Rice University

Divine Apparitions:
The Female-Operatic Voice in Film

By

Thomas J Hoffman, II

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Master of Music

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Marcia J. Citron, Thesis Advisor
Lovett Distinguished Service Professor
of Musicology

Walter B. Bailey, Associate Professor and
Chair of Musicology

Colleen Lamos, Associate Professor
of English

Houston, Texas

MAY 2007
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI®

UMI Microform 1442080
Copyright 2007 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346
ABSTRACT

Divine Apparitions:
The Female-Operatic Voice in Film

By

Thomas J. Hoffman, II

This work formulates a new language for speaking about the operatic voice in film. Beyond cultural signifiers, opera has a more specific purpose in film, and this thesis will provide a new language for speaking about it in such a way. Borrowing from Michel Chion’s *acousmêtre*, the current document develops a new lexicon for the way operatic music functions, beyond the traditional diegesis, and points out the agency of such voices in film. After chapter one outlines the specific attributes of the diva-acousmêtre, the agent outlined in the thesis, three chapters explore its use in the films *Philadelphia*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *Transamerica*. 
Acknowledgments

This work came to be out of my experiences in a wonderful class at the Shepherd School at Rice University, spring 2006. I want to thank my classmates for many insightful discussions which led to my conception of this work. I want to thank Dr. Marcia J Citron, the professor for that class, for exposing me to this wonderful realm of research, and to the body of literature on it.

Dr. Citron is far more than the person who got me started on this thesis. As my advisor, she has been an invaluable resource for me, an endless fount of knowledge. Additionally, she has been remarkably supportive of me along the way, helping keep me as close to sane as possible. Her book and articles have been just as helpful as my countless meetings with her, and I am eternally grateful to her.

Additionally, I want to thank my committee for their help in the final process of formulating this work. I have enjoyed my coursework with both Dr. Walter Bailey and Dr. Colleen Lamos during my time at Rice, and appreciate their helpful comments on this thesis, and my past work as well.

I also wish to thank the other two people who have gone through the editing process with me. First, Christina Hager, whose knowledge about opera and skills as a writer has been endlessly valuable. Second, and most, I wish to thank my father, Tom Hoffman, for his support, both academically and personally, over the course of this work. The endless late-night phone calls and work on each word, each sentence, got me through this thesis.

Divine Apparitions is dedicated to my mother, Tina Hoffman. As I say in my introduction, it is her voice that led me to a life in music. She took me to see Il Barbiere di Siviglia as a small child and has fostered my love for music all along.
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. i

Chapter One: The Diva Acousmêtre: Theoretical Framework ................................. 1
   A Lexicon of Acousmêtre ....................................................................................... 4
   De-acousmatization .............................................................................................. 7
   The Powers of the Acousmêtre ............................................................................ 8
   The Mother’s Voice ............................................................................................. 11
   The Voice and Gender ......................................................................................... 16
   The Disembodied Voice ..................................................................................... 19

   Operatic Voices .................................................................................................. 25
   Entrapment ......................................................................................................... 29
   Possession .......................................................................................................... 34
   Joe’s Possession ................................................................................................. 40

Chapter 3: The Shawshank Redemption: The Manipulation of the Acousmêtre ... 43
   The Journey of the Voice .................................................................................... 46
   The Mute ............................................................................................................ 47
   The Acousmachine ............................................................................................. 52
   Susannah and the Countess’ Acousmatic Powers ............................................. 53
   Red ...................................................................................................................... 59
   The Diva-acousmêtre and Silence .................................................................... 63

Chapter 4: Transamerica: The Disillusionment by the Diva-acousmêtre .......... 65
   The Gendered Voice ........................................................................................... 69
   Performing a Voice/Performing a Gender ......................................................... 71
   The Operatic Voice ............................................................................................. 73
   A Voice Divorced from a Body ......................................................................... 75
   The Acousmachine ............................................................................................. 77
   Mothers .............................................................................................................. 79
   Rethinking Gender/Rethinking the Acousmêtre .............................................. 82

Postscript .................................................................................................................. 85

Bibliography ............................................................................................................ 89
Preface

Over the last few decades there has been a significant discourse on a wide spectrum of subjects relating to opera and film. The vast majority is on filmed operas in their various incarnations. The work of major scholars such as Jeremy Tambling, Marcia J. Citron, Jeongwon Joe, Rose Theresa, Lesley Stern, and Michal Grover-Friedlander has begun to explore the highly complex intersection that exists between the two related genres.¹ A smaller, but equally significant group of theorists have done work on the function of opera within feature films. Citron and Grover-Friedlander both cross over into work in this field, joining Marc A. Weiner, Richard Dyer, and Mary Hunter,² among others. Like all burgeoning fields of research, the work has dealt primarily with codifying a canon of important films, but a few important scholars have started developing methodologies about how to deal with opera in mainstream film.

Theories about the voice in film, on the other hand, have been developing since the invention of sound film. Early theorists such as Adorno and Eisler discussed both the work of voice on film and music on film as separate entities.³ Other have constructed a

¹ This is a regrettably short list from the growing number of scholars in the field. For a more complete compendium of scholarship, see the bibliography of this work. Of these scholars, the following are particularly important: Jeremy Tambling, ed, A Night at the Opera: Media Representations of Opera (London: John Libbey & Co, 1994) and Jeremy Tambling, Opera Ideology and Film (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987). Also, Marcia J Citron, Opera On Screen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Jeongwon Joe and Rose Teresa, eds. Between Opera and Cinema (New York: Routledge, 2002) especially: Rose Theresa “From Mephistophélès to Méliès: Spectacle and Narrative in Opera and Early Films,” 1-18; Michal Grover-Friedlander, “‘There Ain’t No Sanity Clause’ The Marx Brothers at the Opera,” 19-38; Lesley Stern, “The Tales of Hoffman: An Instance of Operality,” 39-58; Jeongwon Joe, “The Cinematic Body in the Operatic Theater: Philip Glass’s La Belle et la Bête,” 59-74.


more holistic approach. Royal S. Brown speaks of music as a type of “voice” which
functions inside and outside the diegesis.⁴ K.J. Donnelly speaks about sound and music as
disembodied “voices.”⁵ Leading film-music theorist Claudia Gorbman approaches both
simultaneously.⁶ Dealing with the voice in film has always seemed to be the work of film
theorists, but lately, as the above list shows, there has been a serious attempt among
musicologists to understand the voice in film from a musical standpoint. Still, however,
only recently have scholars begun discussing the sung voice, more specifically the
operatic voice, in film. Divine Apparitions is a continuation of the studies of Grover-
Friedlander, Citron, and others.

When I set out to write this work, I had a series of questions before me. First
among them was: what happens when the voice in a film is not simply a spoken voice,
but a sung one? Singing changes more than just the timbre of a voice, but the actual
physiognomy of the voice itself. Singing is a deeply embodied practice. It takes place
inside the body, and tries to communicate itself with the world outside itself. The
psychological and physiological complexities of singing, when added into the filmic
landscape, alter the landscape considerably.

Gorbman has developed a wonderful language for dealing with music and sound
in film. The diegetic spectrum has become the common language among scholars.
However, diegesis, as it is currently discussed, is less of a spectrum and more of a

---

⁴ Royal S. Brown, Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music (Los Angeles: University of

⁵ K.J. Donnelly, The Spectre of Sound: Music in Film and Television (London: British Film

⁶ Claudia Gorbman, Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music (London: British Film Institute
binary. Gorbman explores this paradox in even greater detail, but most scholars, especially K.J. Donnelly, have yielded to a two-sided interpretation of diegesis. Music is either diegetic or not. That is, it either resides within the “world of the film” or is external to it. In *Divine Apparitions*, I wish to turn that assumption on its head. Sometimes music in film traverses the boundaries of the diegesis. Operatic singing is especially successful at this, it seems. I began to wonder why this was true. What about opera made music break the boundaries of film music? And so, I came across a problem that I felt needed to be explored. This crisis came at the same time that I found another one in the language about opera and cinema.

I began my exploration into opera film in a class in 2006 at Rice University. I began to notice that the way many people view opera in feature film is as a marker of class, sexuality, race or gender. Opera, most people were saying, plays to the signifiers that people commonly associate with it. I didn’t think that was enough. I felt opera had a richer agency within feature film and so I began to look further into studies on the subject. After reading countless articles, and having many discussions with my advisor, I came upon the work of Michel Chion, a French film theorist, and his development of the *acousmètrê*. It had already been incorporated into musicology by Marcia Citron and

---

7 Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 3.


9 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*. Claudia Gorbman, ed. and trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Though this term is French, and therefore usually should be italicized, in the context of this study it won’t be, due both to the frequency of its use and the fact that I wish it to be considered a pan-linguistic term.

Carolyn Abbate,¹¹ and I was intrigued by their explorations of the concept. I felt I had found something to answer the problems I encountered in the literature on opera in film. I found, in the acousmêtre, a theory that would help to explore both of my problems with the current language about opera in film. In the first chapter, my exploration of Chion’s theories will elucidate how.

About the same time I began research into Chion’s theories, I was lucky to come across the work of other musicologists of opera in film who using metaphysical language akin to Chion’s acousmêtre. Michal Grover-Friedlander¹² and Michel Poizat¹³ both became major influences on how I would grow to apply the acousmêtre to the sung voice. There is a commonality to the almost spiritual way Grover-Friedlander and Poizat speak about opera—and film—and the way Chion speaks about the voice in film. Other theorists, many already mentioned, crossed my path to help guide me to a new language. These were not all musicologists, but film theorists, gender scholars, queer theorists, and even an economist. Divine Apparitions draws on many disparate resources and jumbling them all together. I feel, however, that this proves the relevance and universality of this current study both inside and outside the academy.

As I came to understand what about the operatic voice made it so universal, I realized that one of the associations that both Chion and Poizat make, and which became central to the current study, was deeply personal to me. My earliest memories are of my


¹² Michal Grover-Friedlander, Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). I am indebted to Dr. Grover-Friedlander, whose poetic title was an inspiration for this current work.

mother’s voice. I associate my childhood with my mother singing me nursery rhymes and Joni Mitchell’s “Circle Game,” which still hearkens me back to lying in my dark bedroom, hearing the disembodied voice of my mother as I drifted off to sleep. As I become an adult, I long for that moment, for that voice, which I will never hear again. I will never be that little boy, and I will always long for it.

And so I wanted to learn why. I was thrilled to learn that, at least in Chion’s estimation, I was not the only one. Additionally, I found something universal about the disembodied operatic voice that didn’t play to stereotypes. Each one of the characters in the following films interacts with the operatic voice in their own way. They bring their own cultural and personal experiences into play with it. Beyond those, however, there is a universal relationship between each character and the operatic voice, one that can be answered by Chion’s theory, and that is what makes this current study possible.

In chapter one of this work, I wish to provide the reader with a previously formed frame of reference, using theories that have been brought forth by a wide variety of theorists, but focusing on the work of Chion. In subsequent chapters, I wish to turn some of those theories upside down and inside out. I will explore them, and see if they work. Some are problematic, as the reader will find out, and some contradict one another. Sadly, the framework of a document this size does not even begin to explore the complexities it opens up. Hopefully, however, this will be a wonderful springboard from which to jump, even if I am the only one doing the jumping!

*Divine Apparitions* attempts to form a bond between the operatic voice and film. More specifically it deals with issues of gender, bodies, and desire. The thesis of *Divine Apparitions* is twofold. First, I want to show how the female-operatic voice functions as
an agent in film. Second, the acousmêtre will provide a new language for speaking about
the operatic voice in film beyond the diegetic spectrum. This work, by its very nature,
takes a varied approach towards the central theme. Beyond all those elements, I want to
form a connection between opera and culture. In this thesis, I hope to add to a growing
attempt to show that opera is still relevant in the general culture, even in popular film.
There is a growing trend in popular culture to use opera in unusual places. Take for
instance the new broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera in movie theaters all over the
country. As we know, opera pops up in television, commercials, radio, and film. This
suggests an exciting future for opera. As we see in the films explored in Divine
Apparitions, one such explanation as to why opera is so valuable to popular culture is its
cultural significance today, even though the significance changes with each new
generation.
Chapter One
The Diva-Acoustmètre:
Theoretical Framework

The voice is elusive. Once you’ve eliminated everything that is not the voice itself—the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color it, what’s left? What a strange object, what grist for poetic outpourings. ~ Michel Chion

To paraphrase Chion, the voice in film is particularly elusive. At first glance, the voice one hears seems to be coming directly from the mouth that one sees. However, this is rarely true, especially in feature films. In fact, the filmed voice is spectral, coming from a source separate from the image itself. Sound film is not what it purports itself to be at all, but rather two entities, sound and image, divorced from one another and then rejoined in front of our very eyes and ears. While on video the heard and the seen come from places in close proximity, on film the image, though seen in front of the audience, comes from behind, and the sound, at least in contemporary theaters, surrounds us. As spectators, however, we convince ourselves that this voice is coming from the synchronous mouth in front of us. This is, of course, not true. We allow ourselves to be deceived, but at some point that deception becomes apparent to us, when either voice or image is divorced from its counterpart.

This act of mimesis in film shows just how powerful the voice is in a cinematic context. Some European filmmakers do not concern themselves with synchronizing the voice to the mouth, but for the most part in Hollywood-style feature films, editors, directors, and actors go to great lengths to make sure that the two occur exactly together.

---

Contemporary filmgoers have come to expect it. It is what gives verisimilitude to the characters and the story they tell. But why is the voice more powerful than the image? In most cases, the image comes first, and the voice second. It would seem that, being captured first, the image would be the stronger agent in film. Without the voice, however, the image is irrelevant. In silent film, written words tell the story, but in sound film, the word must be spoken to be intelligible. This is why filmmakers mix the voice into the soundtrack with such prominence over all other sound. Think of any film in which the speaker is visually far away from the lens, to the point where the mouth is all but invisible, but the sound of their voice is immediate, completely transparent. This is not how sound works, but we accept this deception so that the story might continue.

Over the course of this chapter, several different theories will be explored to show connections that exist between the voice, and more specifically the operatic voice, and film. Central to the entire study will be the work of Michel Chion, a French film theorist, and his work *The Voice in Cinema*. This chapter's main purpose is to outline the central points of Chion's work, occasionally commenting on it, and making certain alterations, using the work of musicologists, to connect it to the musicological spectrum. Hopefully, the theoretical framework outlined in the current chapter will provide a lens through which the films in subsequent chapters may be viewed.

Michel Chion's theories of the voice are particularly illustrative of its power in film. He uses the term acousmêtre to point out that the voice in film is an independent entity, not tied to anything else. This fact is most apparent when the voice is removed from the body. For the purpose of his argument, the acousmêtre is the voice completely divorced from any visual counterpart. It usually sounds from a darkness, completely
disembodied, although it can also come from a machine, such as a voice on a telephone. It is this seeming invisibility that creates agency in the acousmêtre. Chion likens the acousmêtre to the Wizard of Oz. It is the booming voice, seemingly emanating from the great head of Oz, but really coming from behind a curtain, divorced from a human form, awesome, often striking fear into the hearts of its witnesses. It is the voice of God, possession by an otherworldly apparition. At the same time, the acousmêtre is the voice of the mother in the womb, nurturing, warm, and completely surrounding us.² As Chion puts it, the acousmêtre “is a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow.”³

Chion borrows the term acousmêtre from Pierre Schaeffer. In his *Treatise on Musical Objects*, Schaeffer came across the acousmêtre in his search for a language to speak specifically about sound in and of itself, without some sort of surrounding context. Schaeffer’s discovery of the term acousmêtre came from an ancient dictionary, unnamed by both Schaeffer and Chion, where it was used as a descriptive term for the Pythagorean education system, where the master instructed pupils from behind a curtain, completely divorcing his voice from his image, eliminating all distraction from the instruction being offered. This imbued the master’s voice with a sense of divinity, like the instructions of some sort of god. Literally, the term has a broader meaning, which is how it was attenuated into Schaeffer and Chion’s work. Break the word down into its constituent parts and you have “acou-” from “acoustic” and “-mètre” or “being.” Schaeffer applies acousmêtre to some apparently divine voices, but also to describe how people listen to the radio, speak to one another on telephones, and other such activities. He contrasts the acousmêtre to his own term: *visualized listening*, where the listener can see the voice’s

³Ibid, 21.
source.⁴ It was from this that Chion took the term acousmêtre, ascribing to it many more specific attributes, especially in its relationship with film.

