narration in films range

¹ For a brief history of the voice-over in cinema, see Kozloff, "Ancestors, Influences and Development," pp 23-40.

² I am using homodiegetic to refer to the narration of a character embedded in the text and diegesis, and heterodiegetic to the voice-over of a narrator who is not a character in the story, as defined by Gerard Genette and explicated in Kozloff, p 42.

from representing the inner monologue of a main character that offers a limited point-of-view, to allowing the audience access to an omniscient narrator, which then allows the filmmaker to experiment with unlimited points-of view as well as with the time and sequence of the occurrence of various events in the film.

However, despite the theoretical challenges posed by its fluid nature, voice-over sound often enables lucid comprehension and concrete analysis, either by establishing an identifiable pattern within films where it is used substantially, or, when used as expository or as a concluding piece of narration, by drawing attention to the materiality of the voice. The dynamic relationships that develop as it engages with the other sounds enable us to understand the ways through which voice-overs affect the sound balance every time it occupies the sound space of a film. It is through its capacity and power of valence that we perceive the mood of the protagonist(s) who drives the narrative. The way it harnesses the other sounds in setting up the mood of the film often dictates the visual aesthetics or the style of the film. The voiceover, therefore, plays a significant role in weaving the various components that contribute to the affective texture of the film.

Both due its unique quality of assertion, which considerably impacts the other sounds within the film's soundscape, and due its being a direct narrational tool which exudes a for-me-ness in its sound, the voice-over is also among the most easily abused sound, too often used by unthinking image-makers to patch-up the holes in a badly narrated story, or as an ill-suited expository frame which does not easily segue into the main narration of the film. At the same time, the history of cinema bears witness to the fact that the voice-over can be one of the most effective tools of narration in cinema whether one wants to use it as a character's voice or an omniscient narrator's voice or as the voice of the image-maker/ author of the film. The many exciting ways in which exemplary artists including Orson Welles, Billy Wilder, Stanley Kubrick, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Sydney Pollack, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and their sound technicians/designers, working always with a clear audio-vision of the overall sound design of their films, have used the voice-over, is sufficient evidence of this.

In this essay, I analyze the sound tracks of Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985), David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), and Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme's *Le Joli Mai* (1963), Bob Rosen and Andrea Simon's *Fayum Portraits* (1988), filmmakers paying

specific attention to the role of female voice-overs therein, in order to explore how this sound, in conjunction with the effects and accompanying music, affect the narration of these films. In the process, I also examine relevant voice-overs in other significant films. What I hope to underscore through my efforts here is how the voice-over, even as it appears to assert itself in its relationship with other sounds, like the dialogues in the production tracks of the classical Hollywood films, exists in fact, in a continually evolving relationship with the two other notable elements of a film's sound track—its music, and its sound effects. More important, I also examine in this essay, how the materiality of the sounds in voice-overs, and the dynamic relationships the voice-over forms with other sounds, both inside and outside the diegesis, create a texture which enables a space for experimentation with regard to the specific goals of narration in a film. Toward this end, with the textual readings of the voiceover and its specificity, I will engage with Deleuze and Guattari's seminal essay, "The Smooth and the Striated," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) to explore the ways we could think of texture in the context of the materiality of the voice and its valences as it weaves itself through other dominant sounds in the soundscape of a film.

Women and Voice-Over Sound

Sarah Kozloff has argued that female first-person narrators generally tend to narrate their own life stories or their own memories in "women's films, adaptations, and occasional noirs; their area of knowledge is generally constricted to what they have personally experienced and to what is presumed to be of interest to primarily female viewers" (100). Both in the first person voice-overs of the older Karen in *Out of Africa* or of Laura in *Brief Encounter* (both films adapted from novels), what is narrated to the audience are indeed their own memories and personal experiences. However, the effect of these voice-overs on the audience is not merely one limited to catering to the interest of women therein. Karen's longing for Africa or the inner monologue of Laura that sounds like the chattering of our own mind also enables the audience to identify with their feelings of longing and imperfection, as these films use their voice-overs to organize the layers of nostalgia and longing or guilt expressed in these voices and juxtaposes them with the story at pre-determined sound spaces. Kozloff's argument, made in the context of Bonitzer and Mary Ann Doane's observations

regarding the gendered bias in voice-overs in films, is useful in drawing our attention to the rarity of a woman's voice as a third-person heterodiegetic narrator (99).³ But with the increasing presence of women's voice-overs in recent films, it is important to note that Kozloff herself concludes that "barriers for women as narrators are crumbling now" (101).

