

Editor’s Note

While it is true that film has been historically considered an image-centred medium, the fact that hearing plays as much a role in perceiving the motion picture as seeing does, transcends it beyond a mere visual art. Furthermore, as noted sound theorist Michel Chion asserts in *The Voice in Cinema*, “the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it.” Therefore, studying parts of the cinema in which the voice gains particular significance is not only justified, but necessary. This issue of *Cinephile* revolves around diverse applications and functions of the voices in fiction films, whose sources are absent from the image frame.

Theoretical approaches to the filmic voice were only developed in the 1980s, and as the works cited in the articles here indicate, at least in the case of off-screen voices and voice-over, they have not been properly updated. One goal of this collection has been to explore various demonstrations of voice-over both in a more contemporary scope and on a more international scale. The main concern of each of the following five articles is the voice-over, showing how concentrating on this under-appreciated technique can lead to bigger conclusions about films and filmmakers.

Expanding upon her own highly influential works on the cinematic voice, Sarah Kozloff renders an analytical reasoning for the rarity of voice-over in classical Hollywood romantic comedies, and its emergence as a “staple element” in contemporary representatives of the genre. Through an insightful historiography and some “delicious” examples, Kozloff provides an inclusive contextual and structural schema to explain some of the implications and consequences of a crucial shift in this paradigm.

Carl Laamanen points out some major differences in Terrence Malick’s employment of the voice-over throughout his career. Moving away from a single, narrative-centred voice-over to multiple character-driven voice-overs that speak from a “timeless present,” Malick’s voices in *The Tree of Life*, according to Laamanen, place us in God’s auditory position, emphasized by a disjointed structure.

In her culturally-focused examination of voice-overs in Chris Eyre’s *Skins* (2002), Laura Beadling argues that the film’s various voice-overs reject not only the existence of a singular authoritative voice, but the possibility of such a conclusive vantage point in the American representations of Native people and stories, both in the cinema and the

culture. The self-revealing act of voice-over narration, then, is considered a politically radical act.

Dismissing the claim that voice-over is incompatible with Asian cinemas, Stephen Teo studies the relationship between words and images in the Far-Eastern cinematic modes. Using an ancient Chinese theoretical framework of poetic values, Teo analyzes the voice-over narration in *Spring in a Small City* (Fei Mu, 1948), “as a classic example of a generic fusion between the cinemas of the West and the East.”

Finally, Alexander Fisher compares the tradition of oral performances in West Africa to the deeper levels of voice-over in cinema. Giving the example of Ousmane Sembène’s *Borom Sarret* (1969), Fisher suggests that some similarities exist in the work of traditional African *griots* and the third-person *cinematic narrator* behind the voice of the film’s unreliable first-person narrator.

The limited space and scope of this study prevented us from including more of the excellent articles submitted. I want to thank all the academics who sent us their essays, and hope that this critical attention can initiate a further round of scholarship on the topic of voice-over soon. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the contributors, editors, and the artist Soroosh Roohbakhsh for their everlasting commitment and hard work. The kind words of encouragement from such distinguished scholars as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Edward Branigan, and Claudia Gorbman, along with the helpful suggestions of advisor Lisa Coulthard and Ernest Mathijs, should also be noted. Lastly, I am especially thankful to my brilliant colleague and *Cinephile*’s previous editor-in-chief, Shaun Inouye, to whom this issue owes immensely.

Throughout the history of cinema, the voice-over has been denigrated by some theorists, critics, and screenwriting gurus. In actuality, though, not only has its presence and popularity *not* diminished, but it has acquired new appreciation and found more significance in various cinematic cultures. As the instances in the following essays show, from the generic conventions of Hollywood to the independent works of many film auteurs, and from the poetic films of East Asia to the politically aware cinema of West Africa, voice-over rules!

—Babak Tabarraee

Contributors

Laura Beadling earned her Ph.D. in American Studies from Purdue University in 2007. Since then, she has been teaching film, literature, and writing at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She has recently published on Mohawk filmmaker Shelley Niro, and is working on a book about Native American filmmaking.

Alexander Fisher is Lecturer in Film Studies at Queen’s University Belfast, where he teaches courses on world cinemas and film music. He has published widely on the relationships between sound, culture, and cinematic form, concentrating in particular on the works of a number of African directors, including Ousmane Sembène, Med Hondo, Souleymane Cissé, and Djibril Diop Mambéty.

Sarah Kozloff has been teaching at Vassar College since 1988, where she holds the William R. Kenan, Jr. Chair. Her scholarship focuses on American cinema, particularly on issues related to language, narrative, and ideology. Her classic *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (1988) is by far the most cited source on the subject. She continued her study of film sound in *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (2000).

Carl Laamanen is an M.A. student in English at Texas Tech University, specializing in Film and Media Studies. Following his research interests in the exchange between film, religion, philosophy, and culture, Carl’s current projects range from employing feminist theology in service of film analysis to exploring Terrence Malick’s connection to Heidegger.

Soroosh Roohbakhsh received his B.F.A. in Television Production from Tehran IRIB University, Iran. In the past decade, Roohbakhsh has been working as a graphic designer, journalist and television producer. He has designed over a hundred book covers, and is currently employed as an executive producer in the bilingual television channel, IFILM TV.

Stephen Teo received his Ph.D. from RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He has published numerous books and articles on Asian cinemas, revolving around subjects of genre theory, film history, auteur studies, cultural studies, national cinema, and investigations into the literary and visual aspects of film theory. He is currently the Head of Division of Broadcast & Cinema Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

CINEPHILE is the University of British Columbia’s peer-reviewed film journal, published with the continued support of the Centre for Cinema Studies. The journal aims to provide an academic forum for film theory, history, and criticism. Recent issues have addressed such topics as sound, horror, anime, and contemporary realism. We are proud to have featured original essays by K.J. Donnelly, Barry Keith Grant, Matt Hills, Ivone Margulies, Murray Pomerance, Paul Wells, and Slavoj Žižek. The journal is available both online and in print via subscription. Please visit our website for more information.