Chion points out that the talking film “began with visualized sound.”⁵ This is not to say that the acousmêtre did not exist in early sound-film. There are countless examples of bodiless voices, especially in film-noir and early horror film, the filmic land of shadows. Acousmêtre is not specific to film and radio either. Chion elaborates on the types of acousmêtre, providing definitions for each.

**A Lexicon of Acousmêtre**

Chion briefly explores some of the various types of acousmêtres in the first chapters of *The Voice in Cinema*. He does not go into great detail in his definitions of the radio-acousmêtre and theater-acousmêtre, as they are not as relevant to Chion’s study. They are similarly less significant in the current study. There is no elaboration beyond Chion’s own descriptions of the radio-acousmêtre, and theater-acousmêtre. Each does seem to need deeper exploration, but it is beyond the scope of the current study to do so. However, briefly naming them provides a contrasting framework against which to explore the more relevant incarnation of Chion’s triptych, the filmic-acousmêtre.

The radio-acousmêtre exists in the realm of sound completely divorced from image. There is never a chance that the listener will ever match an image to the voice that they are hearing. Chion finds this limiting in terms of agency. The voice can never be shown, and therefore loses some of its allure. The possibility that the radio-acousmêtre

---


might eventually make its way into the visual spectrum is part of its appeal and subsequent power. However, the threat of appearance also weakens the voice, for at any moment the radio-acousmêtre could be no more, now a simple human voice, limited to all the flaws and corporeality that goes along with being trapped in a body.\textsuperscript{6}

The second form of acousmêtre is more closely related to the filmic-acousmêtre. In the theater-acousmêtre, the voice comes from a source outside the visual field. Specifically, it is coming from offstage. This seems closely attuned to the acousmêtre in film, but Chion makes one very crucial distinction. In the theater-acousmêtre, the voice is not only heard from offstage, it is localized offstage. That is because the stage is bounded very differently from the screen. The edges of a stage are definite, bordered by the proscenium and completely separated from the world outside it. When a sound or voice comes from outside the proscenium, one can assume that it is coming from a specific place beyond the bounds of the stage. Even with the increasing use of microphones in live theater, a voice offstage is easy to locate.\textsuperscript{7}

This is not always true in film. The screen, like the stage, is also bounded by four edges, sometimes even more sharply. However, sound behaves differently in these boundaries. By nature of film's technology, sound always comes from within the screen and from without it. Even when the sound does not come from a clear source on the screen, we do not perceive that it is coming from off-screen the same way we can assume a sound in the theater-acousmêtre comes from offstage. The sound might be coming from on-screen, which makes the filmic-acousmêtre more difficult to pin down than any of its

\textsuperscript{6} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 21.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, 22.
counterparts. Chion elucidates this point; “It’s as if the voice were wandering along the surface, at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle...Neither inside nor outside: such is the acousmêtre fate in the cinema.”

The filmic-acousmêtre can be further subdivided into two categories. First, there is a simple or partial acousmêtre. In this instance, the voice’s source has been seen previously in the film. This type of acousmêtre is less powerful, because it is attached to a body in the spectator’s memory. Though at the moment the partial acousmêtre makes its way into a scene its apparent disembodiment involves in it a certain amount of mystery, it won’t take long to associate it with a body, and trap it in that body again. This process, which will be explored in greater detail, strips the acousmêtre of all its power, leaving it a mere mortal voice.

The second type of filmic-acousmêtre is what Chion, and the present study, concerns itself with most. The complete-acousmêtre has no body, no physical manifestation. It is a complete apparition, unbounded by any flesh, beyond humanity. This is what makes it so powerful. The complete-acousmêtre’s ghost-like quality gives it a character of divinity, an aura that makes it much more powerful than a voice attached to a body. It comes from everywhere; it is unbounded, like the voice of a deity. Like any good deity, it has powers over the characters to which it speaks. For the remainder of this study, when we speak of acousmêtre, we speak of this divine voice.

---


9 Ibid, 21.

10 Ibid.
De-acousmatization

All of these acousmatic voices maintain their powers only as long as they remain acousmatic. Once the voice becomes attached to a body, it loses all of its allure. De-acousmatization is something of a ritual in most cases. Rather than the acousmêtre controlling its surroundings, the voice suddenly becomes ordered by its own body. Corporeality makes the voice human again, removes its divinity, and attaches all of the possible flaws of the body once again. The acousmêtre is now bounded, and the locus is finally the mouth, an orifice that Chion likens to the final result of a striptease. Chion returns to the acousmêtre of the Great Oz. Once Toto rips down the curtain, the booming and awe-inspiring voice of Oz becomes the tiny, wheezy voice of the man who controls him. Dorothy derides the wizard for his deception, to which he replies, “I am a very nice man, but a very bad magician.”11 This returns us to the deception involved in film at its most base level. We see film for the lie it is, the marrying of a false body and a false voice, ultimately telling a story which is also untrue. Film and the voices that represent it are all fallible and mortal, rather than omnipotent and powerful.12

The Powers of the Acousmêtre

What powers do the acousmêtre exhibit? They are the powers of any good deity, of course. The acousmêtre in film is everywhere, it can see everything, and therefore know everything. By extension, in many situations the acousmêtre also controls much of the action in a film, or at least some aspect of it.

Perhaps most apparent to the acoustmètre’s power is its boundlessness. A voice that traverses the boundaries of any world, in this case the world of the screen, can seemingly be in any part of it, or even outside it. As such, no one in the film is free from the acoustmètre, whether they have a direct involvement with it or not. This also gives the acoustmètre yet another paradoxical characteristic: it is simultaneously here and there. Converse to the acousmatic voice’s ubiquity, it might not be anywhere. This contradiction implies that the acousmatic voice exists in another realm, some place that isn’t real, or at least intelligible, to mere mortals. This anonymous ubiquity is easily experienced upon hearing the disembodied voice in film. The first inclination is to find its source. When the source cannot be identified, one comes to the ominous realization that the voice is not only nowhere, but all around us. This enveloping quality will take on special significance in the current study as we explore the voice of the mother as experienced in the womb. Unbounded by a physical existence, the acoustmètre can move between its own realm and the “real” world of the film.\(^{13}\)

This simultaneous ubiquity and anonymity also makes it possible for the acoustmètre to see everything. This is what makes it most like the voice of God. There is no place to hide from it. When the acoustmètre is not audible, it is impossible to detect. Therefore, it can observe the actions of the persons within the scene anonymously. One might try to trick the acoustmètre or hide from it, but one never knows if one is succeeding. This is what leads to what Chion calls the *panoptic fantasy*: if the acoustmètre

can see the entire space and everything in it. The acousmêtre, in turn, is master of everything, which is the last power of the acousmêtre.\textsuperscript{14}

In opposition to its panoptic counterpart, there is another very important type of disembodied voice in film: the blind acousmêtre. This acousmêtre is even more enigmatic than its all-seeing counterpart, and by extension even more awesome. While the panoptic acousmêtre might be able to see you at any given time, and in fact the possibility remains as such, the blind, or partially blind, acousmêtre deceives its bodily companions into thinking that it cannot see anything, tricking them into believing they are beyond its power. In fact, the blind acousmêtre might be able to sense all of its surroundings, and, like the panoptic acousmêtre, control them in turn.

Chion uses the example of Josef von Sternberg's \textit{Saga of Anatahan} (1953), in which a group of Japanese soldiers are marooned on a seemingly deserted island. At times, the voices of the soldiers do not accompany their bodily counterparts, and remain oblivious to the action around them. They speak in a confused tone, and always use the non-specific "we" rather than names or "I." As a result, they remain anonymous to the viewer. However, as their voices seem to imply ignorance in the action surrounding them, the camera takes us into a hut where other soldiers are sleeping with the only woman on the island. It is the voices of the men cut off from this woman that we hear in voice-over. The voices claim to not know what is going on before the camera's eyes, but it seems difficult to accept this fact.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 24.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 25.
This is exactly what Chion says the blind acousmêtre is supposed to do: elicit uncertainty in the audience, and in the characters of the film. Might the so-called “blind” acousmêtre actually be able to see everything? We are not certain, since there are no actual eyes to give it away. Chion makes a religious comparison:

The idea of a god who sees and knows all (the gods of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are acousmêtres) is perhaps an “indecent” idea, according to the little girl Nietzsche writes of, but it is almost natural. Much more disturbing is the idea of a god or being with only partial powers and vision, whose limits are not known.\textsuperscript{16}

However, it is safe to assume that, no matter how limited or far-reaching an acousmêtre’s powers are, there are powers. This brings us to Chion’s final association: the acousmêtre is omnipotent and omniscient. This has already been discussed circuitously above, but to focus more clearly on this characteristic is a testament to the fact that it is perhaps the most awesome power the acousmêtre wields. The acousmêtre is everywhere—or nowhere—and can see everything—or nothing. It stands to reason, by extension, that the acousmêtre knows everything, or at least most things. This knowledge pertains to the situation in which the disembodied voice resides. This sense of physical boundlessness suggests the possibility that the voice exists, perhaps through connection to other voices, to a temporal boundlessness. If it is temporally boundless, physically boundless, panoptic, and omniscient, than the acousmêtre can see into the past, or into the future. Anything that is capable of this would seemingly be able to control the events over which it holds such complete knowledge.\textsuperscript{17} This connects the voice to another one of Chion’s associations, the mother’s voice. Surely there is no other being that more

\textsuperscript{16} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 26.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 27.
completely controls the world of another than the mother does while caring for her young in the womb.

**The Mother’s Voice**

This brings us to one of Chion’s most fascinating allusions. What is the first acousmêtre that all human beings encounter? The voice of the mother, of course! In the womb, we first connect to our mother through the exchange of fluids. This takes place through the umbilical cord. Chion, borrowing from Denise Vasse and his book *The Umbilicus and the Voice*, feels that, over the course of gestation, the cord becomes a web, with the voice at its most prominent center. The umbilicus marks the infant at its very core with the desire to be a part of humanity. This is why humans develop a social desire to foster a communicative community—notice the etymological similarities between the two—throughout life. This desire is first initiated through the first significant relationship most people experience: one with their mother. At birth, when the umbilicus is cut off, it is signified by the opening of the mouth and the inscription of the voice. According to Vasse, from that moment on, the voice is the signifier of that connection first fostering by the umbilicus in the womb.  \(^{18}\)

Thus, it is the mother’s voice, and not another’s, that first fosters that connection. Infants recognize the voice of their mother before any other’s. This is seemingly because the voice connects to the umbilicus, which was the first nurturing, life-giving force in the womb. Inside the womb, the sounds of life outside become apparent to the fetus rather early in gestation, but it is the mother’s voice that is always most prominent. The sounds

of the mother’s body are all around the fetus, filling its every day. The voice literally surrounds the fetus in the womb, and becomes associated with the umbilicus, which penetrates the fetus.\textsuperscript{19} Chion asserts that, because of the umbilical connection, the mother’s voice simultaneously surrounds us and penetrates us. This is where Chion connects the disembodied voice in film with the mother’s voice in the womb. It surrounds us, and, through the umbilical association, it seemingly penetrates us as well. Our every being is completely imbued with the power of acousmêtre, which is what gives it the ability to wield all of its power over us.\textsuperscript{20}

This is what keeps certain characters in film at bay relative to the acousmêtre. Chion calls these persons listening beings: those who sit, waiting, grasping after the disembodied voices they hear. They have a deep desire to continue listening to this mothering, nurturing voice, because it is the remainder of the umbilical that connection kept, and symbolically keeps, them alive. They crave it, need it, and live by it. It is for this reason that the acousmêtre wields so much power. These listening beings are the focus of the current study. They feel the need to control a voice, in this case the operatic voice, whose mothering and penetrating qualities will soon be elucidated, so that they may continue to maintain this mothering in their own lives. Without this voice, these listening beings feel they would cease to exist. They might be right. Their existence in the film is almost completely defined by their desire to retreat into the womb, away from the dangers of their world in which they feel trapped. They can be enveloped in the warmth of the mother’s voice, through their connection to the acousmêtre. The acousmêtre

\textsuperscript{19} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 114.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 62.
provides that sensation for them, but, in turn, completely controls their every action, consumes them, and haunts them.\textsuperscript{21}

What happens when this voice goes to the next level, becomes something \textit{more} than a spoken voice? What happens when the acousmêtre \textit{sings}? Chion uses the analogy of the siren to speak of the sung acousmêtre:

Sirens are creatures of the \textit{borderline} between land—a solid body, circumscribed—and the sea, which is uncircumscribed, formless. Sirens inhabit the in-between that they invite us to negate, since they invite confusion of land with sea, speech with voice.\textsuperscript{22}

According to this definition, it seems that the siren is the perfect acousmêtre. It is completely boundless, tripping the surface of all things, walking between the shore and the sea. Chion likens this borderline to that of the movie screen, the space that separates the world of \textit{here}—the real world—from \textit{there}—fantasy. In fact, all images and sounds in cinema have a certain seductive power to the audience; they draw us into a deception. But the siren’s voice is particularly evocative. It works doubly on the persons within the film and the audience without. This is most possible, it seems, for the sung voice, which resides on the surface, along the borders of reality.

Chion also argues that the sung voice is particularly powerful in its ability to suspend time. He feels that singing not only slows time down, but rather completely makes it stop, making it possible for the world around it to seem eternal, once again like the womb, or inside one’s own head. He paraphrases Marguerite Duras in saying the sung

\textsuperscript{21} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 73.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 114.
voice draws the listener—the listening being—more than ever to its origins.\textsuperscript{23} Singing is the voice beyond discourse, wailing at the boundaries of speech. While the spoken voice bounds its meaning entirely up in the words it speaks, the sung voice uses timbre, suspension, and breath to signify its desires. This elicits memories in the listener of a time before speech, but at the same time, foretells of the end of time, after speech becomes irrelevant. Thus, singing is timeless, and boundless. This is what makes the siren so powerful.\textsuperscript{24}

As Chion reminds us, sirens are gender-specific beings. They are women, and as women elicit different powers than the male acousmêtre. The male acousmêtre must \textit{hide} its voice to remain powerful. It must be localized in a specific time and place, and only then can it move beyond its boundaries. It is interesting to note that Chion almost exclusively refers to the acousmêtre as “he” when he clearly attributes the main acousmatic characteristics to female voices. Truly, the spoken acousmêtre in film is more than frequently male, but the sung voice in film is often female. Though Chion never says it, perhaps this is what makes the female acousmêtre so powerful: boundlessness. She does not need to evoke a deception, but rather is beyond such deceptions, “the voice of the woman seems to possess ubiquity by nature.”\textsuperscript{25}

The sung voice is a voice that exists at the boundaries of language. While words are often sung, they are also often unintelligible. This is especially true in women’s voices, where the range often extends to such heights that consonants become muted and


\textsuperscript{24} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 120.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 119.
vowels merge into one another, making the voice less speech and more cry. It is a beautiful thing, the siren’s voice. It is, to borrow a term from Marcia Citron, beyond representation. Citron uses this term to speak about the scream, specifically the cry at the end of *Godfather III* (1990), when Michael Corleone witnesses the death of his daughter on the steps of an opera-house. Of the scream, Citron has this to say, “Here it acts at the edge of the voice, at the boundary of silence. It also operates at the edge of time.”\(^{26}\) This quality is reminiscent of Chion’s conception of the siren and its boundlessness. Once again, we see the voice as something that is enigmatic, and in that enigma, pre-symbolic. The disembodied voice inspires the listener with an overwhelming number of associations. It is inculcated with the beginning—the mother in the womb—and the end—the death rattle. As such, it brings about even further correlations, which are beyond articulation. This enigma is what gives the sung voice its allure. The acousmêtre, like Jehovah, is the alpha and the omega. Citron uses examples from *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, where Wagner uses the scream when words fail the characters. The voice moves out of the head, out of thinking and language, and into the body, into the womb, before speech, when there is only the cry. This is why the *sung acousmêtre* is so magnificent.\(^{27}\)

**The Voice and Gender**

Beyond the signifying powers of the voice, let us consider the actual biological implications of singing. Once again, dealing with the voice is dealing with a


\(^{27}\) Ibid, see especially the section “Beyond Representation,” 452-455.
transcendence of borders. Suzanne Cusick has written extensively on just such a subject, especially with respect to how the voice elicits certain ideas about gender. She borrows from well-known queer theorist Judith Butler’s ideas of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not something that is inherent inside a person’s body. Rather it is a series of habitual behaviors, or performances, carefully constructed by society, which shape a person’s gender identity early in life. How one dresses, walks, and behaves within the context of society is really what makes someone a “man” or a “woman.”\footnote{Judith Butler, \textit{Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”} (New York: Routledge, 1993). See especially “Introduction,” 1-23, and “Critically Queer,” 223-242.} This seems all well and good, but what happens when you take into account the biological factors that make up a man and a woman. Aspects of genitalia are fascinating, but not relevant to the current discussion. What is extremely relevant is the voice, a biologically constructed aspect of a person’s gender. This is particularly significant to the acousmêtre, for, in the absence of physical signifiers of gender, we must rely on how an acousmêtre sounds to know who an acousmêtre is. The difference between the male and female acousmètre has already been elucidated above, and it is obviously important to know what kind of acousmètre one is dealing with to know how to approach it. The sound of a female’s voice is alluring in film, and exhibits these siren-like qualities and the powers that go along with it. What is it, exactly then, that makes the voice a \textit{female acousmètre}? It has no genitalia, it isn’t wearing a dress, and it doesn’t have a body.