Karen in Out of Africa

Out of Africa's script was inspired by many books including *Out of Africa and Other Writings* by Isak Dinesen, *Isak Dinesen, The Life of a Storyteller* by Judith Thurman, and *Silence Will Speak* by Errol Trzebinski. The final film has six broad segments, framed within seven voice-overs of the Dane, Karen Dinesen/Blixen (Meryl Streep), who enters into a wedlock with the financially broke baron Bror Blixen (Klaus Maria Brandauer) to become the baroness Karen Blixen after their marriage in British East Africa, through each of which she addresses the audience directly. These voiceovers focus less on her power as a colonizer/coffee plantation owner or the void at the center of her marriage of convenience to an indolent and licentious husband.



Pic. 1: Karen (Meryl Streep) in *Out of Africa* (1985)
Source: <http://classiq.me/style-in-filmmeryl-streep-in-out-of-africa>

Instead, it originates from an older Karen's longing for her past and colors the film with nostalgia through a picturesque landscape of African soil and people, and flora and fauna, and coheres the catalogues of these picture postcards and Karen's interior landscape by superimposing the texture of Karen's voice over the striated backdrop which provides the canvas for the (melo)drama of her life in Africa to be enacted. Karen's voice is delineated from music and sound effects through its sentimentality and, more importantly its materiality,

as exemplified by the key sequences discussed below.

The first significant voice-over in the film is a heterodiegetic narration by the older Karen and begins with her saying "I had a farm in Africa." This is juxtaposed over a long shot of a landscape. The voice is normal in volume, not very loud, with a little reverb. Theme music that has started earlier runs through the voice-over at a lower volume. The sound of her voice serves to arouse our curiosity, inviting us to participate in her nostalgia. A few seconds later, over extreme long shot images of the continuing landscape, the older voice begins again: "I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills..." At this point the voice is lower in volume than the first time and quieter in its quality. The music rises in crescendo and there is a gradual attack of the sound of a train engine. After another few seconds, we hear the old woman repeat: "I had a farm in Africa." This time her voice is even quieter than before, and thereby amplifying the sense of nostalgia about Africa. The corresponding increase in the sound of the moving train engine juxtaposes this feeling of nostalgia with a sense of a journey, or a movement to the past, and to Africa. All of this is enhanced by the nostalgic theme music. Therefore when voice-over's precursor—the title card—reading "Kenya, East Africa, 1913," is superimposed over a rickety train in a long shot of the landscape, our sense of departure to Africa is complete. So also, is our voyage into the past of the Dutch baroness Isak Dinesen, who has now transformed into a young woman, called Karen Blixen. In Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization the nomadic space would be striated as opposed to the stable terrain within boundaries. Here, the striated texture of the African landscape in the backdrop and its uneven quality seems to be seductive for Karen to intrude in the secure company of her would be husband baron Blixen.

The next title card, which reads "This Film is Based on *Out of Africa and Other Writings* by Isak Dinesen," allows us to comprehend that what we are now witnessing is Isak Dinesen's story. The sound effect of the train over this title card adds value to the image of a past journey undertaken by Karen in the same train, as the train wends its way across the African landscape. Thus the old woman's voice, the nostalgic music, and the sound effects of the moving train, set up the expository sounds of the film, which segues into the establishing sound of *Out of Africa* with its unique soundscape, especially once Karen is in Africa. The sound effect of a running train is used heterogeneously, in this instance, to create the here–

³ Also see Mary Ann Doane's "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies*, pp 33-50, where she observes that casting women as third-person narrators is not favored because it leads to the gendered compromise of the narrator's power and knowledge in a male dominated industry.

and-now effect of immediacy, while simultaneously evoking feelings of distance, and the past. In this instance, by combining the sound of the train with the older woman's voice, the film succeeds in transporting us to Karen's younger past.

After her husband leaves for war and she falls in love with Denys, we see Karen Blixen becoming more intimate with the Kenyans and with their African way of life. Towards this, her voice-over in these segments, are layered over the local sounds of Africa, sometimes punctuated with specific sounds, like the prolonged wailing of a child in its mother's arm. While the pitch of the baby's cry does not interfere with Karen's voice, it works brilliantly in compelling the auditor towards causal listening; and since the source—the child—is embedded in the crowd, draws our attention to the Africans themselves adding to the warmth of Karen's affinity towards them. More important, the texture of the wailing child in high pitch alludes to Karen's own childlessness, even as it critiques Karen's investment in animals more than the Kenyan people. Nonetheless, Karen's increasing attraction for Africa at this point, is primarily constructed through the sound track. When she talks to African Kamanate, using the local dialect, the low-volume sound effects of workers planting coffee seeds in the background, exemplifies an instance of how the materiality of her voice, with its pronounced accent and nasal tone, is used to showcase her growing love for the visceral quality of African life, while simultaneously hinting at her exploitation of the locals as a colonizer/plantation owner. In the succeeding voice-over, the spatial signature of the old Karen's voice does not draw as much of our attention as do the ambient sounds of the African landscape. The quality of nostalgia in her voice is heightened by the carefully structured effect track, which introduces us to ethnic African sounds one at a time, (like the sound made by small bells for example,) without overcrowding the sound track.

