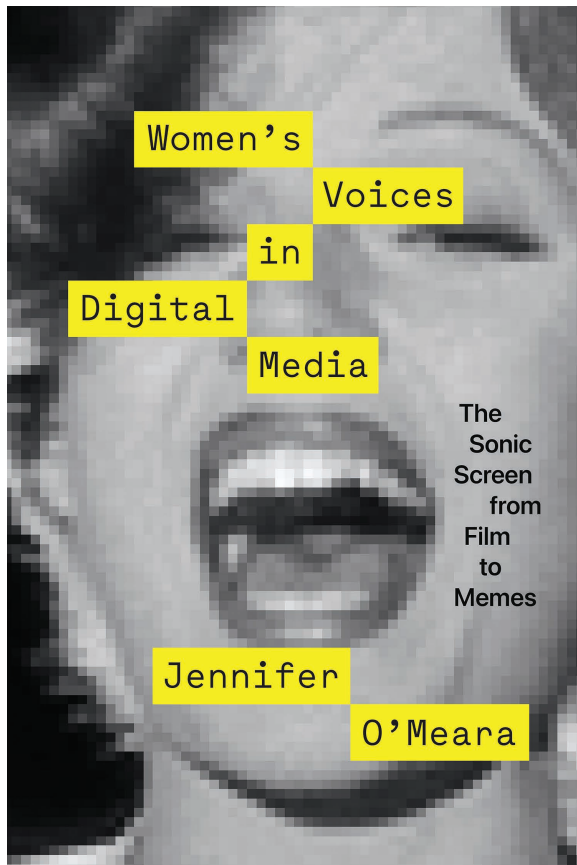# Book Review:

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

Katie Quanz
URSINUS COLLEGE
kquanz [AT] ursinus.edu[1]

Studies on the female voice have been a mainstay of both feminist film theory and sound studies, with a number of important monographs, articles, and book chapters published on the topic every decade since Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988). Amy Lawrence's *Echo and Narcissus* (1991), Britta Sjogren's *Into the Vortex* (2006), and Jennifer Fleeger's *Mis-Matched Women* (2014) are but a few noteworthy examples. With such a rich body of scholarship, it may seem to some that the fascination with how women's voices are presented in the media has run its course. But the papers I heard at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies conference in Denver in 2023 suggest otherwise. There, women's voices in relation to artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), and the popularity of female singers such as Taylor Swift and Beyonce were among the offerings on the topic. Clearly, the presentation of female voices remains a siren call in media studies, one that continues to be of interest to several scholarly interest groups.

But the wealth of scholarship on the topic raises a predicament for those currently engaging

with it. What more can be added to the conversation that is not merely duplicating previous claims with updated examples? Jennifer O'Meara answers this question with aplomb and reveals that there is much to be added. In her most recent book, *Women's Voices in Digital Media: The Sonic Screen from Film to Memes*, O'Meara draws on a wealth of scholarship to ground a comprehensive exploration into how the digital age enables different opportunities for the female voice to be represented, as well as new ways for audiences and fans to engage with these digital representations. In the introduction to her book, O'Meara writes:

> In a cultural climate that is increasingly convergent and participatory, women's voices are subject to a forceful pull—as though in a vortex—often spinning from one screen format to another. For the individual in question, be it an actress or a character, this may manifest in a lack of control. And while they (and we) may not be able to prevent such strong forces, this book aims to at least understand them.[2]

Indeed, O'Meara's focus is on this "forceful pull" that takes place once women's voices are digitally encoded, a pull that is a byproduct of both the technology and how we have come to use it.

I admit that I was skeptical at first of O'Meara's central concern that the digital era changed the ways that audiences engage with women's voices. Have digital technologies fundamentally changed how we listen to the aural representation of women? While my own research focuses on the ways digital sound production technologies have brought substantial changes to labor practices, I have been more reluctant to say the same for our listening practices. However, O'Meara's arguments quickly convinced me that speakers and listeners have in fact interacted with women's voices differently following the widespread adoption of digital sound technologies.

O'Meara presents this argument across six meticulously researched chapters. In the first one, she discusses how digital video-sharing platforms enable fans to reevaluate and discuss the vocal replacements of female actors. While the vocal performances she examines predate the digital era, O'Meara convincingly argues that the digital era facilitates investigations into whose uncredited voice we hear in classic movies, with a focus on the Bond franchise's purported use of Nikki van der Zyl to redub the voices of several Bond women. For O'Meara, it is the nature of digital sharing of media and the fact that fans can relisten and comment on film clips that enable them to question whose voice they hear and its implications for how audiences have come to identify the franchise's iconic "Bond Girl," among other Hollywood stars.