What Cusick points out as the particularity in the female voice is similar to the already established female-acousmètre’s strongest trait: traversing boundaries. Cusick asserts that the voice is, in fact, the “purest” form of gender performativity, because the voice originates at the core of a person’s being, inside the body. The voice, unlike other
indicators of gender, “is the body, its very breath and interior shapes projected outward into the world as a way others might know us, even know us intimately.”

Cusick points out some fascinating distinctions between speech and song. Speech, she points out, takes place almost entirely at the border of the body, within the mouth and the organs surrounding it. Speech is really just articulation of language, and is guided entirely by social norms. The larynx doesn’t even really need to take part in the speech act; it can completely take place at the lips, tongue, and teeth to still be considered speech. However, the sung voice is another thing entirely. Her research into developmental psychology leads her to the conclusion that singing does not originate out of speech. Rather, it develops concurrently, taking on physiological and psychological actions which are different from speech. To sing, one must go deeper into one’s body, further into one’s being. One must exchange gasses from the world around the self, and the coordination of countless muscles and organs at the most precise level requires a great deal of awareness and control of the body. Controlling the voice in song is a way of saying, in the words of Cusick, “‘I am still here. I hear myself.’ And the perception, ‘I am here. They can hear me. If I shape my vocalizations to be intelligible to them, I can retain some control.’” Similarly, the acousmatic voice asserts its control over the world outside through the careful manipulation of itself, a self entirely defined by a voice.

The sung voice changes, though, as we age. For men, the voice becomes more noticeably different than in women, and this difference is heightened by the cultural

---


31 Ibid, 30.
stigmas applied to what it means to be a “man” and a “woman.” Men are taught to abandon the parts of their voices that are feminine, the range that is said to be false(tto). This plays into the Aristotelian thought that men become more human as they age, while women do not. Of course, biologically, the voice does not change all that much between genders; it is rather a deception that society convinces us to embrace. This concept will be explored in greater detail in a later chapter, but it is crucial to understand that the female voice must remain something peculiar, something closer to the body’s origins, which is why the female voice is so much more alluring than the male’s. As Cusick has famously pointed out, “women sing, men do not.”³² This accusation will be explored in greater detail in chapter four, but is quoted here to provide evidence as to why the female acousmêtre almost entirely a sung one. Additionally, it once again returns to the signifiers that reside at the most essential forms of human existence, the mother and the womb.

**The Disembodied Voice**

This association between the voice and gender once again connects the voice and the body. So what happens when the voice has no body? Such is the acousmatic voice, which once again points to the fact that it is enigmatic among film’s different agents. It is our desire for an understanding of ourselves that continues to draws us to the voice. Michal Grover-Friedlander takes a psychoanalytical approach to the voice to try and explain its appeal. To Lacan, the voice precedes even self-recognition in a mirror as a clue to subjectivity. It is to this point that one constantly wishes to return.³³ It is one of

---


the first, and most important, "partial objects" of the self. She quotes Lacan in saying, "The object voice and the object gaze 'give body to what constitutively eludes [the field of the visible and audible]...the object gaze is a blind spot within the field of the visible, whereas the object voice par excellence...is silence.'"54 Once the voice enters into language, it is forever lost, and the remainder of one's life is spent searching for that lost object. The sung acousmêtre is closer to that lost object, at first because the sung voice resides, according to Michel Poizat, Citron, and Grover-Friedlander, much closer to the cry, or the pre-signified, lost object.35 This is where the operatic voice comes in. It is the operatic voice that most closely represents "the cry" in its symbolic state.

Our pleasure in opera, then, is the result of an illusory structure that brings us into proximity of original jouissance as the voice qua object turns into a cry. Thus, both cinema and opera can be theorized as inevitably doomed attempts to evoke a return or restoration of the original lost object, of the first imaginary state as pleasure and cohesion. In both, the cry is what articulates the edges of vocality and invisibility.36

Both opera and film seem to fail in this attempt apart from one another. It is only when the two come together, in the form of the diva-acousmêtre37 in film, that the primal lost object is most nearly approached. This is where its appeal lies, and where it gains its power. The desire to find this lost object in filmed voice is often difficult to stage. Grover-Friedlander insists that, frequently, this problem is solved through the use of monstrous bodies matched to operatic voices. She uses the example of the diva in Luc

---

34 Michel Grover-Friedlander, Vocal Apparitions, 23.


37 This term does not belong to Chion, but is rather my own.
Bresson’s *Fifth Element* (1997). Here the monstrous body of the operatic voice is in fact alien. This is often true in many of film’s portrayals of operatic voices. The operatic voice, according to Grover-Friedlander, is impossible to contain in a normal body. She uses the image of Maria Callas, on which much more will be said later. Callas’ voice is mythologized as too much for her body, something that is supernatural, a type of acousmêtre trapped in a body in which it doesn’t belong. This idea of necessary disembodiment is why it seems the diva-acousmêtre is forever a complete acousmêtre, in Chion’s depiction. The diva-acousmêtre can never be contained in a body, for the diva’s voice, as Grover-Friedlander and countless others attest, is outside the body, too much for the human. It is, in fact, the voice of something presymbolic and desirable, in its association with the lost mother’s voice by all people.

This is what makes the diva-acousmêtre the central figure of this study. It is the culmination of all the voices erstwhile explored by other theorists. The diva-acousmêtre is Chion’s complete acousmêtre. It contains the inability to be maintained by a human body, even though it originally came from one, and might eventually return. It is the voice of the mother, forever lost and forever desired. It is unbounded, omniscient, and omnipotent, like a creator, like a deity. It is almost beyond description, definitely beyond representation, and closer to the primal cry than any other sound a voice can make. It is at the same time sexless and sexed. The diva-acousmêtre is awash in contradictions, unable to be tied down, which is exactly what makes it spectral, and spectacular.

---

38 Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions*, 54.

39 Ibid, 145.
Chapter 2

*Philadelphia:
The Worship of the Diva-Acousmêtre*

In 1993, Jonathan Demme, Tom Hanks, and Denzel Washington changed the world. The film *Philadelphia* was, in a sense, Hollywood's coming-out project. Its popularity and lasting reception are evidence of the changing opinion of AIDS and homosexuality in America. It's certainly no wonder that when Hanks won the Academy Award for Best Actor in this film, it was his scene with Maria Callas that the producers chose as evidence of his interpretive brilliance. Hanks did an amazing job, but Callas deserves credit for her role in the scene as well.

*Philadelphia* tells the story of Andrew Beckett, a prominent, up-and-coming lawyer in a large corporate firm who, we come to learn, is homosexual and infected with AIDS. On the night in which he is offered a partnership in the firm, one of his colleagues notices a lesion on his forehead. He is sabotaged by the partners in the firm, which results in him being fired for incompetence. Andrew believes he is actually fired because of his diagnosis, which is reflective of the cultural stigma of HIV-related illness in the nineties. He decides to take the firm to court in a wrongful termination suit and begins to search for a litigator to represent him. After a long and unsuccessful search, he attempts to enlist the services of Joe Miller, a lower-class lawyer whom Beckett accuses in an earlier scene of being an "ambulance chaser," and for whom he has little respect. Miller, who is notorious for taking any case, refuses, at first, to represent Beckett. Joe's decision is not based on legal merit as much as it is on his own homophobia.

Eventually, Beckett's persistence pays off and Miller agrees to take his case. The
remainder of the film tracks the lawsuit as well as Beckett's slow deterioration as he succumbs to AIDS-related illness.

In the decade since Philadelphia was released, it has been criticized for the visual depictions of AIDS, and also of homosexuality, with its cross-dressing, kitsch, and obsessions with dramatics, now so out-of-date. 1 Marc Weiner adds to the list of critics in his article "Why Does Hollywood Like Opera?" One of the early explorations of how opera functions within feature films, the article is an invaluable resource. 2 The current study is a further exploration of how opera and operatic singing function in Philadelphia.

Opera serves a myriad of purposes in the course of Philadelphia. As will be explored in more detail, it serves as a marker of class, sexuality, and race. However, there is a more complex relationship between the operatic voice and Andrew Beckett than is immediately apparent. Certainly, opera is something that Andrew loves because of countless associations with his sexuality and class, but there is a more universal connection. This connection is that of the acoustmètre, and more specifically the female diva-acoustmètre.

The voice serves as the significant factor in the current study. Tom Hanks has a decidedly characteristic voice, one that is immediately recognizable in all of his films. Conversely, he is also inclined toward projects that involve spending a great deal of time in silence. Most notably, he spent over an hour in silence in

---

1 Robert J Corber, "Nationalizing the Gay Body: AIDS and Sentimental Pedagogy in Philadelphia." American Literary History, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 107-133. This is just one such example from a long list of critics, far beyond the scope of this current study.

*Cast Away* (2000). In *Philadelphia*, we watch as Hanks sinks slowly into silence. Beckett’s voice, at first marked by Hanks’ characteristically brash timbre, becomes softer, raspier, fading to a whisper before finally becoming silent in the end of the film. His desperation to be heard, central to the suit he brings against his former employers, slips into an acceptance of his fate, marked by silence. His career as a lawyer, who trades in *spoken* words, is no longer relevant. Andrew’s voice is partly what inscribes his identity in his body. If he were borrowing from Suzanne Cusick, he might say, “They can hear me. If I shape my vocalizations to be intelligible to them, I can retain some control.”\(^3\) Speaking becomes unnecessary and he loses his desire to control his life through it. His silence, it seems, has a direct correlation to another, equally characteristic voice in *Philadelphia*.

Maria Callas is arguably one of the most immediately recognizable voices in the entire recorded operatic repertoire. Her voice’s characteristics will be explored in more depth later. Suffice it to say that it is her voice, a voice seemingly divorced from the body, which helps to usher Beckett into the silence of death. The acousmatic voice, as positioned within this film specifically, acts as a sort of siren, beckoning her charge into the realm of the afterlife, calling him back to a prelinguistic state last experienced in the womb, which is where Beckett finally ends up.

The correlation between Callas and Beckett lies in their respective entrapments. Callas, it will be argued, was a voice trapped inside a body. Her identity was defined by her voice, which could not meet its full glory until it had been released from the body that housed it. By the time *Philadelphia* was released, the voice of Callas had for a generation been a sort of disembodied apparition, only audible on audio recordings, and never connected to her body. Her voice has become, since her death, an acousmêtre even outside film, a divine entity, completely invisible, divinely worshiped by many. It has transcended the entrapment of the body that housed it, and been born anew as voice in and of itself.

This is the power of the acousmêtre in *Philadelphia*. The voice, once trapped inside a flawed body, one seemingly unnatural and diseased, is now able to transcend the corporeal realm. Immediately, it makes sense that such an apparition would be appealing to Andrew Beckett, a man who is culturally marked by his sexuality and disease, set apart from the world, trapped in a body that separates him from all else. Beckett wishes to obtain the same fate as Callas, to transcend the entrapment that his body holds him in.

**Operatic Voices**

Andrew is associated with opera throughout *Philadelphia*. In the blood-transfusion scene at the beginning of the film, Andrew is listening to music from a Mozart religious work on head-phones. Frequently, Andrew is seen listening to the voice of the diva. The use of operatic voices in the blood transfusion scene, in
his office as he frantically prepares a deposition, and elsewhere in the film, is not as immediately relevant for the current study. For one, the voices do not exhibit all the physical characteristics of an acousmêtre in film. The music functions entirely within the diegesis of the film, never venturing outside the boundaries of the “real” world of the film. In a way, the voices in these scenes are all embodied, the bodies are the machines from which they emanate. Their source is clear, and, as such, their scope within the scene is limited. This is different from the acousmêtre, which is boundless, working both within the diegesis and outside akin to what Claudia Gorbman has described as the “meta-diegesis.”

These voices do, however, allude to the acousmatic voice to come later in the film. Beckett seeks comfort in the operatic voice at stressful moments in his life. The first appearance of operatic singing is during a blood transfusion, and Beckett uses his headphones as an escape from the uncomfortable surroundings. He removes the headphones to speak to his doctor and the music disappears. When he is done conversing about his medical situation, he sees a particularly sick man who exhibits all of the physical manifestations of a person with AIDS. The man is emaciated, pale, and balding, with sunken eyes and sores on his body, a stark contrast to Beckett, who still appears “healthy.”

There is a close-up on the sickly man, then on Beckett, staring at him. Immediately, Beckett puts his headphones back on. It is as though Beckett is using the operatic voices as a type

---


5 I use these descriptors purely to elicit an impression of how a person with AIDS was viewed in film during this period. This description is now seen as out of date and criticized, in Jody Norton, “Multiculturalism as Disease: Advocating AIDS,” *Journal of Medical Humanities*, vol. 19, nos. 2-3 (June 1998): 99-125.
of acousmêtre, calling to mind Chion’s association with the mothering voice. He surrounds himself in the sonic womb of the disembodied sung voice to escape from the real world around him. His escape, enabled by the operatic voice, highlights his desire to return to the prelinguistic state, one which will be even more apparent in the operatic scene to follow.

Marc Weiner has pointed out that opera functions early in the film to heighten the class distinctions that separate Beckett and Miller. Beckett’s homosexuality, race, and class are all marked by stereotypes associated with opera. Before this film, there were few depictions of homosexuality in feature film, and as such there was no common language in the film repertoire to mark a person as homosexual. As a result, Demme and Ron Nyswaner, the screenwriter, had to rely on a great many signifiers that would now seem somewhat stereotypical. Miller, who loves the “Phillys,” drinks beer, and does not work for a large, wealthy, law firm, is supposed to "be-like-us." However, he is African-American, which, like Andrew, places him in a marginalized position. This marginalization does not associate him with opera, however. So, at first, opera seeks to separate the two characters.7

This remains the case until Maria Callas, singing an aria from Andrea Chenier, makes her way into the film. In the central scene of the film, Miller and Beckett are preparing for Beckett’s testimony in the case. Andrew is distracted during the interview, growing increasingly more interested in the music behind

---


Joe’s questions. He asks Joe if he likes opera, to which Miller, ever the bastion of the American male, admits he doesn’t. As the voice becomes more and more prominent in the diegetic landscape, the music, and more specifically the voice, seemingly possesses Andrew. He describes in detail every musical and dramatic moment in the aria. Beckett becomes increasingly empowered, his emotions overwhelm him, and he ultimately gives way to the ecstasy of the moment. The final cadence of the aria leaves Andrew and Joe speechless. After this, all that remains is silence. Andrew agrees to go on with the deposition, seemingly reinvigorated by the previous moments, but Miller simply answers, “No, you’re ready,” and, with a nod of empathy, heads home.