Since the narrative foregrounds Karen's failing marriage to Bror as well as her growing love affair with Denys, I would argue that the very essence of the film —her love for Africa—is essentially achieved through the affective use of sound effects mixed with her voice-overs. Thus for example, the sound track maps the awakening of her heart towards the Africans as she says emotionally, with a broken sound, "The friends of the farm came to the house and went away again. They were not the kind of people who stay for a long time in the same place." Again, towards the end of the film, before leaving for

Denmark, Karen says at Denys' grave: "Now take back the soul of Denys... whom You have shared with us. He brought us joy...We loved him well... He was not ours... He was not mine." This speech is accompanied by the low volume sound effect of birds (not of a generic nature), and there is a noticeable absence of music. Even though the visuals foreground Denys' white friends as the Africans recede into the background, the sound continues to emphasize, at a semantic level, Karen's love for Africa, and by extension for nature itself—emblemized by the serene sound of birds—which appears to subsume her love for Denys. From young Karen's recitation at the grave, as she prepares to leave Africa, the voice-over takes us back to the older Karen's voice, who says, with deep longing: "If I know a song of Africa... of the giraffe and the African new moon lying on her back... Does Africa know a song of me?"⁴ Through this narration, by avoiding a high level of reverb, the voice-over emphasizes the materiality of the nasal tone, thereby enhancing the sense of her rootedness to earth and augmenting the emotions evoked by preceding visuals of her inability to drop a handful of earth onto Denys's grave. The sound of her elegiac words draw our attention to the materializing sound indices of the actress Meryl Streep's breathing and lip movements, even as it engages us emotionally with visuals of African coffee fields, and reminds of the close relationships Karen has forged with Juma, Kumante, and other natives. This moment becomes doubly poignant as we become gradually aware of Meryl Streep, an American actress, playing a Dutch Baroness with heavily accented English, and thus her falling in love with Africa and the lament in her voice adds another dimension to the film, as we recognize an extra-textual historical context.

This perception of the difference in sound quality between the younger and older voices of Karen vividly demonstrates that the voice-over can be used to great effect in playing with the time-gap between the narrating-I and the participating-I, as well as towards truncating psychological space by converging loss-in-the-present (Denys's death,) with a longing-for-the-past (i.e, the older Karen's longing for Africa). Even more important, Karen's voiceover during key moments in the film sheds light on the striated spaces it stitches together: on the one hand, Karen's journey in the beginning recalls the Orientalist jaunt of many colonizers, but soon we

⁴ See *Out of Africa: The Shooting Script* for Karen's entire voice-over.

realize her deeper engagement with Africa and her people and her profound but schizoid relationship with them of love for their pristine land and obedience and apprehensions regarding their free spirit and defiance, as epitomized by her attraction and repulsion toward Denys, his whiteness offering her the security she seeks as a lonely and loveless woman in a foreign land but his raw and wild spirit of adventure and unwillingness to be tamed by the ritual of marriage undermining any such solace.



Pic. 2: Karen (Meryl Streep) and Denys (Robert Redford) in *Out of Africa* (1985) Source: <http://classiq.me/style-in-filmmeryl-streep-in-out-of-africa>

Even more important is the way her voice erases the fact that she was one of the feudal landlords and an epitome of British imperialism: "In the film Kikuyu are portrayed as near caricatures of complacency, given to occasional comic intransigence. Yet history shows that, following World War II, a resistance movement developed within the Kikuyu tribe, headed by the secret Mau Mau society. By 1955, the British claimed to have ended the movement, killing an estimated 10,000 of the tribe. So much for what Dinesen described as 'the absolute passivity of the native.'" Angela Bonavoglia's insightful review also reveals how Karen has been reduced to a "glossy Hollywood hero, and the film whitewashed and one-dimensional, rosy and romanticized, offers only a majority view" (1986, 44–5).⁵