The next chapter looks at *Anomalisa*, *The Congress*, and *Her*, films that not only center the voices of female characters but also present these voices as mechanical or post-human. *Her* specifically forms a nice connection with the previous chapter, as its filmmakers ultimately replaced Samantha Morton's voice with Scarlett Johansson's. In her analysis of Johansson's disembodied performance, O'Meara notes how technology companies prefer female voices for their software, from AOL UK's use of Joanna Lumley in the 1990s to the popularity of Siri and Alexa today. While O'Meara does not offer definitive explanations for the preference of female voices, she notes two possible motivations: the tendency for women to occupy receptionist and assistant positions and the desire by technology companies to avoid associations

between their product and HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In relation to the film *The Congress*, O'Meara examines how Robin Wright's voice becomes her "signature" of authenticity in a world where anyone can look like Robin Wright. She also notes how the film highlights the dangers of AI replacing actors, a topic at the foreground of the recent strike by SAG. Finally, in *Anomalisa*, O'Meara analyzes Michael's (the male lead) obsession with Lisa's voice. For Michael, the ASMR quality of Lisa's vocal utterances and his desire to hear her sing are more important than physical intimacy. O'Meara links Michael's fetishization of Lisa's voice to that of fans of ASMR. For O'Meara, each of these films interrogates central issues of the digital reproduction of female voices: their role as virtual assistants, the potential of AI to replace the role of actors, vocal fetishes, and the performer's lack of control over their voice once it is recorded.

In the third chapter, O'Meara focuses on how film stars are providing voiceovers in new contexts, from museum guides to Instagram reels. Here, O'Meara asks how actresses change their voices for different platforms. To answer this question, O'Meara primarily looks at how actresses are building upon their personas by lending their voices to projects outside of traditional media. For instance, Sarah Jessica Parker narrated the museum guide for the Met's "Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty" exhibit. Parker's voice provided glamor to the exhibit while tying in with her personal brand as a Manhattan fashionista. O'Meara also examines how Parker and Busy Philipps change their voices for their personal Instagram accounts to create intimacy and familiarity with their fans. In so doing, they signal that they are inviting fans into the actresses' personal spaces. Such intimate moments subsequently form contrasts with film voiceovers, such as those heard throughout *Clueless* and *In a World.*

Chapter four is a close examination of the podcast *You Must Remember This*, hosted by podcaster Karina Longworth, with a particular focus on the show's Jean Seberg and Jane Fonda season. Here, O'Meara's interest is in how we relate to an actress's voice differently when it is detached from images of the actress's body. The separation between audio and image, according to O'Meara, enables the podcast's audience to hear the content and emotion behind the message anew, especially as Longworth mixes film performances with interviews and her own interpretations of each actress's history. In so doing, O'Meara argues that Longworth revises popular understandings of Seberg and Fonda, thereby substantially contributing to the study of women's film history.

The next chapter explores how memes (silent GIFs from famous movies and television shows) can cause viewers to reproduce the voice of an actress inside their heads. O'Meara's focus here is on how such memes were used after the 2016 presidential election. These memes, O'Meara argues, became a tactic to push back against MAGA memes and internet trolling by the far-right. Here, O'Meara argues that some voices and lines of dialogue are so iconic that we hear the actress's voice when reading the text. Drawing on examples from *Clueless*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Simpsons*, among others, O'Meara demonstrates our connection to female characters and also how the memes themselves draw on early cinematic practices.

The final chapter of the book examines *RuPaul's Drag Race* and how the contestants embody the female voice through their reimagined (and lip-synced) performances. O'Meara makes it clear at the outset that this chapter is strongly influenced by Jennifer Fleeger's concept of the mismatched women, as outlined in her 2014 monograph. While Fleeger focuses primarily

on cis-gender women in her book, O'Meara opens up the concept to aid in how we understand drag performances that are designed for audiences in the digital age and that are frequently repackaged as short YouTube videos. Throughout the chapter, O'Meara queers the idea of "female voice" and performance, especially as the drag queens rarely strive for authentic reproductions of the original song. Instead, as O'Meara argues, they opt for demonstrating their skills as entertainers where a voice–body mismatch can heighten the overall performance.

Though each chapter offers a significant intervention to understanding how we listen to female voices through digital technologies, the first and last chapters stand out as the strongest. This may be due to my own research interests, but I can envision teaching either chapter in a course on gender and media or on the voice. It is also worth mentioning that O'Meara's literature reviews deftly tread the line between reminding readers of the relevant arguments presented in previous works without getting bogged down in summary. For me, this was another strength of the book, as it has been years since I read much of the foundational scholarship cited in this text. The literature review was just enough to trigger my memories of these earlier works, and I did not feel like I needed to reread the scholarship to follow O'Meara's claims. Furthermore, in this era of paranoia around missing citations and missing credit, O'Meara confidently acknowledges that her work builds on previous scholarship by linking the concepts she cites to her own exploration of female voices in digital media. In sum, I can see this book becoming part of the aforementioned canon of scholarship that questions and clarifies how media technologies shape the female voice and ultimately how female voices shape the way we engage with and value media technologies.

---

[1] Katie Quanz is a Collegiate Assistant Professor at Ursinus College. Her work has appeared in *The Velvet Light Trap* and the critical anthologies *Cinephemera: Archives, Ephemeral Cinema, and New Screen Histories in Canada* and *Voicing the Cinema: Film Music and the Integrated Soundtrack*. She is currently writing a book about the post-production sound industries in Toronto and London.

[2] Jennifer O'Meara, *Women's Voices in Digital Media: The Sonic Screen from Film to Memes* (University of Texas Press, 2022), 19.