The opera scene is stylistically different from the rest of the film, which is shot with fairly unremarkable cinematography. As Beckett describes the aria, the camera soars above him, the lighting changes to a brilliant red, and the voice becomes the most prominent part of the scene. “La Mamma Morta” does not simply function as background music. Rather, the voice becomes a crucial agent within the course of the scene. Here is where the operatic voice becomes unstuck in the diegesis, becoming “meta-diegetic.” Gorbman describes meta-diegetic sound as something that resides within any given character’s mind. In Philadelphia the diegetic landscape is more complicated than Gorbman’s estimation. This music is best described as “meta-diegetic,” in that it does not clearly reside in the diegesis—the real world of the scene—or in the non-diegesis—the world outside the scene, as in the film-score. In Gorbman’s estimation, the voices in this scene reside in the meta-diegesis. I think it is more

---

8 Claudia Gorbman, Unheard Melodies, 22-3.
complicated than this. The acousmatic music resides somewhere in between, at once inside the diegesis and outside it. The acousmêtre is both real and imagined. However, in describing the voices in *Philadelphia* using Gorbman’s lexicography, meta-diegesis is best. Over the course of the aria, Callas’ voice ceases to be a recording and becomes an apparition, a spirit possessing the body of Andrew Beckett. Beckett, upon hearing the voice, loses the ability to speak, opens his mouth, and becomes the voice of Callas transfigured. The operatic voice takes on a more complicated task, no longer simply uniting Miller, and us, with Beckett. The power of the acousmêtre now elevates Beckett from the disease-filled body that he must live inside of everyday.

Certainly this voice, this powerful operatic voice, is an acousmêtre. What about it, then, makes it a *diva-acousmêtre*? She is female, and her voice is operatic. The voice exhibits all the acousmatic tendencies. It is disembodied, ubiquitous, and omniscient. The function of the voice is what makes it the type of acousmêtre described in the current study. In exploring, specifically, what this voice exhibits, and more specifically, what this voice means to Andrew and then to Joe, we will be able to understand the metaphysical experience that goes along with the *diva-acousmêtre*, and in turn come to terms with what exactly such an acousmêtre is.

**Entrapment**

There is no voice like Maria Callas’ voice. This, Wayne Koestenbaum claims, is what enlists such a following for Callas by opera queens, gay men with
an overwhelming affinity for opera. Her voice is beyond her body, it is uncontrollable, like Callas herself. It is flawed, metallic in the high range and hollow in the middle, with a chest voice unmatched by any other soprano. She had, and continues to have in countless recordings, a break between her head voice and chest voice that many would characterize as flawed, not to mention the uncontrolled vibrato in her later recordings. Even her breathing was pedagogically flawed, while dramatically effective. When Callas breathed, she gasped, dramatically. It was as though, in creating the voice that made her Callas, she had to struggle to sustain the body that housed it. She was multiple voices in one—singing Die Walküre one week and I Puritani the next (at the Teatro La Fenice). Koestenbaum points out a gendered paradox embodied in these contrasting roles: the large manly quality of the dramatic soprano, and the light feminine quality of the coloratura lyric. Singers even today grasp after the Callas sound, with its careful portamenti, gasping breaths, and glottal attacks. Maria Callas’ voice was her own. Even with all of its flaws, there are no others like it. Her image, on the other hand, was someone else’s, an imitation of beauty that wasn’t a part of her, and so it relies on being adored.

In contrast to Callas’ voice, she tirelessly and famously transformed her corporeal self from a lumbering Grecian-American woman into a glamorous and beautiful international diva. She was always perfect in image, with thick makeup

---


11 Ibid, 146.
and fussily coiffed hair, and yet her voice was imperfect by any standards. Many credit her sudden weight change as the source of her vocal death. How could such a slight body contain such a massive voice? In a sense, Callas the voice and Maria the body became two conflicting beings trapped together until one succumbed to the other’s will. As Koestenbaum puts it, “Every body is a civil war. Callas sang the war.”12 There is a paradox in Maria Callas. There is a struggle to be “natural” in a body that is so unnatural.

If her voice and her body make her something of a paradox, then which one was she really? According to Koestenbaum, before she was Maria Callas the Diva, she was Callas the Voice.13 Her voice is constant, and forever, it is the lasting essence of her being. The image of Callas gazing back at Koestenbaum on a particularly evocative album cover relies on his adoration for its continued existence.14 The voice, on the other hand, lives on without being stared at; it doesn’t even really need to be heard to still exist. As the two were joined in her Diva-self, it was the body that had to give way. The voice was always, but the body changed, until it disappeared altogether, literally.15

The association between Callas and death is a frequent part of the mythology surrounding her. Some of her most famous roles were of dying maidens and murderous women. Her actual death is tied up in mystery, and her corporeal remains are lost for all eternity. To this end Michal Grover-Friedlander

---

12 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, 146.
13 Ibid, 135.
14 Ibid, 72.
15 Ibid, 140.
asserts that Callas is to be seen as a voice beyond a body. Not simply a paradox of two things, the Callas that will live on for eternity is the Callas that exists after Maria’s death.\textsuperscript{16}

Grover-Friedlander, when speaking of Maria Callas, mostly speaks of Callas’ ashes. For her, Callas’s body is nothing but ashes, but the voice is like a phoenix rising out of them.\textsuperscript{17} The ritualistic tendencies of cremation are very old, and far reaching. Callas’ estate had to obtain special permission from the Greek Orthodox Church to have her body cremated, since it is not typically a part of their theology. The ashes disappeared, were hidden, and ultimately made their way into the sea, and seemingly into the mouths of mourners surrounding the ceremony.\textsuperscript{18} In the film \textit{E la nave va}, Federico Fellini tells the Callas death sequence in a loosely veiled parody. All in all, Callas’s body has become ashes; even her pictures are almost always in grey, black, and white. Her most famous character, Medea, is bathed in flames.\textsuperscript{19} So, in this one scene of \textit{Philadelphia}, is Andrew Beckett. \textit{La Mamma Morta}, after all, is about death by flames as well.

So, it seems, Callas and Beckett go down in flames together in this scene, their bodies succumbing to fire. Callas’ voice remains powerful, once again withstanding the tortures her body must endure, and it is this sense of empowerment that injects itself into Andrew Beckett’s body. The connection here is twofold. For the souls of Callas and Beckett to become freed from the


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 150.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 139.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 151.
entrapment each experiences, they must destroy their bodies. Callas, after death, was not only freed from her body’s entrapment, but the trap disappeared.

Andrew’s body doesn’t suddenly disappear in flames as Callas’s did. Rather, he decays, slowly slipping from one world to the next. As time passes in the film, Beckett becomes increasingly sick, and his body shows the ramifications of his illness. He becomes emaciated and pale, losing his hair and showing more marks of lesions. Images show him becoming physically less prominent and his voice follows suit. He goes from being a boisterous lawyer to a quiet victim, increasingly internal. The opera scene is the moment of final transition, where he loses the power of speech, ironically just before he must defend himself in court. The power of words, the power of the embodied voice, is shown to be weak in his testimony. He cannot say anything to defend himself; it is the image of his decaying body, covered in lesions, which ultimately saves him. His victory, which might be met with a cry of joy in the courtroom, is instead delivered to an empty chair. Our last images of Andrew the adult are of him masked—oxygen-masked, to be more specific. His mouth, his voice, is slowly decaying as he prepares to join Callas in the world beyond representation, to borrow Marcia Citron’s term once again.\(^{20}\) His last words, “I’m ready,” are not a powerful declamation, but a hushed decree. But the face indicates recognition of the jouissance he is about to experience.

For someone with AIDS, there is always a void in the body. Each day, Andrew must greet the possibility of his own mortality. The disease is eating him,

destroying parts of him one at a time, through the destruction of his immune system. By this point in the film, Andrew has become an incomplete man, decaying before he is dead. This physical decay mirrors an apparent emotional void. So the voice of Callas is where he turns to fill the void. As soon as Joe leaves the apartment, after very few words, we hear the aria again coming from within. It is as though Andrew cannot live without the voice of Callas, at the same time a mothering acousmêtre, a siren beckoning him to the other side, and an apparition, who is free of a body, as Beckett wishes to be.

Possession

Fetishist that I am, I focus on the word “Callas.” I’m embarrassed to say the name as she and her crowd said it—the huge A, CAH-LAAAS, neither syllable emphasized at the cost of the other, the two syllables distinct from others in the world. Saying “Callas” fills my mouth with fruity sensation...fans at La Scala cheering “Callas, Callas, Callas, Callas” found their chant turning into “sCalla, sCalla, sCalla, sCalla,” as if Callas were the container as well as the object contained. ~ Wayne Koestenbaum\textsuperscript{21}

One of the first words Andrew Beckett utters about opera is a single name: “Callas.” To Andrew, and countless others, Callas is a representation of opera. Maria’s reintroduction of bel canto opera after years of Wagner was the revitalization of melody after its loss at the turn of the century. She is much more than that, especially, according to Wayne Koestenbaum, to the “opera queen.” In a sense, grasping after the voice of Callas is grasping after a memory of things no

\textsuperscript{21} Wayne Koestenbaum, \textit{The Queen's Throat}, 149.
longer real, hoping for things long dead.\textsuperscript{22} It is like Andrew Beckett’s desire to return to a time when he wasn’t dying. Beckett, like Callas, grasps for immortality, while forever being consumed by death. Ultimately, the two must accept their fate. As Andrew accepts Callas’ fate, hearing her voice as a specter of her bodily remains, he too accepts his own death. In the central, operatic scene of \textit{Philadelphia}, Andrew Beckett doesn’t simply try to make Joe Miller understand \textit{him}—he also understands his mortality, accepts it, and becomes bathed in the splendor of it.

Over the first few bars of the aria, Beckett asks Miller, "Do you pray?" to which Miller replies, "That the Phillies win the pennant." This is when Andrew begins the discourse of opera, and in his attempt, tries to explain both opera and himself to Miller, and, in turn, the "average" movie-goer, who might not relate with Beckett.\textsuperscript{23} The religious question Beckett poses to Miller parallels the religiosity of the scene, and the way Beckett views opera. The operatic voice is, for Beckett, an object of worship, not merely something to admire. Beckett the "opera queen" becomes a prophet for the divine voice, preaching its power to the initiate, Miller, and in turn to the audience.

At the height of the aria, we see Andrew’s face, bathed in a flickering red light, his mouth gaping, as he becomes engulfed and possessed by Callas voice. He, along with Callas, rises up, phoenix-like, above the ashes of their bodies. Beckett exhibits symptoms of what Michel Poizat calls \textit{jouissance}. It is a mixture of ecstasy and pain, a truly masochistic moment for Andrew, to experience this

\textsuperscript{22} Wayne Koestenbaum, \textit{The Queen’s Throat}, 149.

\textsuperscript{23} Marc A Weiner, “Why Does Hollywood Like Opera?” 76-77.
height of emotion (see figure 1). Poizat speaks of two separate moments of
joüissance. First, there is the cry, the moment at which all words fail, where the
voice sails to heights of unintelligibility. This is why, according to Poizat, the
female voice is so superior for this effect; it is capable of going even higher.
Callas, grasping at these notes, becomes even closer to a state of pre-linguistic
purity, or, as Poizat would state it, she reaches the point of “the cry.” This is the
moment at which the void of art, in the Lacanian sense, is filled. Marc Weiner,
in speaking of this moment in Philadelphia, uses Adorno’s term
phantasmagoria. However, Poizat’s joüissance seems more appropriate, since it
is not tied up in memories of Gesamtkunstwerk, where so much beyond the music
takes part in the mystical experience. In Philadelphia, it is the voice, and its
melody, that carries Andrew to this state, and nothing else. At the height of
emotion, his eyes are closed, all other senses shut off, and he loses the ability to
speak. He becomes completely receptive to the voice.

---

24 Michel Poizat, The Angels Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principal in Opera, Arthur


assertion about phantasmagoria, but simply find Poizat’s term more useful for the present
exploration.
Chion would argue that the voice has actually possessed him. Andrew becomes a *listening being*, completely powerless over the voice, and it controls him. According to Chion, the only time a person in film completely empathizes with an acousmêtre is when they allow themselves to become possessed by them, literally inscribing the voice *inside* their bodies. Throughout the scene, Andrew speaks while Callas sings. He acts as translator for Miller, because the initial intention of the scene is to help Joe understand opera, and in turn Andrew. At the moment of the cry Andrew loses his ability to speak, the two voices become one voice, and he becomes *possessed*. Once his body is possessed by Callas, she will remain with him until he himself leaves the body. This is perhaps most clearly visible in the haunted look on Andy’s face at the scene’s end (see figure 2).\(^{27}\)

He is powerless over her, and must succumb to her power. This is the second stage of *jouissance*, according to Poizat. After the masochistic delight felt when actually possessed, there is an overwhelming feeling of emptiness when part of the possessing apparition, the voice of the *diva-acousmêtre*, is gone (see figure

\(^{27}\text{Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 138-9.}\)
2). The same look of loss is visible on Miller’s face as well. Both men, suddenly feeling the void of silence, still unable to speak themselves, are left in silence.²⁸

This, according to Poizat, is why applause must happen. It fills the void of silence as we regain the ability to speak, to articulate ourselves once we have been carried back, in Citron’s terms, beyond representation. We are reduced to a state of wild abandon, banging our hands together and hollering nonsense simply to fill the void felt in our bodies.²⁹ However, there is no applause after the jouissance experience in Philadelphia. Awkwardly, he and Joe attempt to deal with the loss through speech, but it is obvious that they are unsuccessful. They cannot find the words to say and they leave each other without being able to overcome the power of the diva-acousmêtre. Joe, as we will explore later, becomes haunted by the voice and Andrew must return to the voice, as we hear the aria play again from inside his apartment as Joe leaves.

Figure 2: The Loss after Jouissance

When Andrew returns to the sound of the voice after Joe has left, he is making the umbilical connection that Chion speaks of when describing the

²⁸ Michel Poizat, The Angel’s Cry, 88.
²⁹ Ibid.
association to the acousmatic voice. The voice of the mother in the womb is tied
to the umbilicus, which is what gives life to the fetus. In longing after the diva-
acousmêtre, Andrew is longing after the umbilical connection that Chion derives
from. Vasse points out that, immediately after birth, the voice of the new child is
brought into being through the cutting of the umbilicus.

[T]he voice is inscribed in the umbilical rupture. By
means of this closing "testifying at the center of the
body, to the definitive rupture from another
body...The child is assigned to reside in that
body...From then on, the bodily contact with the
mother becomes mediated by the voice....the
umbilicus means closure, the voice is subversion of
closure.\textsuperscript{30}

Andrew Beckett has a lovely relationship with his mother. She is
supportive, loving, and compassionate. She is human, and he treats her as such.
However, Andrew has another, superhuman mother: Callas. It has already been
established that the diva-acousmêtre is associated with the mother’s original
voice. Even more, the state of primeval \textit{jouissance} is a feeling one only truly feels
at the age prior to speech, according to Poizat, and so it too can be associated with
reliance upon the mother.\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Jouissance} might be the feeling one experiences upon
seeing and then not seeing the mother, or hearing her voice. When she is present,
it is a feeling of comfort, warmth, and security, but when she is gone, the feeling
is of complete emptiness.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 61-2. Chion is quoting from: Denis Vasse,
\hfill

\textsuperscript{31} Michel Poizat, \textit{The Angel’s Cry}, 14.
\hfill

\textsuperscript{32} Though Poizat does not point this out, developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, which
is outlined by Arlene F. Harder, “The Developmental Stages of Erik Erikson” \textit{The Learning Place}
So, when Andrew becomes possessed with the voice of Callas, it is a bit like Norman Bates being possessed by his mother's voice. He becomes addicted to it, reliant upon it. Ultimately, the only way to truly gain the state of bliss is to die, to follow the siren-ness of the diva-acousmêtre and release one's body, moving to the boundaries of the world. In the final scenes of the film, Andrew's body ceases to exist, and so does his voice. His child-like state, in addition to representing a return to innocence, also claims him for the diva-acousmêtre. It is interesting to note that the childhood body of Andrew Beckett, his final physical manifestation, in addition to being voiceless, is also almost bodiless. The image is blurry, with a barely distinguishable face. It represents a human form but not a human (see figure 3). It is as though, released from his body and completely mute, Andrew is in a state of perpetual jouissance, beyond representation and finally in possession of the object (a). He is forever living at the moment of the cry, where he ceases to exist. And his body, which no longer exists, will never feel the void of a lost mother again.