Susan Brantley in her review of Aage Jorgensen's anthology on *Out of Africa*, points to Sydney Pollack's admission of the romanticized Karen Blixen in the film, and to the critique of the two Kenyans in the collection who reject the apology on behalf of Karen that "... she nevertheless took a reformer's interest in the autonomy and education of the African natives, and appreciated tribal customs and characteristics... (as quoted in Brantley 1990, 258)." Sydney Pollack's adaptation takes liberties with the novel in its portrayal of Karen

generally as a well intentioned baroness who is preoccupied with her failing marriage with a philandering husband and later, with the impregnable Denys. The incongruity in *Out of Africa* is not only because of the discordant presence of the plantation owner, the heavily accented Dutch Karen, in the British colony of Kenya, but also due to the casting of the American actor Robert Redford as Denys: "His lack of even the pretense of a British accent is disturbing as well, but overall he succeeds in portraying a carefree romantic in the spirit of Peter Pan" (Bonavoglia 1986, 45). The British actress Jane Seymour vouches for Redford's decent British accent, nevertheless according to Pollack, the decision to "drop the accent" was propelled by the doubts regarding audiences' acceptance of such an accent ("Accent thrown" 2014) While the oddity of Redford playing Denys is smoothened for an audience which is aware of his persona as an American star, it is entrenched with Meryl Streep's Danish accent as the audience expects her as a preeminent method actor to mark her roles with individuality and cultural specificity. While Brantley is convinced that Meryl Streep has "done wonders for University enrollments in Karen Blixen courses" (257), Bonavoglia heaps praise on her acting: "In contrast to Streep's singularly studied performances in earlier films, here she portrays freer character, easy, spontaneous, less predictable ..." (44). This is in polarity to the general criticism about the length of the film (161 minutes) and its languid pace. The epic and episodic narrative could thus be argued to be held together not by the seamless continuity editing of Hollywood alone, in this particular case, it is mainly by the texture of Streep's voice in Karen's voiceovers. The stress on the heavy accent, and the very conscious tone of her delivery, enable an insight into her anomalous presence, and thereby, her spontaneous exploration of the African landscape and concern for the Kenyan people of the Kikuyu tribe, thus provoking our interest in her humanity despite her colonizing imperatives as a plantation owner. The star text of Meryl Streep as the unique Hollywood star when it comes to sensitive female protagonists enables the smoothness within the striated surface in *Out of Africa*.

In this context, Deleuze and Guattari's meditations on the passage of the smooth to the striated and vice versa sheds light on texture of Streep's voice as it coheres the narrative: "... the two spaces [striated/nomadic and the smooth/sedentary] in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated and transversed

⁵ See Bonavoglia's review for details.

into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (474). They posit the heterogeneous felt, which is "infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction" (475–476) and "implies no separation of threads, no intertwining" as a binary of the homogeneous fabric with its traditional warp and woof structure (475), only to argue for the blurring of the divide and the passage of one into the other, as exemplified by the transformation from the stilted and accented voice of the baroness Karen to her chirpy and whispery tone when she is romancing with Denys: instead of being in control as a colonizer, she is driven by her passion for Denys and wanders into exciting but perilous adventures with him, to fill the void at the center of her sedentary and lonely existence. In the context of the nomads, Deleuze and Guattari observe that "[e]ven the technologists ... give them credit for felt: a splendid insulator, an ingenious invention, the raw material for tents, clothes, and armor among Turco–Mongols. Of course, the nomads of Africa and the Maghreb instead treat the wool as a fabric" (476). In the film, literally Karen in her passionate (and nomadic) outings with Denys is framed in such tents and costumes where his wildness seems to be the fabric, like the felt and the wool in the hands of the nomad, which keeps her warm as she drops her formal and labored way of conversing with people around and sheds the baggage of hierarchy to speak to his heart.



Pic. 3: Karen (Meryl Streep) in *Out of Africa* (1985)

Source: <http://classiq.me/style-in-filmmeryl-streep-in-out-of-africa>

Thus it is the texture of Streep's voice during Karen's voiceover that weaves her nomadic journey through Kenya together and smoothens the picturesque but striated surfaces on the uneven landscapes of her exterior and interior journey.

Laura in Brief Encounter

Laura Jesson's (Celia Johnson) voice-over in *Brief Encounters* comes as a confession of guilt as she shares her story with us, the audience. Given the

way that David Lean sets up Laura's homodiegetic narration to earn the sympathy of the audience, *Brief Encounters* is the perfect example of limited first-person point of view story telling. It is not unlimited like in *Out of Africa*, where we understand Karen's feeling for not only Denys, her lover, but her husband Bror, and towards Africa and her people. Here, Laura attempts to make us understand her story through her subjective narration, as it revolves around her extra-marital affair with Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard). The guilty chattering of her inner mind does not give us a detailed picture of her home or the people around. To focus on this inner limited point of view, Lean uses Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Concerto*, played by the well-known pianist Eileen Joyce, in order that the audience may sense Laura's emotions when she meets and falls in love with Alec. Thus, the voice-over here is used to tell a complex emotional tale of adventure, unsettlement, joy, and guilt.

