

Defining the Sound of Femininity

Review of *Women's Voices in Digital Media: The Sonic Screen from Film to Memes* by Jennifer O'Meara, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022

EMMA CONATSER REKTENWALD

In *Women's Voices in Digital Media*, Jennifer O'Meara takes up important questions regarding new media's sound and its connection to the representation of gender and sexuality. The work seeks to understand how "particular digital formats and platforms . . . are shaping experiences of women's voices, but also how these 'new media' trends relate to the historical treatment of women's voices . . . , as well as to the corresponding theories of voice and gender."¹ Bridging the gap between the study of the feminine voice and the way it is represented in new mediated forms is an ambitious venture, but this is precisely the challenge that O'Meara so aptly takes on.

The book's first chapter examines the role of digital platforms like YouTube and IMDb in the archival study of vocal histories. O'Meara uses several known instances of early Hollywood dubbing for the chapter's case study, interrogating the erasure of these women's voices and its connection to cultural assumptions about femininity. The chapter opens with a description of *Wound Footage* (2009), a piece of audio-visual glitch art by Thorsten Fleisch, which points to the dubbing work of Anita Ellis in the film *Gilda* (1946).

1. Jennifer O'Meara, *Women's Voices in Digital Media: The Sonic Screen from Film to Memes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), 20.

O'Meara uses this piece as an example of the excavation that vocal histories like Ellis's require. As the author reveals, the work of Ellis and many like her is not properly credited in the films themselves but is supported by databases like IMDb or in more colloquial knowledge like the comments viewers leave on YouTube clips of the film. O'Meara analyzes these discourses, underscoring their connection to the feminine screen voice, one of the book's fundamental concepts. As the author notes, "Such technologies and unofficial accounts [such as IMDb and YouTube] can be crucial to a diachronic understanding of the female screen voice."² Here, the author pulls accounts of Ellis, along with Nikki van der Zyl, Mercedes McCambridge, and Louise Brooks, to construct a revised history of the female voice's auditory presence but visual absence. O'Meara engages with Tessa Dwyer's concept of "to-be-dubbed-ness," drawing conclusions about the way these women's voices have been recycled and reinterpreted over time.³

After defining the stakes of vocal presence and physical absence, chapter 2 contemplates the role of digitized representations of vocal femininity. Here, the author examines three films, *The Congress* (2013), *Anomalisa* (2015), and *Her* (2013). O'Meara points out that these mediated images of feminine digitizations have implications for real-world technology such as Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa, with the aim of "reorient[ing] attention to the two-way flow between actual voice technologies and their representations in English-language cinema."⁴ Here, the author develops the concept of the feminine voice, arguing that while the dubbed actresses were rendered invisible to audiences outside of their voice, in these films, each woman's embodied presence is replaced, with only her voice remaining. O'Meara pays particular attention to the desirability that these voices garner from male characters. The author links these actresses' performances to actual instances of embodied presence being replaced with technology, insisting

2. O'Meara, *Women's Voices in Digital Media*, 30.

3. This concept itself is an adaptation of Laura Mulvey's "to-be-looked-ness," though both are concerned with the notion of the male ear/gaze respectively.

4. O'Meara, *Women's Voices in Digital Media* 61.

that these threats of the voice signaling idealized femininity are less imagined than we might guess. O'Meara argues that without visual markers, this voice is subject to fewer racialized/queered readings. Without an embodied presence, the feminine voice is fetishized as a straight, white ideal.

In chapter 3, the author examines the history of the female voice-over and its relationship to narration, beginning with early Hollywood and ending with expanded cinematic forms. O'Meara's primary goal here is to "consider how . . . voice-overs by familiar actresses are being used to help initiate audiences into various new forms of digital entertainment."⁵ The author traces the history of the female voice-over, determining how each iteration of this trope positions each female narrator as increasingly self-aware. O'Meara's primary case studies are Busy Philipps's and Sarah Jessica Parker's Instagram stories, where the actresses stand in as narrator, writer, and editor all at once. The author argues that these women's previous on-screen roles underscore their Instagram voiceovers, infusing them with the sexuality and sensibility audiences associate with their performances. O'Meara also contends that these actresses' work represents decades of women who have navigated industrial changes surrounding sound and the production of the on-screen feminine voice, from Gloria Swanson to voiced VR.

The fourth chapter is O'Meara's most concentrated case study. Here, the author studies the way different feminine voices are remixed in the *You Must Remember This* podcast. The author argues that by separating women's embodied images from the voices presented on the show, the host Karina Longworth is able to "reorient listeners' attention to the verbal and vocal representation of women in Hollywood."⁶ O'Meara contextualizes Longworth's career, connecting the host's work to the audio theory of Michel Chion and Michele Hilmes, who each conceive of the sourceless sound in different manners. Although she grounds this chapter's premise in the close reading of

5. O'Meara, 94.

6. O'Meara, 128.

the podcast at large, O'Meara focuses especially on the ways Jane Fonda and Jean Seberg's images, respectively, are renegotiated on the podcast.

In chapter 5, O'Meara's focus is the subtitled meme, an artifact where the feminine voice remains visually present, even when it is not audible, asserting that these memes function as sites of political discourse and connotative meaning. O'Meara excavates the "afterlives of scripted screen dialogue and how it is reused in different contexts on the secondary screens of the internet," with particular emphasis on the way this continues to shape women's digital identities.⁷ Beginning with early Hollywood intertitles, the author creates a chronology of the development of the pairing of text and image. O'Meara contends that a character's visual presence can inflect a viewer's reading of the text, as the character's superimposition determines the way the text makes meaning. This superimposition, O'Meara argues, continues in the memes used today, as tones of heroism and villainy are suggested in the political memes commodified by Donald Trump and others. Ultimately, the author determines that these messages are fraught, citing the import of such considerations as intersectionality and the Bechdel test as limits to the effects these memes can have.

The book closes with chapter 6, where the author seeks to understand the feminine voice as performance and examines its remediation in spaces like *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The author cites the centrality of the lip sync at the end of each episode, suggesting that this emphasis on performing cis femininity is linked to the long-standing tradition of the lip sync as a symbol of ideal femininity, such as Debbie Reynolds' role in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). O'Meara contextualizes the show's historic connection to vocal embodiment, referencing other early televised drag shows and situating the maternal voice often taken on by "Mama Ru." In the author's estimation, this performance of cisgendered femininity, when paired with a visual "body talk," can in one moment disrupt and in another reinforce the discourse surrounding cis femininity and its digital embodiment.

7. O'Meara, 159.

Women's Voices in Digital Media takes on the challenge of framing the scope and sound of digital femininity, for better or for worse. The book's premise is contingent upon studying the way the feminine voice has been framed across a wide range of digital media. Because much of the book is concerned with examining the way this voice functions in a variety of *mainstream* digital spaces, there is little need to distinguish between the feminine voice as it was hegemonically imagined and how it actually existed in each of those contexts. It is not until the final chapter, however, that questions of cisgendered femininity become central to the author's argument. Regardless of any tendency to privilege hegemonic conceptions of femininity over others, *Women's Voices in Digital Media* represents one of the most robust collections of case studies that take both digital sound and feminist study into account. For readers who wish to better understand the ways feminist scholarship can interact with this audio studies, look no further than *Women's Voices in Digital Media*.