Figure 3
Joe’s Possession

Joe Miller also undergoes a sort of apparitional experience. Though he doesn’t seem to make the exact same mother-like connection Beckett makes, he doesn’t escape the voice after he has been made witness to it. The voice follows him all the way home. Or perhaps after the jouissance experience, he longs for it and takes the diva-acousmêtre with him to retain some of the feeling. As Miller embraces his daughter, he makes a face reminiscent of Andrew’s at the height of ecstasy. Perhaps he allows himself to be possessed. Joe’s sense of loss felt after the jouissance experience is clearly prominent in the end, as the camera zooms in on his face. However, the lasting effect is less prominent than it is on Beckett. As the film progresses away from the opera scene, Miller goes on speaking, still able to effectively maintain a connection to the corporeal world.

Beckett does not.

In countless first drafts for the film, Miller does go back into the apartment, where he and Beckett bond after the opera scene, and become close friends, because, as Nywaner says, “that’s the right movie thing to do.”

Ultimately, this isn’t what happens. The diva-acousmêtre has already done that work for them. She goes with Miller, and an unspoken bond has taken place, through the vocal possession. In the opera scene, the shots of Miller all take the form of a gaze. His empathetic stare forms a more powerful bond than any “buddy scene” could. Words fail; Miller and Beckett understand each other

---

without articulating it and that is apparent in the remainder of the film.

Ultimately, Joe visits Andrew in the hospital to congratulate him on their victory. He fearlessly touches Beckett's face, lovingly, compassionately for the first time in the film—up until now, he wouldn't even shake Andrew's hand. The operatic voice helps Miller understand how it feels to be trapped in a body that is foreign to what is inherently one's identity.

Like Callas, Beckett is freest without a body, and that is ultimately where *Philadelphia* ends. The last images of Andrew are not a still picture next to a coffin, but rather home videos of him as a child. He is silent, without a voice, but also in a body that isn't marked by disease, as his adult body was. It is as if he returns to his "natural" state and reclaims a body that can be truly his. But his voicelessness is evidence of his continued desire for the mothering, divine voice of Callas, to which he silently clings. He is not entirely a child, but rather able to feel the complete *jouissance* that his body prevented him from feeling.

The list of descriptors used for *Philadelphia* is multifarious. Perhaps the words "entrapment" and "transcendence" should be added to the list. Andrew Beckett is trapped in a world in which he doesn't belong, and in a body that can no longer contain his former self. At first, the film seems to be about his suit against the firm, a desire to remain in the world, and in his body. However, in the end, after the diva-acousmètre has worked her magic, Beckett longs to move beyond it, to transcend the corporeal world and regain his sense of reality last felt inside the womb. The operatic voice in this film is incredibly complex, weaving
inside and outside the diegesis, containing all of the mythology of Maria Callas; it is the perfect exemplar of a transcendent being.
Chapter 3
The Shawshank Redemption: The Manipulation of the Acousmêtre

At first glance, there is little similarity between Philadelphia and Shawshank Redemption. After all, how could a film about a gay man with AIDS fighting for recognition in a world of prejudice have anything to do with a prison-buddy drama about a man wrongly accused of killing his wife and her lover who spends years tunneling out of prison with a tiny rock pick. However, there are remarkable parallels between the two plots. Both films center around two men, one black, the other white. The main characters of each film must deal with class and racial distinctions to form a bond that will help them overcome an external foe—be it a bigoted law firm or a corrupt prison Warden.

In each situation, the central character, coincidentally named Andy in Shawshank Redemption and Andrew in Philadelphia, is marked as a social pariah associated with death. Andy is an alleged murderer and Andrew a potential murderer as a carrier of AIDS. Andrew and Andy both spend their days simultaneously waiting for death and trying to grasp something that will continue to mark them as alive, or at least relevant to the world from which they have, in a sense, been removed. They both vehemently attempt to continue to be the men they were before. Andy builds a library and educates his fellow prisoners as though he were trying to feel in some way above them, not one of them, the missionary and teacher rather than the prisoner. Andrew’s law-suit is pursued for more than just social belonging. He wants his job back; he longs to be a part of the world that shuns him. In both cases, Andrew and Andy are filled with a
desperate sense of nostalgia about their former identities, and try and find places where they can reacquire it.

In the supporting role, both Red and Joe exhibit similar characteristics as well. Both take the role of witness, as they observe Andy and Andrew in their actions. They also narrate the important points of the central characters’ lives. Red acts as literal narrator in Shawshank and Joe narrates the events of Andrew’s life as stories, either to his wife early on in the film, or in the courtroom to the jury as the trial commences. Additionally, both Red and Joe are, in a sense, criminals, again literally for Red and more figuratively, in his role as “ambulance chaser,” for Joe. They are also less educated than the main characters in each film, most apparently in the world of opera.

The relationship between Andy, Red, Andrew and Joe is most remarkable for the current study. Opera plays a major role in the seeming redemption of Red and Joe by Andy and Andrew. It is at the central point of each film that opera most prominently comes into play. As with Philadelphia, in Shawshank Redemption Andy takes an opportunity halfway through the film to expose his new-found companion and the other inmates in Shawshank to the culture that, in a great many ways, separates him from the rest of them. Before I describe the scene in detail, it would be helpful to provide a general plot outline of the film.

Shawshank Redemption, based on the Stephen King short story Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption, is the story of Andy Dufresne, a wealthy banker wrongly accused of murdering his wife and her lover. Dufresne is sentenced to two consecutive life-sentences at the Shawshank correctional
facility. Upon arriving at Shawshank, Andy meets Red, an old con, with whom he forms a bond over several years of incarceration. While in Shawshank, Andy builds a library, wards off “the sisters”—the prison’s resident rapists—and becomes the prison accountant, which also involves laundering embezzled money for the prison’s warden. After years of imprisonment, Dufresne manages to tunnel his way out of Shawshank, steals all of the warden’s embezzled money, and brings down the corrupt administration, leaving money for Red to join him, after he is granted parole, in Mexico. In the end of the film, both men are seen walking down a beautiful beach, finally granted the freedom for which they have longed.

The similarities between *Philadelphia* and *The Shawshank Redemption* are not the only reason for the current film’s inclusion in this study. The relationship between Andy and his diva-acousmètres is similar to that of Andrew and Callas, in that both use opera as an escape from the miseries of their everyday lives. However, the way the acousmètre functions in *The Shawshank Redemption* is quite different from the voice of Callas in *Philadelphia*. The voices in *Shawshank* are still just as powerful as the diva-acousmètre always is, but they are used in a different way, and that manipulation is the interest of the current chapter. Additionally, there are two other beings from Chion’s study that will make an appearance in this chapter: the mute body and the “I-Voice.” These two creatures surround the acousmètre in Chion’s theory, and in fact function quite similarly to the acousmètre. Thus it is convenient that they would appear in a film that also casts a diva-acousmètre in a central role, giving further credence to my assertion that the sung voice is a crucial addition to Chion’s theory.
Central to *The Shawshank Redemption* is a scene which entirely centers on opera. After years of writing weekly letters to the state Senate, Andy Dufresne is finally granted two hundred dollars and assorted used books and music to build a more sizable prison library. Among the sundry items, Andy finds a recording of *Le Nozze di Figaro* and decides to listen to the duet “Sull'aria” in celebration of his good work. Left alone in the Warden’s office, he puts the record on and basks in its beauty. Soon, he gets the idea to play this beautiful singing for his fellow inmates throughout the prison, and turns on the prison PA system. Over the remaining bars of the duet, we see shots of hundreds of men staring at the voices of the Countess and Susannah as they writhe in beautiful harmony. Andy leans back in the Warden’s chair, once again reinstated in his former social state, and enjoys the few moments of bliss that precede his eventual capture and punishment in solitary confinement.

**The Journey of the Voice**

Over the course of this scene, the sung voices employed by Andy move from within him to the external world and back within him, wielding their powers along the way. Their agency is different from that of Callas’ voice in *Philadelphia*. Whereas Andrew joins the throng of devoted worshipers, trying to convert yet another in playing Callas’ voice, Andy takes a more dispassionate approach. In both cases, the voices originate inside the memories of Andrew and Andy, but what happens after that is very different. Andy calls the voices from within his mind, placing the record on the player and then projecting them through the loudspeaker. In the case of Andrew Beckett, the voice overtakes him
and asserts its power to the point that he becomes just as affected as Joe, perhaps more so. Andy is not so easily moved. He remains aloof, coolly sending the diva-acousmètres out to do their work, to wield their power over the new initiates while he sits back and objectively enjoys what they have to offer. This is not to assert that the acousmètre in The Shawshank Redemption is any less powerful than in Philadelphia. Rather, one begins to wonder how Andy Dufresne is capable of withstanding the diva-acousmètre. It calls into question what sort of creature Andy Dufresne is.

The Mute

Chion identifies just such a being when he describes the mute character in film.¹ Not all mute characters, according to Chion, have to be entirely silent. Going through the course of The Shawshank Redemption, one begins to notice that Andy is markedly less talkative than many other characters in the film. He is not given to long rhapsodic monologues like Red, or mindless chatter like many of the other inmates. Even in moments when Andy should speak up to defend himself, he responds in short phrases or even simply with one word. In each of the rape scenes, Andy does not try to talk his way out of the situation. He fights, but remains silent. It is Red who describes the events we see before us. When he tells Red about the money laundering going on in the Warden’s office, one of his longer discourses, he describes Randall Stephens, the name under which all the embezzled money is deposited, as “The silent, silent partner,” implying that he,

Andy, is actually the silent partner. In the end, Andy becomes Randall Stephens, takes his money, and becomes silent. Like Andrew Beckett, our last sight of Andy in the film, we do not hear him, but simply see his image.

According to Chion, mute characters are almost never the starring roles in film, but very close to the center of the plot. They usually act as assistant. Very rarely, as in the case of Andy Dufresne, do they govern the actions of the film. In Chion’s conception, it would be Red, the story-teller, who is central to the film while Andy remains on the fringe. In a way, Chion is right. The central narrator of the film is Red; things do not happen without him telling us they will. But Andy Dufresne is the main source of intrigue, and part of this intrigue is brought upon by his silence. With muteness, according to Chion, comes intrigue, mystery, an implied knowledge of some sort of secret, and an important secret at that. It is crucial to the plot that that secret be kept until just the right moment in film. Andy keeps many secrets: about the Warden, about Red, and most importantly about what hides behind his other silent conspirators: the ladies who hang on his cell-wall.

The other mute characters in The Shawshank Redemption aren’t real people at all, but rather photographs, images captured and unchanging. Behind the images of Rita Hayworth, Bo Derek, and their companions hides the important secret that Andy keeps, the hole that will be his escape from Shawshank. Throughout the film, there are head-on shots of these posters; they are talked about by Red, the Warden, Andy and the guards. They have the same affect that

---


3 Ibid, 96.
Chion might say Andy has; there is an impression of secret knowledge in their silent stare. In fact, Red even says that it seems they were hiding a secret; one that only they and Andy knew. This all seems simple enough. Many characters in film have secrets. Why, then, does the mute character hold special agency in film? According to Chion, they seem to be able to see deeper into a person, to know more about them, than the normal person. Andy and his women are trapped in bodies and on pages, so they can not be as ubiquitous and omnipresent as an acousmètre. But they, like the acousmètre, know something you don’t know.4

How, then, do these mute characters relate to the diva-acousmètre? Their interaction with Shawshank’s central mute is one such correlation. The apparitional diva-acousmètres do not simply disappear once the guards have broken into the Warden’s office, beaten Andy, and taken him to solitary confinement, a place where Andy spends a great deal of time, and where he is completely silent. Like the diva-acousmètre in Philadelphia, the once-heard operatic voices become inscribed in the inmates at Shawshank, haunting them with the memory of their voices. This is most immediately apparent when Andy returns from solitary confinement to greet his companions. Upon congratulating him for his bravery, and thanking him for playing such beautiful music for them, the other inmates ask him if it was worth the punishment he had to endure. Andy replies, “It was the easiest time I ever did.” When prodded for more information, he informs his friends that he had “Mr. Mozart” to keep him company. Though he could not hear the voices in his tiny dark cell, he tells them, he had the beauty of

---

4 Michel Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 97.
the voices with him in his mind, and in his heart. The voices helped him pass the
time, he continues, and kept him company.

Time is a central issue within the film. Red is quoted as saying about it,
"In Shawshank, time is all you have." Surely, time spent in solitary confinement
is the slowest time in prison, with nothing at all to occupy one's mind but one's
thoughts. Shots of Andy in solitary show the complete lack of space, light, or
sound one experiences in such a cell. The sensory experience leaves one feeling
as though time stops. Mary Hunter feels that this is why the duet from *Le Nozze*
was chosen: "the...Letter Duet takes its listeners out of their paradoxical prison of
time: when Red says, 'for a moment, every man felt free,' he is surely thinking as
much about escaping the endless weight of time on their hands as about spatial
confinement." The words in the Letter Duet are spread out over a long span of
time. Wye J. Allanbrook, in speaking about this duet, points out the leisurely
musical structure. The duet repeats itself frequently, with phrases falling back on
themselves in a reflective manner. The harmonic changes of the opening section
of the duet, which is most prominent in the film, have a simple two-reprise form,
with a simple I-V-I harmonic structure. Chord changes, Allanbrook says, "are
leisurely, not dramatic." All of this is to underline the time of day in which the
duet takes place: evening, which Allanbrook describes as "a gentler world free of
the limits imposed by daytime necessity." This is reminiscent of another moment
in *The Shawshank Redemption*, where Andy negotiates with a prison guard to get
beers for his fellow inmates and they relax on the roof of the prison in the light of

---

5 Mary Hunter, "Opera in Film: Sentiment and Wit, Feeling and Knowing: The
Shawshank Redemption and Prizzi's Honor," *Between Opera and Cinema*. Jeongwon Joe and
Rose Teresa, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 104.
the setting sun.\textsuperscript{6} Between the beer scene and the opera scene, it seems Andy maintains popularity in Shawshank through his manipulation of time. Andy uses the feeling of “Che soave zefíretto” to change time, both for the prisoners in the yard and for himself in solitary confinement. Not only does it change, though, it stops, or at least slows down, as real time continues to progress along at a normal pace. Once one leaves the world brought upon by these diva-acouzmêtres, much more time has passed than if one had passed it in silence. When Andy tells his fellow inmates that he is able to control time in solitary by conjuring up the sounds of the Letter Duet in his mind, he once again likens himself to the powers of the acouzmêtre.\textsuperscript{7}

It is not the voices, however, whom Andy credits with keeping vigil with him in his cell, but “Mr. Mozart.” This is an important distinction. Andy refuses to admit that the voices wield their power over him, instead attributing the beauty he heard to the music rather than the voices. One might consider this a weakness in the powers of the diva-acouzmêtre, but one must remember that Andy is not like the others; he is a powerful being in his own right. For now, at least, Andy must keep his power a secret, like all the other secrets he keeps, and so must not expose the powers of the diva-acouzmêtres, since he shares those powers with them. It is as though, like his silent conspirators hanging on the wall, Andy is in


\textsuperscript{7} The reader is reminded of my discussion of the acouzmêtre and time in Chapter 1. Also, see Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 119-122.
cahoots with the apparitional voices that accompany him from the Warden’s office, out into the prison yard, and then into solitary confinement.\(^8\)

### The Acousmachine

Andy uses yet another one of Chion’s devices to help him assert his control over the acousmêtres in *Shawshank*. Hunter points out that the voices in this scene are propelled forward by the machinery in the prison; they are loosed from the phonograph, not by the acousmêtre itself, but through the aid of the prison PA system.\(^9\) Perhaps it is due to the fact that these voices are not the voice of Callas, and therefore not able to propel themselves into the Meta-Diegesis.\(^10\) More importantly, it seems Andy must maintain his control over the voices to keep his own powers a secret. Rather than waiting for the voices to loose themselves from the diegesis, Andy uses machinery within his own power to trap the voices in the diegesis, still allowing them to seem acousmatic in their powers. It is *through* the machinery that the voices are ubiquitous and seemingly boundless. In fact, the voices are bounded, and Andy must keep them trapped so that he can remain in complete control.\(^11\) In showing the machinery used to acousmatize the voices, the filmmakers were able to highlight the illusion of the acousmêtre. However, because the voices never locate themselves inside a visible

---

\(^8\) Chion himself states that these two entities are similar in saying, “‘[I]t turns out that the mute, the body without a voice, displays many attributes of his counterpart, the voice without a body, the acousmatic voice.’” Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 97.