Since Laura's confessions do not appear as a continuous pouring from her heart, at a certain point of time in the story, but rather, as streams of guilt interspersed with delicate adventures, negotiating the voice-over as it encapsulates the various segments of this story poses a challenge. The sound track is therefore carefully designed by favoring the voice-over in sound balance, as is normally done in films, and also at the same time, making it unique by using a romantic Rachmaninov piano theme. The generic sounds of traffic on the busy Milford street by day, along with the familiar soundscape of Milford railway station by night, are effectively used to create a romantic out-of-focus sound frame that carefully layers the anxiety ridden, guilt-filled, and sometimes hysterical, voice-overs.



Pic. 4: Alec (Trevor Howard) watching Laura (Celia Johnson) at the Milford Railway Station in *Brief Encounter* (1945)

Source: <https://wondersinthedark.wordpress.com/2014/10/03/2-brief-encounter-1945/>

The music and effects are carefully linked to the diegesis that enable the audience, despite the blurred, ambivalent, confessions of the homodiegetic narration of Laura, to get involved in the actions as it unfolds. However, during the voice-over itself, the sound effects are low in volume and dipped under. Territorial sounds, like the bell sound at the Milford station, or the rumbling and roaring of the steam engines along with the visuals of the smoke they emit, are carefully woven to punctuate the end of her voice-overs.

The use of effects is particularly noticeable in the train sequence when Laura says in the voice-over: "This can't last... this misery can't last... I want to remember every minute-always-always-to the end of my days..."⁶ Laura's head simulates a sudden jerk immediately after the voice-over, as we hear the suddenly amplified noise of the train coming to a standstill. The volume of this effect is substantially higher than the prior effect of the running train and the music during the voice-over. Later, sound effects mark the beginning of a voice-over, when Laura describes her first meeting with Alec. Her voice-over starts immediately after the sound of a train drawing to a standstill. She says in a joyful voice: "... that's how it all began... just through me getting a little piece of grit in my eye."

This strategy in the use of effects continues through the film. Later, half-way through the film, the cloud of steam and the sound of the incoming engine act as visual fade-out and a simultaneous sound-fade in, and creates an unusual dissolve as we see her enter a crowded third-class compartment of the train to Ketchworth. The sound of the grinding brakes of the train and the hiss of steam is used to punctuate the end of her voice-over lines: "... I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that he wouldn't say a word, and at that moment the first awful feeling of danger swept over me."

The station bell is also used to similar effect in other places. As Laura says in her voice-over, for example, that "... Nobody could have guessed what he was really feeling... then the bell went for his train." The platform bell rings. This points to a general pattern in the film, where we first listen to her voice-over and then, are again visually reminded of what she has just narrated. Such a redundancy underscores the fact that "this long flashback is not just a device for telling one story in the context of

another, but is specifically Laura's telling of it."⁷ As far as the music is concerned, Rachmaninov and Laura are juxtaposed together. Thus, the piano concerto we hear during the credits later becomes her theme, as it first enters with a gradual attack inside the train sequence, while the camera tracks into her close-up and her voice-over begins in the film for the first time. The texture of Laura's voice over is thus laid like an embroidery, rather than using the voiceover as the normative patchwork: Laura's anxiety and her inner "blues" are woven together with Rachmaninov's velvety romantic tunes to embroider the striation in her very smooth middleclass sedentary life.



Pic. 5: Laura' double/interiority in *Brief Encounter* (1945)
Source: <http://thefifiorganization.net/janus/brief-encounter/>

The sound effects form the thick black lines which delineate the passage into the interiority form the outside formal world of Laura. But as we have seen in *Out of Africa*, here too there is a spillage of the striation into the smooth urban middleclass home of Laura.

For instance, like the effects, the music is also brought into the diegesis early on in a scene at home where she is with her husband Fred Jesson (Cyril Raymond). Here, Laura crosses the room, turns on the radio and tunes into the opening movement of the Rachmaninov *Piano Concerto in C minor*. As Fred is busy with a crossword puzzle in *The Times*, she takes up her sewing and sits quietly opposite him. We see her eyes fill with tears through a close shot, as her inner monologue starts in a tender voice: "Fred, Fred, dear Fred. There's so much I want to say to you. You are the only one in the world with enough wisdom and gentleness to understand... I don't want you to be hurt. You see, we are a happily married

⁶ See *Masterworks* for Laura's voice-over in its entirety.

⁷ See Dyer, p 17. Dyer also details the music of the film in his book.

couple and must never forget that. This is my home.” These lines emphasize the theme of the film. It also indicates that the film is going to be narrated by Laura. Simultaneously, the Rachmaninov music, layered under the voice-over, becomes another voice of her interiority and expressivity, as it tells of her emotions, of the love and guilt imbued in her relationship with Alec. The soundscape being set at a constant level, her voice-overs allow us to feel as though we were in a privileged position within the confession box from where she is narrating the whole story. The semantics of her voice-overs hint at the anxiety of a middle-class English woman when confronted with her own moral imperfection, particularly when she says: “I felt so utterly humiliated and defeated and so dreadfully, dreadfully ashamed”;... “I should have been utterly wretched and ashamed... I know I should, but I wasn’t.” By focusing on the inner recesses of her heart, and through its hurried and self-critical tone, the voice-over strives to make the audience sympathize with Laura. While her highly subjective narration restricts the showcasing of the British life in the forties essential to our understanding of the milieu of the story, through our capacity for reduced listening it succeeds in drawing us to her guilt, stemming from her ingrained values of family and love, thereby enabling us to extrapolate her entire society outside from within it, and to then empathize with her plight.

In their delineation of the musical model to explicate their take on the striated and smooth spaces, Deleuze and Guattari invoke Pierre Boulez: “[He] was the first to develop a set of simple oppositions and complex differences ... In the simplest terms, Boulez says that in a smooth space-time one occupies without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts in order to occupy. He makes perceptible the difference between nonmetric and metric multiplicities, directional and dimensional spaces. He renders them sonorous” (477). This passage seems like the apt description of Laura’s interiority as she moves from the smooth space-time of her home to her anxiety ridden, often staccato style voiceover driven meeting with her paramour, wherein she literally counts to occupy as epitomized by the huge clock and the bell sound, at the railway station. The directional space of the railway station and the dimensional space of her home gets blurred as Rachmaninov’s music and her impulse to confess/share her secret life striates the smooth domestic sphere, even as it provides the canvas to weave her story of uninhibited desire and

passion, and thus smoothen her disconnected heart and its longings. Thus, the textural embroidery surrounding Laura’s passionate but anxiety ridden voice underpins this classic narrative of the flow desires between the subconscious/striated and the conscious/smooth.



Pic. 6: Laura (Celia Johnson) and Alec (Trevor Howard) in *Brief Encounter* (1945)

Source: <http://www.gonemovies.com/WWW/Drama/Drama/BriefEncounterKiss.asp>

However, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between “the central theme or motif” in embroidery and “the piece by piece constructions, [and the] infinite, successive additions of fabric” in patchwork by focusing on the harmonious center of the former. Nonetheless, as in Laura’s case above, embroidery could be a frame which links or is the conduit between the external/exterior and the internal/interior patches of Laura’s universe, and the frame could be read as an always shifting outside/inside boundary from the subjectivity of the protagonist, rendering the texture of her voice/emotions and its valences with music and effect as a dynamic one.

Heterodiegetic Voice-Over and Documentaries: Simone Signoret’s voice-over narration in *Le Joli Mai*

Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme’s *Le Joli Mai* or *The Merry Month of May* (1963), is a portrait of Parisians in May 1962, the month that marked the end of Algerian war. This classic cinema-verite documentary captures the spirit of Paris in the early 1960s and incorporates ethnographic interviews with a broad cross section of Parisians including a slum dweller, a merchant, an African student, an Algerian worker, as well as a priest turned militant communist.



Pic. 7: Chris Marker's *Le Joli Mai* (1963): *The Happy and Cheerful Month of May*; Source: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/chris-marker-and-pierre-lhomme-le-joli-mai>

The film begins and ends with a meditative, poetic voice-over commentary, jointly authored by Chris Marker and Catherine Varlin, and rendered in Simone Signoret's contemplative voice. In the first half of the film throughout the vignettes of Paris, the voice-over is joyful, with the background music characterized by the lively use of accordion. Accompanying sound effects include the territory sounds of the railway station, as well as the generic sounds of busy streets and the stock exchange. As the documentary proceeds to interview individual Parisians, however, the urban soundscape of Paris dip the music, while the sound effects combine noticeably with the human voice. Then, when the film broadens out to expose the physical setting and the political context in which the Parisians lived, through a moving portrayal of the central prison in particular, the tone of the voice-over becomes quieter and the variations in pitch decrease.