\(^9\) Mary Hunter, “Opera in Film,” 99.


body, they remain acousmatic. Additionally, the effect these voices have over the other characters in the film is evidence of their acousmatic powers.

**Susannah and the Countess’ Acousmatic Powers**

In every way, the voices employed in this scene are diva-acousmètres: they are disembodied, clearly wield a power over the inmates, and seem to know something that their witnesses don’t understand. Red delivers a commentary on the duet:

> I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don’t want to know—some things are best left unsaid. *I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can’t be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared, higher and farther than anyone in a grey place dares to dream.* It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments every last man at Shawshank felt free.¹² (italics added)

What Red describes here is a feeling of *jouissance* brought upon by the two voices that soar out over the loudspeakers of the prison. Poizat’s use of the term is appropriate here again. Singing and music, each beyond linguistic representation, succeeds, where all else fails, in bringing each man in Shawshank to a point of freedom, returning each to the state in which he existed before he became a hardened criminal, when he was wrapped in his mother’s arms, hearing her beautiful voice, with their whole future in front of them. To paraphrase Poizat’s use of Lacanian psychology, each is returned to the point before they

---

developed into acculturated human beings. Each hungers for the object (a) for which all humankind longs in their life, signified by the prelinguistic cry of this sung voice, soaring to new heights. The words do not matter. They are, in fact, completely unintelligible to the witnesses, as represented by Red’s description. What is important is the feeling each man experiences upon hearing these voices.\(^{13}\)

These voices, with all their acousmatic powers, are dangerous to the prison administration. For one, they are female. Hunter, in her study of this film, astutely points out that there are almost no women in *The Shawshank Redemption*. The women who do exist are completely silent, most notably the posters that hang on Andy’s wall, silently concealing his secret. The duet is one of but two remarkable exceptions to this point, the other being the voice of Rita Hayworth in the film *Gilda* (1946), which is shown as entertainment for the prisoners. Hunter’s assertion about this point is that simply by being female, these voices have a certain eroticism embedded within them in this almost entirely homosocial, or male centered, film. On top of that, she feels that the fact that these voices sing in close harmony elicits a sonic sexual act between the Countess and Susannah. All of this further advances the jouissance brought upon by this scene. In Hunter’s words, “[t]wo female voices may not double the jouissance of one, but their doubleness...increases the sensuousness of the sound.”\(^{14}\)

---


\(^{14}\) Mary Hunter, “Opera in Film,” 98-99.
Both Rita Hayworth and the Countess and Susannah are overtly seductive in their appearances in the film. When Hayworth appears in *Gilda*, it is to great anticipation by the inmates. When she finally appears onscreen, it is with a flourish of her hair and a seductive pose. The musical styling of “Che Soave Zefiretto” is similar. The close harmonies, outlined by Hunter, are only part of the seduction that takes place. The 6/8 meter also provides a sense of weaving. And, though the inmates may not recognize it, since they don’t know what the duet is about, “Sull’aria” is, after all, about the Countess’ seduction.

This sensuousness is proof of another quality exhibited by the diva-acousmêtre. These voices function as sirens in the film, like the sirens of Chion’s acousmêtre. They come from a place that is seemingly boundless, they are outside the image of the screen, the prisoners don’t know their origin, and their sound trips along the boundaries of the screen. As sirens, they seduce the men hearing them into a gaze, seen in the yard as the camera pans along the faces of countless men staring at the loudspeaker (see figure 4). The place that they seduce the men into is not real, just like sirens at sea, but rather a “green world” which Allanbrook uses to describe the pastoral in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. The pastoral imagery of “Sull’aria,” brought about through the use of close, consonant tonalities and arpeggiated accompaniment, elicits a feeling of simplicity. The 6/8 meter, in addition to being seductive, is commonly associated with the pastoral. The parallel motion of the wind section, and the flat key signature—the duet is in B-flat—are all employed by Mozart to elicit a feeling that the listener is to join
the character in Allanbrook’s “green world.” Of course, this green world is false. Once the music is over, the men are returned to the “grey world,” in Red’s terms, of the prison. The prisoners experience the loss felt after the jouissance brought upon by these voices. The loss of music and subsequent dismissal from the “green world” does not mean the effect of the diva-accès-mètre is over. The sirens have worked their magic. They are now inscribed on the memory of the men who have heard them, and can seduce them once again when the men see fit to call them to their memories.

Figure 4

In addition to being a source of desire in the film, both as reminiscence of the mother and as an object of sexual desire, the two voices heard in this scene also act as a talisman of ritualistic worship. The pseudo-religious imagery in The Shawshank Redemption is not unique to these voices, however. The Warden, a devout Christian, has all of his new convicts stripped naked and seemingly “baptized” into their new existence as prisoners. They are given a Bible and new clothes as their only possessions. When Red is repeatedly called before the parole

15 Wye J. Allanbrook, Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart, 145-149.
16 Michel Poizat, The Angel’s Cry, 88.
board, he is called upon to “confess his sins” and ask for “repentance” before being granted pardon. However, this religiosity is more a ritual than an actual plea for forgiveness, since he is not granted parole until he finally ignores the ritual of confession. Christianity seems to fail everyone in this film. The Warden looks at his favorite bible verse, which hides his faked tax forms, before shooting himself in the head. Andy uses his “good book” simply to conceal the rock pick he uses to tunnel out of prison.

In the end, Andy makes his own redemption, tunnels out of prison, crawls through miles of sewer pipes and is ultimately reborn again, baptized into the water of freedom. His moment of escape is encapsulated in a shot of him from above, almost naked and soaking wet, crying to the heavens. Though Andy never experienced the jouissance of the acoustmètre felt by Red in the opera scene, this silent cry finally unites him with his brethren at the moment of his freedom (see figure 5). It is like the cry of Michael Corleone at the end of Godfather III, described by Marcia J. Citron and discussed in the previous chapter. At the moment of the cry, the moment of jouissance, Andy, like Andrew, is removed from the discursive world and brought to a point beyond representation, where intelligence and words aren’t necessary. He becomes loosed from the civilized world at the moment of his rebirth, his freedom, brought upon by his mute cohorts and aided by the diva acoustmètre.

---

He remains the same powerful figure even after experiencing this *jouissance*, however. For once Andy escapes from Shawshank, the remainder of his work is done almost entirely in silence. He exposes the Warden through documents, rather than through a voice. The actions following his escape are described by Red while Andy speaks only twice; once as Randall Stephens, the "silent, *silent* partner," withdrawing his money from the bank, and then one last time, but his voice does not come from his body. The last time we hear Andy’s voice in *The Shawshank Redemption*, it is as an acousmêtre of sorts. As Red reads the letter, left for him by Andy, which accompanies the money that will reunite them, we hear Andy’s voice iterating the words. The likeness of the mute character in film and the acousmêtre brought upon by Chion is here united in one. Perhaps it is that the mute character, “the body seeking a voice,” is in fact simply a paradoxical half to another acousmêtre. In Chion’s words, “The bodiless voice and the voiceless body can also be...the two disjointed halves of a single elusive entity.”\(^{18}\)

Red

There is one other character in The Shawshank Redemption who complicates the acousmêtre in the film. The relationship between Red and Andy is seemingly deeper than any other relationship in film. The two share secrets about themselves that they keep from others. Andy tells Red about the Warden’s financial dubiousness. Red shares stories about his past with Andy that, at least as far as we know, he does not confess to others. The two buy gifts for one another. After the opera scene, Andy and Red discuss music and Red confesses that he used to play the harmonica. Andy purchases a harmonica for Red, which he is unable to play at first, because he associates music with freedom. In fact, we never see Red playing the harmonica, but Mary Hunter has astutely pointed out that in the final scenes of the film, when both men are reunited and walk down a sunny Mexican beach, the score, composed by Thomas Newman, has a prominent solo for a harmonica.19

Why, though, is there such a connection between Andy and Red in Shawshank? Clearly, the two men share a deeper understanding of humanity than the other characters seem to in the film. Andy’s education and knowledge, not to mention his efforts in the film to edify the other prisoners, are evidence of his heightened humanity. Red, in his monologues delivered throughout the film and in his conversations with Andy, also shows that he, though not as educated as Andy, is an intellectual being.

Perhaps, though, there is another connection these two men share. Might Red, like Andy, also have certain powers of the acousmêtre? For the most part,

19 Mary Hunter, “Opera in Film,” 116.
Red’s main discourses throughout the film are performed as disembodied monologues. When he speaks to others in the film, it is usually brief. Within the diegesis, Red is almost as mute as Andy. However, he is not a mute character like Andy is. Rather, his voice exhibits many of the same qualities that Andy’s does in the letter scene at the end of the film. Within the context of the film, Red is almost mute, but outside, as the narrator of the film, he is like an acousmêtre. It is as though Red’s voice and Red’s body were a paradox.

Chion has another term to describe the type of acousmêtre Red is: the “I-Voice.” The I-Voice is not simply any voice that delivers a voice-over in film, but rather a voice that functions outside time and space. Some voice-overs are simply the interior thoughts of characters onscreen. This is often the voice-over of Television, far less complex than the similar I-Voice in film. The I-Voice divorces the body from the voice, as in the case of Red. Red’s I-Voice never appears in the same frame as Red’s body, at least not for long—sometimes the two overlap. The sonic quality of the I-Voice is immediate; it sounds closer than the other voices in the film. Chion uses the term “immediate” to differentiate between the I-Voice and other voice-overs. The sense of immediacy is what makes the I-Voice seem both interior and exterior, within the film and within the mind of the listener.20 Red’s voice, when it functions as an I-voice, functions a great deal like a sung voice. Sung voices also have an immediate quality to them; they can be heard more clearly than a spoken voice. Red’s voice seems to surround the action, coming from everywhere, penetrating the listener, guiding the action. In other

---

words, Red’s I-Voice exhibits many of the same qualities as the diva-acousmètre and the mute.\textsuperscript{21}

However, Red doesn’t seem to be equal to Andy in the film. Hunter points out that, even though the film seems to want to show the universality of humankind, especially in the opera scene, where music unites all the prisoners and guards in the hypnotizing powers of the voice, what actually happens is Andy becomes set apart from the other characters in the film as the only civilized person in Shawshank.\textsuperscript{22} Andy even controls the audience in the opera scene. By being forced to watch the prisoners listen to the music, and being shown the source of the sound, we are also coerced into sympathetic listening.\textsuperscript{23} In Chion’s terms, Andy turns the prisoners, the guards, and the audience all into listening-beings, and, as such, all fall under Andy’s power.\textsuperscript{24}

When Red speaks as the I-Voice, it is to speak about Andy as a legend. He talks about Andy in the past tense, and in super-human terms. Red even says that Andy will be the most famous prisoner Shawshank has ever seen. In a way, Red’s powers as a type of acousmètre exist only because of Andy; he never assumes the position of the I-Voice to speak about anything else. Andy, it seems, owns Red. Red’s position in the prison before Andy arrives is as “the guy who can get you things.” His value in prison is as a commodity dealer, and when Andy shows up, that is the role Red first performs for Andy. In fact, Red gets Andy the tool that

\textsuperscript{21} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 49-51.

\textsuperscript{22} Mary Hunter, “Opera in Film,” 117.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 99.

\textsuperscript{24} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 73.
will eventually get him out of prison. In telling Andy’s legend, Red tries to own his friend, but the opposite happens. Red’s existence becomes defined not as commodity dealer, but now as story teller, and the only story he can tell is Andy’s. The story-telling scenes of the film also once again place the audience in the position of listening-beings. We become passive, we allow ourselves to be deceived into believing that Andy is normal—that he is not, in fact, a stronger agent than the other members of the film.

How does Red, a seemingly intelligent and self-confident character, allow himself to be tricked into coercion by Andy? It happens, at least partially, through the operatic voices that Andy conjures into being. These voices seduce Red into believing that Andy has something to offer that will free him from his “grey world.” In fact it works. Andy does free him. But how free is he? He becomes hypnotized by Andy’s diva-acousmêtres, and then becomes coerced into helping Andy escape. Once he is free, Red can only survive in the outside under the guidance and with the help of Andy. The image of the two men on the beach at the end of the film seems idyllic, but it is only in light of the fact that Red almost succumbed to the same fate as Brooks, the other parolee in the film, who kills himself after his release from prison. The beach is an appropriate place for the men to reconcile. It is the boundary along the sea, which Chion metaphorically asserts is the residence of the acousmêtre. It is the land of the siren: the diva-acousmêtres in Shawshank. Andy is, in the end, reunited with all of his minions. Although we do not hear the voices of the duet, we can assume they are there.\(^{25}\)

So Red is less like Andy than he is like the diva-acousmêtres in the film. He has powers that position him above other members of the film, but he is still a pawn who is put into play by Andy. What does this say, then, about the powers of the voice in the film, if they can be manipulated by another?

**The Diva-acousmêtre and Silence**

All of the acousmatic beings in this film are related by something. Whether it is the Italian singing of the diva-acousmêtre or the silence of Red and Andy, the diva-acousmêtre, the mute, and the I-Voice entice the witness outside of the realm of discourse. As discussed in previous chapters, one of the goals of the diva-acousmêtre is to draw us out of the world of language to a primitive state, or beyond representation, in Citron’s terms.\(^{26}\) The effect of *jouissance* is to return us to our most fundamental level, a level that we lost, according to Poizat, the moment we learned our first words.\(^{27}\) Perhaps the reason that Andy is able to wield such power over the diva-acousmêtre in this film is that, in his pseudo-mute state, he is closer to this pre-linguistic being than other mortals.

Additionally, the diva-acousmêtre is characterized by Red as being similarly beyond language. It is not the words of the Letter Duet that are important to the prisoners, but rather the ideas and feelings the operatic voice can elicit from them. Singing, not speaking, is successful in redeeming the characters in Shawshank. More specifically, female operatic singing, which Poizat credits as being the furthest from speech, is most effective. As Poizat points out, the higher

\(^{26}\) Marcia J Citron, “Operatic Style and Structure in Coppola’s *Godfather Trilogy,*” 454.

the voice sings, the less the words become intelligible, which is the desired intent in this current context. In other words, the diva-acousmêtre is the only acousmêtre that could successfully achieve the state that Andy Dufresne wishes.

Chion repeatedly reminds the reader that the reason the acousmêtre calls to the foreground images of the mother and the boundless siren is because of the feelings of originality that we experience whenever we hear such a voice.\textsuperscript{28} He also tells us that, almost without exception, we always fail to reach the goal of returning, which is why we gravitate to such voices in film. Andy Dufresne is unique. It seems that he is able to walk among both worlds, simultaneously human and divine, and this is why he is able to manipulate the diva-acousmètres and the I-Voice so well in this film. He gives his fellow inmates a momentary glimpse into his world, and allows Red to join him. When this happens, both are reduced to silence and reside at the boundary of the sea, the realm of the siren. \textit{The Shawshank Redemption} is more than simply about redemption from sin and prison, but redemption from the prison in which our voices and words entrap us, and how Andy can break free from it.

\textsuperscript{28} Chion, \textit{The Voice in Film}, Chapters 1, 4, and 8.
Chapter 4

*Transamerica:*

*The disillusionment by the diva-acousmètre*

The film *Transamerica* poses an uncomfortable question to its audience: what if all you thought about gender wasn’t entirely true? More specifically, what makes a person a man or a woman? The opening scenes of the film help to identify one of the major components of it. The first image presented is of a person of questionable gender—looks like a woman, but could be a man—sliding from the very top of the vocal register, most commonly associated with a female, down into the “male” range. The mantra this character delivers to us in a clearly feminine tone is, “This is the voice I want to use.” She—I say “she” because she looks and *sounds* like a woman in all respects—\(^1\) tells the viewer to repeat this mantra, inflecting it differently, but maintaining the feminine voice. Soon we see a lipsticked mouth, we hear a voice; throaty, husky, but seemingly feminine, a feminine backside in a silky pink robe, legs in white stockings, breasts, with some additional padding, long pink fingernails, a pale pink suit, exaggerated makeup. Finally, we see the end result of all this work: a person who barely looks like a woman, Bree Osborn.

*Transamerica* is about Bree’s struggle to become a woman. In all ways but one, Bree is seemingly already a woman, but she was biologically born male, and it is the elimination of the remnants of that birth that she is working towards at the start of the film. A week before her gender reassignment surgery, Bree

\(^1\) The woman on the screen is in fact Andrea James, a transsexual woman. www.imdb.com.
receives a phone call from a New York City jail, informing her that her son has been arrested. Bree, whose only sexual encounter as Stanley—her birth name—she says, was, "so tragically lesbian" she refuses to acknowledge it, cannot believe that she could possibly have a son and the news comes as an unwelcome surprise. Even more unwelcome is the fact that her therapist, upon hearing about this, informs Bree that she cannot go through with her surgery until she reconciles with her newfound offspring. The remainder of the film is the story of her trip across the country with her new son, whom she convinces that she is a missionary. She must return to Los Angeles in one week so that she can go through with her surgery and become the person Bree believes she really is.

Identity is a major issue in this film. First, there is the issue of Gender Identity Disorder or Gender Dysphoria, which the American Psychiatric Association still defines as a mental disorder. This issue is fascinating, though not entirely central to the current study. How one defines one's gender is important here. How the world treats it as a pathology is for another time.

Additionally, both Bree and her son, Toby, lie about crucial parts of their own identity throughout the film. Not until the end of the film does Bree admit to Toby that she is his father. The characters along the way—Toby’s stepfather, a hitchhiker they pick up along the road; Calvin, who comes to the duo’s rescue after they are robbed; even Bree’s family, whom we are told are all deceased at the outset of the film—all have secrets.

---

2 This issue seems to be hotly contested among members of the psychiatric community. A good outline of the debate, and the disorder itself, can be found in: Richard A Isay, "Remove Gender Identity Disorder from the DSM," Psychiatric News, (November, 1997). Available at http://www.psych.org/pnews/97-11-21/isay.html.
The most important secret, however, in *Transamerica* is the one Bree keeps. Though Duncan Tucker, the film’s creator, said that the film is not a “Trannies are people too” film, there is a strong undercurrent in the film of Bree’s constant struggle to “pass” as a woman. Bree is incredibly fussy, always making the strongest effort to be a perfect female specimen. Even beyond that, she desires to be a lady. Class likens *Transamerica* to both *Philadelphia* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. Bree, like Andy and Andrew, desperately tries to maintain her status as an educated and well-mannered human being even when her status as a white man in general society is destroyed. Bree’s transgender is what imprisons her, but not simply as a woman trapped in the body of a man. Within society Bree is marked, set apart in the same way Andy’s imprisonment marks him and Andrew’s homosexuality and disease sets him apart. All three seemingly rely on their class and education to maintain a connection to the world around them. In each film, one of the things that fosters this connection is opera.

There is very little classical music in *Transamerica*. In keeping with the Americana imagery in the film, the soundtrack features country songs fused with Latin-American music. Dolly Parton wrote the theme song “Travelin’ Thru” for the film, for which she was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe. There are only three numbers on the soundtrack that fit outside this realm: Massenet’s “Meditation” from *Thais*, Chopin’s Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9 No. 2, and “Dido’s Lament” from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*. All three are clearly associated

---


4 This term will be explored in greater detail in a later section of the chapter.
with Bree; she listens to each inside her home, where she is separated from the outside world and able to feel free to be herself. The sonic landscape functions much the same way Bree’s obsessive personal aesthetic does. She does not live in affluent surroundings. Rather, Bree uses classical music to “dress up” her humble bungalow the same way her pink suits and perfect hair “dress up” her identity as a lady, not just a woman. This is in stark contrast to the music of the outside world, that of country and western and Latino music. Toby’s world is briefly marked when he attempts to listen to hard rock in the car along the road, which Bree quickly turns off. The same way classical music acts as a signifier for Bree, Toby employs rock music to emphasize his masculinity, youth, and “angry” persona.5

Massenet’s “Meditation” and Chopin’s Nocturne each make very brief appearances in the film and, though they work to associate Bree with the class distinctions outlined above, they have little other effect in the film. “Dido’s Lament,” on the other hand has a crucial role in the film, and, in fact, sets the actions of the film in motion. “When I am Laid” appears in a much more prominent position in the film. At the moment before her decision to go to New York to meet her son, whom her therapist describes as a part of her body that she cannot discard, we see a phonograph with a record spinning on it and hear the refrain of Purcell’s aria. Bree is standing in front of the player, absentley staring while listening. When the phrase of music returns, Bree places her long pink fingers on the record player, slowing the playing speed. The result is obvious: Dido’s voice becomes low, sounding like a man’s.

Beyond the connection between opera and class, this chapter will explore the complexities of gender and the voice, and how these become even more complex when dealing with transgendered people. Although Chion discusses the acousmètre and gender briefly, a deeper connection is made between the voice and gender when gender binaries are broken down by persons such as Bree. Osborn’s identity, as reinforced by the memoirs of prominent transgendered activist Deirdre McCloskey in *Crossing*, is closely connected to the voice that comes from their bodies.\(^6\) Like the acousmètre, transgendered people separate the voice from the body, which is reason enough to consider the inclusion of opera in *Transamerica*, and the film’s inclusion in this exploration.

**The Gendered Voice**

The first scene in *Transamerica* immediately deals with the training of Bree’s voice to sound like a woman’s. Throughout the film, this same theme reappears, as we once again hear the mantra from the film’s outset, “This is the voice I want to use.” Bree wants to use this voice because it is what will keep her from “passing,” or being read as transgendered. In the second half of the film, after her car, purse, and hormone pills are stolen, Bree begins to worry that the theft might have an immediate effect on her voice and returns to her training, doing careful vocal exercises and consciously speaking higher than usual. This accords with her constant desire to “pass” as a woman, to remain “stealth.” These allusions to covert behavior are what Bree calls slang for being a convincing

woman, something she is not, at least physically, and at least not yet. They are not unique to the film, but frequently appear in literature intended for transgendered people to avoid being ostracized from society, or, worse, being persecuted for their attempt to cross.

One such document is McCloskey’s *Crossing*. Deidre McCloskey is the former Donald McCloskey, a noted economist from the University of Iowa. She is now Professor of Human Sciences at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and a transgendered woman. Her memoir traces her journey from boy to man to woman. One of the many issues that McCloskey speaks about is her struggle to pass. She undergoes surgeries, hormone treatments, electrolysis, makeup lessons, completely relearns how to comport herself as a woman. Her voice, however, continuously gives her away. She attempts surgery on her vocal cords but it fails to help her raise her voice to an acceptably “womanly” pitch. After hours of speech therapy and another surgery she raises her voice so that only half the time do people identify her as “sir” on the phone. Throughout the book, as McCloskey becomes closer and closer to being a biological woman, and even after her gender reassignment surgery, it is her voice that continues to mark her as a man. In the end, she recommends to her readers that they train their voices to sound higher, as Bree Osborn does, rather than attempting surgery. It seems the voice is the only part of her biology that cannot be solved through plastic surgery.\(^7\) Though this issue is not mentioned overtly in the film, it is safe to assume that Bree agrees with McCloskey. Her obsessive training of her voice is proof enough that she

\(^7\) Deidre McCloskey, *Crossing*, 164.
believes it is able to be “fixed” through manipulation, rather than surgical alteration.

**Performing a Voice/Performing a Gender**

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler explains the complexities of gender when viewed through the lens of discourse. In Butler’s estimation, what makes a person a man or a woman is bound up more with the norms established by society, in what she calls Gender Performativity, than it is with the biology established through genetics. How a person carries their body, the jobs they perform in the workplace, and the duties they perform in the home are all deeply involved in the development of their gender identity. These activities are externally derived. We are not predestined by our genes to do dishes. To Butler, gender is socially constructed from the moment that we are interpellated into being through the phrase, “It’s a Boy!” or “It’s a Girl!”

But what of the biological truths that define a person as male or female? These are not so cut and dried either. Butler, along with Anne Fausto-Sterling and Riki Wilchins, argues that the biology of gender becomes multifarious with the addition of hermaphroditism and transgender. This complex matrix of genitalia aside, there is one aspect of biology, it seems, that is inherently a part of being a

---

8 Butler borrows the term “interpellation” from Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Quoted and explained in Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 122. For more information on gender performativity see especially the following chapters: Introduction and “Bodies that Matter.”

man or being a woman: the voice. Even when the rest of the body might imply a spectrum, rather than a binary, of genders, the voice marks a person as a male or a female. This seems to be true even if all other gender signifiers are clear-cut. Women with low voices are considered “manly sounding” and men with high voices “feminine sounding.”

Suzanne Cusick, however, implores us to ask the question: what about the sound of these voices is inherently gendered? The range of voices is easily as varied as the spectrum of genders possible through other biologics. Cusick argues that, like the other performative parts of gender established by Butler, gendered voice is socially constructed. The voice is, in part, trained to sound like the correct gender. Cusick outlines the binary of vocal gender in saying men are taught at an early age to lower their voices, while women are trained to speak in a soft, sing-song tone. This fact can be confirmed by a trip to any gathering of adolescents, where boys are heard forcing their voices to sound lower than their vocal cords seem capable of. One must work to sound right.

As mentioned in chapter one, Cusick connects voice and gender further in saying that men sing and women do not. The sung voice is specific to the female realm in popular music, to Cusick, where females “sing” in close harmony, while men “shout” their music. This has a direct bearing on Bree. When she and Toby

---

10 I make this assertion based on the arguments central to the work of Riki Wilchins, Queer Theory/Gender Theory: Deirdre McCloskey, Crossing; and Suzanne Cusick “On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex.” To my knowledge, Fausto-Sterling and Butler do not mention the voice.


12 Ibid, 33.
spend the night with Calvin, Bree spends time on the porch with her new friend after her son goes to bed. Calvin serenades Bree on the guitar while singing “Home on the Range.” Bree seems to want to sing along, but is embarrassed that she cannot. After he finishes his song, Bree gleefully responds, “You can sing!” After this scene, it is clear that she is smitten with him. Bree’s longing for Calvin is due, at least in part, to his sung voice. Calvin is unafraid to break down the traditional gender roles though singing. Perhaps this is due to his ethnicity. As Roger Ebert points out, quoting Stephanie Zacharek, his Navajo identity leads to him being more open minded than the average person.13 Going beyond that, perhaps that is why he is unafraid to sing. Of course, this is in direct opposition to his “manly,” cowboy qualities. All of the other aspects of Calvin’s personality make him compulsively male. Perhaps Calvin’s willingness to sing is less about gender performativity and more of a reminiscence of a former time. Like his retreat into the country Calvin’s singing shows a longing for a time before technology, when music was natural. Again, this could be an explanation of his appeal to Bree, who is struggling to be natural and also, through listening to “old” music—on a record player nonetheless—is longing for a simpler time. Her inability to sing like a woman is reinforced in the following scene, when Bree once again attempts her vocal exercises to make sure she sounds convincing as a woman. Since Bree cannot sing, she cannot be entirely female.

The Operatic Voice

Bree’s gleeful exclamation that Calvin can sing is a very different reaction from the interchange with Dido’s voice earlier in the film. Calvin’s voice is untrained, a “natural” male sound, slightly out of tune. It sounds rustic and manly. Bree’s bliss at hearing Calvin sing is a longing for his voice, since she does not have a natural voice of her own. Kym Amps’ voice, the one portraying Dido in this recording, is completely different from Calvin’s. Most obviously, it is a woman’s, and therefore a source of envy for Bree, who longs to sound like a woman. However, Cusick provides a further explanation that can illuminate why Bree might have a melancholy reaction to the operatic voice.

[T]he disciplines applied to the singing voice—especially the control of pitch, timbre, and volume—are located far further inside the body’s borders than the disciplines that form the voice into Speech. Further, the adjustments that take place at these sites deep inside the body’s borders are tiny, requiring the finest motor control to exert sonic control over pitch, register, volume, and even timbre.  

By singing Dido’s Lament to Bree, the acousmatic voice of Amps is, in effect, saying to Bree, “look how well I have trained my body to sound like a beautiful woman.” Operatic singing is not a natural occurrence. Apart from the mythology surrounding certain opera stars, most tell stories of training the voice to sound “right.” In an interview, the singer Régine Crespin speaks of the first time her piano teacher heard her sing. “‘My,’ said the teacher, ‘you have a lovely voice...you should do something with it...a little study, perhaps.’” A little study turned into years of study, at first in her hometown in rural France, and then in

Paris, before she would make her debut in *Lohengrin* in 1951.\(^{15}\) The operatic voice is not what one is born with; rather it must be affected through careful manipulation. It takes years of training to achieve perfection. In other words, in Cusick’s model, operatic singing is just as hard to achieve as Bree’s attempt to speak like a woman. After all, Bree’s speech is not simply marked by the control of muscles at the borders of the body: the mouth and tongue. Bree must affect her voice the same way singers do. She must go deep inside her body to change the pitch and timbre of her voice. She cannot simply speak like a woman, she must sing. This is why Bree longs for the diva-acousmètre in *Transamerica*.

**A Voice Divorced from a Body**

If Bree longs for the female operatic voice, why are there no scenes of her sitting in an opera house, ogling an actual diva? Beyond the obvious answers to this question, there is one that Chion might offer: Bree does not long for opera in general, but rather opera disembodied. True, the training of the operatic voice takes place deep inside the body, but the *recorded* operatic voice has no body from which to emanate. And so, Bree does not long for the visual spectacle of opera, at least not within the context of *Transamerica*. Rather, only one such voice is appropriate for her devotion: diva-acousmètre.

The transgendered voice is one that is seemingly divorced from the body. At first it is a gendered voice that sounds “wrong” in comparison to the gendered body. Even if Bree, or any transgendered person, trains her voice to sound natural

---

enough, she will never sound like a woman. McCloskey is particularly poetic in describing her own transgendered voice:

The new operation gave her a hoarse but acceptably feminine voice. Perhaps it could be improved. In stores no heads turned, very far, though people would occasionally say, “My, you have quite a cold there, dear” or “Have you just been sleeping?” and little children would stare at her and then ask naively, “What’s wrong with your voice?” A graduate student in economics offered her a cough drop. But the supposition was that this was a woman with a hoarse voice, not a former man. Half the time on the phone they would call her “ma’am,” half the time “sir,” and she would politely correct them, since it was awkward to go on in the wrong gender.16

Interestingly, McCloskey speaks of herself in the third person throughout *Crossing*. It is as though in writing her memoirs, McCloskey separates her written self from her actual self. Memoirs are a written account of *storytelling*. In other words, in telling a story about herself as though she is speaking of someone else, McCloskey is a voice disembodied. Osborn attempts to speak about Stanley in the third person as well, but her therapist will not allow it. She must remain embodied, even if her voice is not.