Towards the end of the film, Marker and Lhomme frame a series of visuals of anxious, tired faces of the Parisians as they walk through a busy downtown street, mainly in mid-shots and close-ups. The live sound of cars and other vehicles on the close-ups, draw our attention to specific details, like the tired strides of an old Jean Renoir after a hard day's work. As a series of close-ups captured through telephoto lens follow, the continuing sound of traffic in the effect track is foregrounded by an increase in volume. By this juxtaposition, these faces increasingly come to resemble an angst ridden landscape, and this effect is enhanced by the narration. Simone Signoret's voice becomes more personal as she says: "Are you afraid of God? Is that it?..." The music lowers and the traffic effect dips under the voice and becomes almost inaudible as she says: "You are in Paris in the midst of a prosperous country..." Whereupon the effect once again rises in the succeeding lines: "Perhaps you feel in a confused way..." The music and effects continue over the faces

of tired Parisians when the voice is silent for a few seconds, and creating a meditative space for Marker and Lhomme's final words, as Simone Signoret directly addresses us, the audience, in second person: "As long as poverty exists, you are not rich." Her voice is pulled forward with an increase in the volume and the music is set at a very low level and the effects dip even further down. The music decays quickly after the voice-over. On the next close up of a man, the voice-over says: "As long as despair exists you are not happy." At this point, there is only the sound effect of the traffic set at a very low level along with the voice-over. Then the effect decays quickly. Finally, the final line comes on the close-up of the same man (the face of the prisoner we are shown earlier in the film): "As long as prisons exist you are not free."⁸

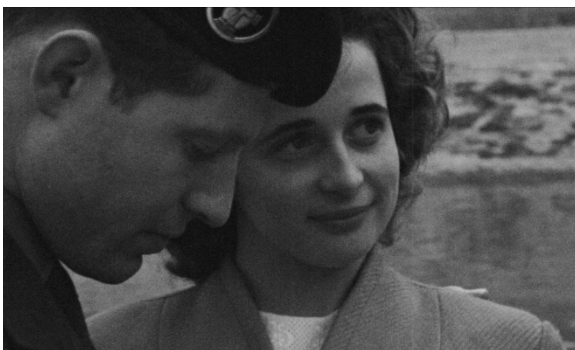
Thus, employing a reductive approach at the physical level, initially decaying the music and then the effects, the film draws our attention to the voice itself. The materialization sound indices—"Sonic details that "materialize" or "de-materialize" the sound of moving images;" a high level of MSI's draws attention to the very material [and its texture] (Chion 2014)—of Simone Signoret's voice points us to the sound of her breathing. This increases our curiosity about the source of the sound. The titles at the end reveal that the voice belonged to Simone Signoret—a French actress—who was narrating in English. This adds to the realism of this *cinéma vérité* film, as we are able to recognize her accent as a sound belonging to people within the diegesis of the film.

Joseph Conte's erudite observations on patchwork sheds light on Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and argues for how his "compositional method of 'ply over ply'... suggests multi-layered striae of allusions and quotation," but nonetheless, "the often haphazard patchwork or collage of references demonstrates an affinity for smooth space" (61). Conte's reading of the modernist poems of Pound through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari is useful for reading Marker's documentaries and essay films, in particular his collaboration with Lhomme, *Le Joli Mai*. It's an assemblage of their impressions on Paris and its people immediately after the end of the Algerian war. Like Marker's other famous film *Sans Soleil* (1983), this is also an essay film full of references to and/or quotations from French history, artists and

⁸ See Brun, for the full script.

activists, and Algeria. As in the case of the patchwork in *Cantos* and its "affinity for smoothness," Marker and Lhomme's compilation of impressions on Paris and her people enable their pacifist and leftist egalitarian ideals to intersect through the voice of Signoret who addresses their concern for the Others in a foreign language (English). She weaves a texture through her accent and her differential stress on the syllables and the pronunciation of vowels, to express their concern about Otherness due to the swiftly modernizing and alienating Paris, as well as their eagerness to communicate with the Others despite the difference.

Conte in his insightful analysis of the "literary 'quilting'" in Lyn Hejinian's prose poem *My Life*, points to how her experimental "patchwork form [is] expandable," like the sixth section of her book, which "refers to the traditional Hindu form of 'raga' in which themes and variations are improvised within a prescribed framework" (61–2). The climax of *Le Joli Mai*, analyzed above for its reductive and minimal formal aesthetics in terms of its soundscape, also has an expansive texture when a compassionate but concerned Signoret ruminates over Marker's authorial themes of poverty and richness, despair and happiness, and prison and freedom. The peculiarly husky voice of Signoret which was endearing early on in the film, now becomes gradually alarming: She improvises on the theme of love and compassion and its variations "within the prescribed framework" of Marker and Lhomme's montage, to reveal reflexively and retrospectively how her voice narrating their meditations on the hopes surrounding the end of Algerian war as well as the despair/apprehensions regarding the future is not the patchwork but the main fabric of the film which coheres together the absorbing assemblages of Paris and her people.



Pic. 8: Chris Marker's *Le Joli Mai* (1963): The Cheerful but Contemplative Parisians in the Aftermath of the Algerian War.

Source: <http://blogs.artinfo.com/moviejournal/2013/09/12/le-joli-septembre-marker-s-classic-doc-returns/>

Voice-Over and the Subalterns

Another film that employs the voice-over in interesting ways is *Fayum Portraits* (1988), a documentary by filmmakers Bob Rosen and Andrea Simon, who worked in collaboration with art historian Richard Brilliant. "It is a haunting presentation of Hellenistic Egyptian funerary portraits, produced in the context of the 'Art on Film' program sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Getty Museum (Altman 173)." The film showcases over fifty mummy portraits painted in the Fayum region of Egypt between A.D 100 and 300 during Roman rule, accompanied by the music of Meredith Monk, as well as with a heterodiegetic voice-over track. The voice-over track is constructed with different voices of men and women arranged individually one after another. Recording outdoors ensures that the redundant quality of a studio recorded voice-over track is avoided, and a unique effect is achieved by varying the reverb levels of these voices. The beautifully shot visuals of the Egyptian portrait paintings evoke an archaic sensibility, such as that of the indoors of an old studio, or of a picture exhibition in an ancient cave. By using the voices of common people, the voice-over narration gives us a glimpse of the ordinary people of ancient Egypt, and reminds us of their lives and values as we get absorbed in their artistically painted faces from centuries ago.

The documentary begins with the sound of women humming. Subsequently, a woman begins narrating: "You are in the oasis of Fayum. It is here these people live and die..." Next, we hear a man's voice saying: "These portraits are painted from life. Yet the painter captures the essence of human subjects..."

After the introduction, while the history of Fayum and her people is being narrated, different voices in the voice-over track inform us of their beliefs and tells us of their culture as the camera pans and tilts across various portraits of men and woman with dissolves in between. The film then depicts the indigenous treatment given by their creators to the hair, eyes, and faces in their paintings for the preservation of color. Then, over a portrait of a bearded man, the voice-over says: "I longed for the Lord of the winds... I seek for God himself not for the work of God." The voice-over, through the quality of its sound, adds value to the image here, as the audience interprets it as the plea of the bearded man in the portrait. By avoiding the studio and incorporating the ambience of an outdoor space, these different voices in the narration add a realistic

dimension through their quotidian texture that draws attention to the community rather than individuals. The juxtaposition of the present with the faces of people from the past creates a unique effect, drawing us into this history of the subalterns, who appear so majestic in appearance.

The camera proceeds to pan away from the bearded man's portrait to a young woman's portrait. A woman's voice takes over: "My thoughts are torn this way and that... in the habit of change, and shall the earth see all of paradise that we shall know." The visceral texture of the voices brings the portraits alive by the ordinariness of their sound quality. The voices-over along with sporadically used ethnic music, enable us through the voices of the subaltern and its texture of the ordinary to perceive the celebration of life as the primary theme in the portraits of these Fayum painters from so long ago.

Conclusion

In this essay I have studied voice-overs from a select sample of films, in order to detail the voice-over's primary role in cinema, as a conspicuous narrating agent of the image-maker. As a narrating

agent, the voice-over works in tandem with the musical score as well as with the sound effects of the film. On the surface, this relationship appears to be an uncomplicated one, with the voice-over dominating all the time. However, as my study has shown, the relationship between voice-over, sound effects and music is a complex one that varies from film to film. There are subtle variations in each instance, depending on the goals of narration and the concomitant texture.

My study also reveals the complexity of the voice-over sound as it differs significantly in the way it is used by the various auteurs and according to the needs of the genre. The uniqueness of the voice-over sound, therefore, lies, as exemplified by the landmark films discussed above, in its singularity of texture to affect the audience, mainly through the materiality of the voice and its valences as it weaves itself through other dominant sounds in the soundscape of a film, and more importantly, by cohering the visuals to delineate the narrative, while simultaneously shedding light on the interiority of the characters.

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