The acousmatic voice is similarly divorced from a body. Its apparitional quality maintains a certain mystique, but there is also a very real separation between voice and body, since there is no visible body to be connected to the voice. Beyond all the metaphysical and spiritual connections already made with the diva-acousmètre, in *Transamerica* it has a very real function. This function is heightened through the use of another one of Chion’s tools: the acousmachine.

---

16 Deidre McCloskey, *Crossing*, 245. McCloskey speaks of herself in the third person, but is in fact speaking about herself.
The Acousmachine

Once again there is a focus in *Transamerica* on apparatuses. There are the tools that Bree uses to maintain her femininity: her makeup, her clothes, her special undergarments, and her hormone pills. The first scene of the film is not of real life, but a shot of a television, another apparatus, with its characteristic graininess and tinny sound. The most prominent gadget in the film, however, is directly connected to the acoustmètre. Several times the camera focuses on the record player. In the opera scene this takes place in extreme close-up. The record player is shown in deep focus in the opera scene. We see it as though it were a character in and of itself. An acousmachine can be any mechanical apparatus from which voices play. The phonograph is also central to Chion’s study and, like the acousmachine in Chion’s exploration, zooming in on the machinery has a specific purpose in *Transamerica*: to heighten the disillusionment of the acoustmètre in film.17 Bree wishes that the voice has some sort of supernatural power, that it might be able to teach her how to separate the voice from the body, or perhaps to train her voice more effectively. The diva-acoustmètre is sought after to teach her how to train her voice outside of her body, rather than inside, where her gender is trapped. This voice, however, is similarly trapped. It is locked inside a record, which is then audible only through the use of machinery. Perhaps this is why Bree’s reaction to the voice is one of disappointment. It is just like the man behind the curtain—we are witnessing the de-acousmatization of the voice when we enter the scene. This is the moment, Chion says, at which the voice becomes locked in a

body, and loses its acousmatic powers. "Embodying the voice is a sort of symbolic act, dooming the acousmêtre to the fate of ordinary mortals. De-acousmatization roots the acousmêtre to a place and says, 'here is your body, you'll be there, and not elsewhere.'"\textsuperscript{18}

By focusing on the acousmachine in \textit{Transamerica}, Duncan Tucker, the screenwriter and director, locates the acousmatic voice in a body, but it is not a natural human body. It is a machine, something artificial, created. It is a voice, transferred into an unnatural body. In other words, it is a great deal like Bree—something that must be altered to maintain its seemingly natural state. Though one might argue the psychological complexities of whether a transgendered person is more natural in their pre- or post-operative state, one must admit that the body of a transgendered person is a body created through technology. In other words, Bree's trans-voice resembles in a great many ways the operatic voice of the diva-acousmêtre in the acousmachine.

By showing the symbolic act of embodying the diva-acousmêtre, Tucker creates a parallel between the disillusionment of de-acousmatization and the disillusionment felt by Bree at this moment in the film. After she turns off the record, we realize that Bree has come to the conclusion that she has not yet freed herself from her former body, from her former identity as Stanley, and that she never will. Now that she has a son, Bree comes to realize that Stanley will never be gone for good, as much as she longs to be rid of him. Bree speaks of Stanley in the third person, as though he were someone else. Bree’s meeting Toby and welcoming him into her life is a way for her to acknowledge the fact that Stanley

\textsuperscript{18} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 27-28.
still exists in her. It is as though admitting the deception of the acousmètre is also admitting the deception of Stanley’s disappearance.

**Mothers**

The disillusionment in this film with the acousmètre is also closely linked with the disillusionment with Bree’s mother as shown in the latter half of the film. A close connection has already been made between the voice of the diva-acousmètre and the voice of the mother in the womb.\(^{19}\) The voice of the diva-acousmètre is ubiquitous, all-present. It surrounds the viewer, as well as the characters in the film, like the voice of the mother, the voice with which we first associate and to which we constantly wish to return. It is the acousmatic voice that most closely maintains the umbilical connection that is immediately cut off at the moment of birth.\(^{20}\)

This is exactly how Bree feels towards the diva-acousmètre in *Transamerica*. She longs for a mother and, in turn, a family. She is completely cut off from the world around her, and seems to trap herself in her home, a world marked by classical music and good taste. When questioned about her family, first by the psychiatrist and then Toby, her response is to say they are all dead. In addition to associations with gender and performativity, the voice of the diva-acousmètre represents for Bree the connection to a mother lost. Perhaps this is why the disillusionment experienced when the opera scene begins is so painful for

---

\(^{19}\) See chapter 1.

Bree. She is realizing that this voice that represents a deified mother is in fact a mere mortal voice, witnessed through a machine.

This disillusionment is even more starkly felt when we actually meet Bree’s family later in the film. They are not dead, she only wished them so. It is Bree’s response to the fact that her mother refuses to accept her that she pretends to be orphaned. The artificiality of the acousmachine is parallel to the artificiality of Bree’s mother, who looks almost cartoon-like with her platinum hair and overly-tanned skin. A.O. Scott finds Bree’s mother particularly important too. “She verges on monstrousness, but stops short of being grotesque, and it is clear that while young Stanley may have rebelled against his mother, Bree has studied her behavior closely in search of both negative and positive examples.”

The world of Bree’s family, a faux-marble palace and ceramic ornament, is just as marked with careful artifice as Bree’s own life is. Bree’s reaction to this world is evidence that her relationship with her mother will never be as she wants it. Her mother, who is just as artificial as Bree’s own sense of self identity—she calls transgendered women “ersatz women”—will never accept her. So, Bree longs for a mother in the acousmître that will not judge her, because it can’t. The diva-acousmître in Transamerica is only able to say what it has been programmed to say. In other words, it is Bree’s opportunity to have the comforting sound of her mother’s voice paired with the control she wishes to exert over the rest of her life.

Bree’s self-control immediately transfers to her relationship with Toby the moment they meet. This becomes an interesting connection between her and her

---

mother. Both women are overbearing in their desire to correct their children. Bree corrects Toby's grammar, insists that he not put his shoes where they don't belong, and fusses over his appearance, much in the same way that her overbearing mother does. Her desire to control Toby is seen first in her desire to manipulate herself, the way she carefully does her hair and makeup; she is harried any moment when her own personal perfection is not maintained. This desire for control makes its way into Bree's relationship with the diva-acousmêtre as well.

Just before turning off the sounds of the operatic voice in her home, Bree makes one more attempt to maintain her control over it. She places her hand on the record, slowing it down and changing the sound of the voice. The high tones of the aria suddenly begin to sound like the voice of a man. This brief moment seems to be Bree's attempt to control the operatic voice the way she controls her own voice, and later attempts to control Toby's voice by correcting his grammar and foul language. It is as though, upon the failure of her desire to revel in the divine voice of the diva-acousmêtre, she must at least attempt to make it her own, make sure that its fallibility is linked to her own control. However, the complexities of the diva-acousmêtre are clearly outlined at this exact moment in the film. The moment she removes her hand from the record, the expected result happens—it speeds back up and the voice returns to its original state. Chion argues that the voice trapped in an acousmachine is simply a voice trapped in a body, fallible and unable to maintain its acousmatic powers, but it seems to be more complex than that. Of course, once we witness the voice as a part of a machine, it does not maintain the mystique tied-up in being an acousmêtre. But it
seems that the acousmètre in *Transamerica* is able to wield at least a bit of its power beyond its de-acousmatization. It is unable to be manipulated and continues to show its effect on Bree, as she stares blankly at the record player for a moment before sitting on the couch to call the New York Central Lockup to find her son.

**Rethinking Gender/Rethinking the Acousmètre**

It seems Butler is right: an incredibly complex matrix of performances make up our conception of gender. As she and Cusick both point out, these performances take place both inside and outside our bodies. Our idea of gender, as constructed by the society around us, traverses the boundaries of our bodies, evolving as we become more acculturated into the world around us. However, Butler’s theory that gender is entirely socially constructed might place a bit too much of the onus on the rest of the world. Although *Transamerica* is a work of fiction, but a careful representation at that, the film suggests that manipulation of our genders does not entirely work from the outside in. Sometimes it comes from the inside out, and sometimes it comes from neither inside nor outside.

There is perhaps no other manifestation of this phenomenon more clearly articulated than the acousmètre, more specifically the diva-acousmètre. This voice, beautiful and transcendent in all its female glory, soars beyond a body, evidence of its freedom from corporeality, while at the same time showing the careful manipulation required to achieve such a feat. The mimicking of such a sung voice is Bree’s attempt to maintain her own femininity. Her desire for the
diva-accoupmètre is her desire to be as womanly, and as carefully trained, as the voice emanating from the speakers. Bree longs for the disembodied voice throughout the film. She speaks of the ancient Indian, who spoke of the Loon call as the apparitional voices of ancestors. Her longing for a voice is her longing for identity, for belonging, and for a connection to the mother that she will never again foster.

The artifice of the voice, as highlighted by the acousmachine, is a clear example of the lack that Lacan describes, and which Chion paraphrases, in his musings.\textsuperscript{22} Our longing for the object (a) is unattainable. It is the void we long to fill through our connections to others. Grover-Friedlander speaks of the object voice for which we long—the voice of the maker and the mother.\textsuperscript{23} Our struggle to articulate ourselves, as Cusick says, is our struggle to assert our identity.\textsuperscript{24} Bree's ultimate sense of identity, at least as she initially conceives of it, is impossible to achieve. The acousmatic voice, trapped in the acousmachine, shows the ultimate failure to grasp what it is meant to represent. However, it is not mutable, not able to be manipulated as humans are. The acoupmètre, even once embodied in the acousmachine, maintains its constancy and gives us further hope for our Lacanian goal. The film ends in just such a light. It seems that the goals we set for ourselves, the manipulations we place upon ourselves, ultimately fails as our true selves, our constant identity, prevails, assuming we let it. The

\textsuperscript{22} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 63.


\textsuperscript{24} Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," 29.
complexities of the voice, and the myriad things it represents—identity, longing and worship—remain, no matter how we try to control it.
Conclusions

Andrew Beckett, Andy Dufresne, and Bree Osborn are all very different people. Of the three, Andrew fits best into a stereotype evidenced by an affinity to opera. However, not one of them, I argue, listens to opera as a marker of their class or social standing, though I can understand how this view has become so widely accepted in film and opera scholarship. In fact, it is at truly dark moments in their lives, which are all central to this film, that each turns to the operatic voice for comfort. This is what I think the purpose of opera is in film. It is capable of eliciting such emotions that are unparalleled by other forms of music. Royal S. Brown, a film-music theorist and composer, said that music in film is crucial to setting the emotion of a scene.\(^1\) In each of the moments described in the chapters of this work, this is immediately apparent.

Brown, however, is talking exclusively about non-diegetic music and its emotional power. To him, as well as to others, diegetic music does not have the same effect on the audience that it has on the characters in the film. Conversely, non-diegetic music, though highly evocative for the viewer, is inaudible to characters in film, and therefore not applicable to their emotions. This thesis has challenged this dichotomy. The music being employed in the opera scenes of Philadelphia, The Shawshank Redemption, and Transamerica is neither inside nor outside the diegesis. In fact, I think “diegesis” is an inadequate way of talking about the operatic music in these films.

---

\(^1\) Royal S. Brown, Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 110.
Now, thanks to Chion, we have a new language for talking about it. The diva-acousmètre frees the operatic voice from the cultural signifiers usually tied up in it, not only in these films, but in other feature films where opera has a notorious agency, such as *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Moonstruck* (1987), and recent films such as *Match Point* (2005) and *Closer* (2004). Admittedly, opera in these films does mark certain characters with certain cultural characteristics. However, opera also appears at moments in film similar to those explored in *Divine Apparitions*, where characters feel the need to escape the situations currently surrounding their lives. They turn to the diva-acousmètre for that escape. And so we should recognize these voices as important agents in film, rather than insignificant parts of the non-diegetic or diegetic landscape of the film. This is the other useful part of the language: the ability of the diva-acousmètre to break down the diegetic spectrum even further. As in the three films discussed in this study, the music in the films above again transcends the boundaries of the film, functioning both inside it and without it.

Over the course of this work, the operatic voice is not a thing but has been personified, taking on the form of a human. Acousmatic voices can come from a variety of bodies, though not all have been explored in this current thesis. After all, Chion’s opening paragraph, which also began this current study, speaks of the voice as being completely devoid of the qualities that make it human. Take away bodies, discourse, timbre, and what do you have left? The voice slips away into the realm of the ephemeral.
This is not entirely true of the diva-acousmêtre. I admit that the term coined for this work might sound silly to the reader, but the word “diva” carries with it many different connotations that describe the voices in film. Most apparently, opera singers are notoriously divas, but there is even more. A diva is something of a paradox. For one, she is human, and her voice is that of a human’s. None of the voices described in Divine Apparitions could be likened to the inhuman voices Chion speaks of in The Voice in Cinema. They are all inscribed with at least some of the traits that Chion strips away: they sing words, not always intelligible to everyone, but they are words nonetheless. They have a human timbre, more specifically a womanly timbre that marks their voices as human. At the same time, the word diva conjures up something much more grandiose than mere humanity. Webster’s Dictionary derives the word from the Latin divus—meaning god. Even without that, the word elicits sounds of divinity, and that is exactly what these voices are: somewhere between human and divine. Their disembodiment, their “acousmetreeness,” if you will, places them on more than simply the boundary of the diegetic divide. They also maintain a slippery agency, acting as something very human, the mother, but at the same time evoking a divine status.

This slipperiness is what makes the voices described in Divine Apparitions so difficult to hold down, especially with the existing rhetoric used to talk about music in film. After all, though they are voices, and could be dealt with exclusively by film theorists, they are carrying music with them, and that only adds to their mystique. It is my hope that a new language will develop, as I
already see in the work of Citron,\textsuperscript{2} Grover-Friedlander\textsuperscript{3} and others, which borrows from many of the varied sources I have brought into play. Hopefully, the acousmêtre, and more specifically the diva-acousmêtre, will be useful for rethinking the language used to describe opera in film.

However, this slipperiness is also what makes it possible for the diva-acousmêtre to do her work, which she always does. The diva-acousmêtre doesn’t ever seem to sit idly by, indifferently commenting on the action of the film, which is the way many theorists see music in film.\textsuperscript{4} Rather, she is an integral part of the lives of Dufresne, Osborn, and Beckett. This is perhaps where the three characters most have something in common. Bree, Andrew, and Andy are all trapped in some way. True, only Andy is physically imprisoned, but Bree is trapped in a body that she does not feel to be hers, and Andrew is essentially locked inside a corpse. The diva-acousmêtre, with its ubiquity and disembodiment, is the very bastion of transcendence, and this is what she represents to her charges in these films, and even more broadly, to audiences as well. Most religious histories speak in some way of the soul being trapped in the body, or being trapped in this world, or some other similar mythology. It is inherent in the zeitgeist of the present that people feel the need to get out, to transcend the world in which they reside. Even “the America Dream” has something to do with “moving up.” The three central


\textsuperscript{4} Royal S. Brown, \textit{Overtones and Undertones}; Georges Burt, \textit{The Art of Film Music} (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994).
characters in this study all felt similarly charged to escape their world and they found in the disembodied female-operatic voice a being that could aid in at least feeling as thought they were escaping. Like Bree, Andy, Andrew, and the inmates of Shawshank, we spend our lives longing for the moment when we can be like the diva-acousmêtre, free from the bodies that trap us, and the world that surrounds us. And so, the operatic voice has a great deal more appeal to people than might be immediately apparent. She exhibits qualities that are not simply musical, but speaks to us at a deeper level.

Opera is an important part of our cultural history, and filmmakers are increasingly coming to that realization as they include more and more it in feature films. It connects us to our very old past, and using it as a disembodied entity is a wonderful way of highlighting its apparitional qualities. It is not simply as a cultural stigma that opera should function in feature film. Rather, as diva-acousmêtre, it has the power to underline who we are as humans, both over our entire history and in the moment of listening.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Dyer, Richard. Nino Rota, Music, and Film (Forthcoming).


**FILMOGRAPHY**


