

Scarred Voices, Speaking Bodies: Memory Work in Documentary Re-Enactment

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Roland Barthes refers to speech as the theatrical and unpredictable other of the written word, freed from the former's "tactical" feature. The written word introduces "a new image-repertoire, that of 'thought'".¹ In our encounter with documentary film and media, the experience of first person testimony, framed confessions and memory work present us with an "aesthetics of ambiguity" where the logics of Barthes' binary is shaken or even ruled out.²

It goes without saying that the expressive possibilities of montage and narration in film often claim an "image-repertoire" similar to that of the written word. Still, the moment a camera starts filming, speech doubles into both a performative act and a recorded event. The speaking subject becomes the subject of a cinematic gesture, and the performance in the presence of a camera is famously something different than a face-to-face encounter. Aspects of mise-en-scène, sound recording and editing will inevitably curb the seemingly spontaneous act of telling into a framed scene, which, in turn, will be open for additional meanings. What is often at stake in the experienced realm of filmed speech, as Jean Epstein suggested, "a certain degree of contradiction between image and speech, of falsehood between the eye and the ear", and, we may add, between what the person says and her gestures, between the words and, to paraphrase Barthes, "the grain of the voice."³ This is, and has always been, at the core of the filmed testimony and it aligns with the ethical challenges of documentary. The

¹/ Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice", in *Image, Music, Text*. Transl. S. Heath. London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1977, p. 179.

²/ Dai Vaughan, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity", in *For Documentary. Twelve Essays*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999, p. 54-83.

³/ Jean Epstein, Epstein, Jean, "The Counterpoint of Sound". Translated by Franck Le Gac, in Keller Sarah and Paul, Jason N. eds., *Jean Epstein. Critical Essays and New Translations*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012.

immanent chance element of the subject's performance may be invoked or edited out, and, last but not least, in recording, something happens to the voice. Just as with the filmed face or bodily performance, the voice becomes subject to the forging of a screen event. As Michel Chion concludes with reference to Marguerite Duras, "the contemporary cinema stringently requires voice to be *nailed down* to bodies."⁴ In the digital age, this is perhaps even more pronounced in the use of small microphones or mouthpieces to achieve an increased intimacy with sound, and in the postproduction manufacture and control of a film's soundscape; a tendency which is not least striking in documentary.

The aim of this text will be to discuss documentary approaches to voice and recollection, where re-enactment provides a means to escape the media conventions of the talking head. Instead, the first person narrative results in a *mise-en-scène*, where the artifice of framing seems rather to enhance the emotional authenticity of the subject, struggling with the challenge to reassess experiences of a troubled past. I am interested in aesthetic and phenomenological aspects of duration and contemplation; in media projects and screening contexts where voice, sound, and the drama of body language add to the framing and experience of memory work in moving images.

My earlier work on film and phenomenology was typically biased towards visible scars and vestiges of the past, centering, on the notion of *the trace* and the classical subject of image and death.⁵ I have always been fascinated with the ideal ways in which poetic imagination and, more specifically, re-enactment in moving images may "impinge a micro-perspective on the linear axis of official time."⁶ In order to further explore the aesthetics and agency of memory work in documentary, we will have to challenge the bias toward the visible in classical and contemporary film theory by addressing the, as it were, "face value" of

⁴/ Chion, *op. Cit.*, p. 130.

⁵/ Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time. Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁶/ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

performed and re-enacted speech. As already acknowledged in scholarly work on aesthetic experience and documentary cinema, the mediated voice, including the dramaturgy of silence and moments of hesitation, are key aspects for the realization of a speaking subject in moving images. The close-up is a stylistic convention that we associate with stark testimonies and direct address, but the intimacy of voice may be enhanced off-frame or even intensified by a more distanced camera. Chion's notion of the *acousmètre* and the "I-voice", famously depending on "an immaterial, non-localized body", may easily apply to the essay film's more personal registers of voice and its playful relation to text, music, sound effects and visuals.⁷ For example, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker would reflexively elaborate on the interval between image and sound, voice and text. In addition, the disembodied voice may provide an intimate site of subjectivity. For example, the first person narration and re-enacted phone calls in *Belleville Baby* (Mia Engberg, 2013) posits the *I-voice* in the aesthetic combine of sensory materiality and materialized subjectivity. An unexpected call from a lost but not forgotten lover triggers a recollection in essayistic fashion of a specific time, a place, a relation, and a former self. Aside from the staged phone call, the overall reflection is not only narrated by Mia Engberg, but her perfect voice is at once soft and scarred, proud and vulnerable. *Belleville Baby* brings attention to the ways a recorded voice (here in tune with an imaginary blend of actual locations and dream images) may claim a framed and cinematically invoked persona as striking as that of a face in close-up.

In the following, will take the risk of exemplifying sonic traces and of describing the texture and rhythm of voice in moving images, but with examples that deviate from the conventions of the "Voice-of-God", the "talking head", or the regular interview formats of documentary film and television. A major inspiration for this text was found in a context of contemporary art, and the exhibition mode of "the black box", which tends to mimic the

⁷/ Michel Chion, *The Voice of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 51.

experience of the movie theatre, while stressing the sonic and the sculptural qualities of time-images in different ways. The pronounced quality of duration and digital sound-images in the art gallery seem to ask for further attention, not least in relation to artists' conceptual exploration of documentary modes. This combine of media materiality and the embodied space of the gallery film made me return to the writings of Jean Epstein.

In consequence, there are two conceptual nodes in the following discussion: Epstein's notion of *la phonogénie* and the contemporary gallery film *Repertoire*, (*Repertoar* was part of the Tova Mozard retrospective "Verklighetens Afton" at Kulturhuset, Stockholm, Spring, 2013), by the Swedish artist Tova Mozard.

Writing in 1930 Jean Epstein famously criticized the talkies and "the parroting exercises" of sound cinema. But in deploring the misdirection of microphones, he also recognized the possibilities of a cinema to come, the "spontaneous, new, wild accents which will sooner or later entail a transformation of the art of film."⁸ Later in his 1955 essay "The Close-up of Sound", he remarked: "In the domain of sound, there has been very little attempt to seek out the innovative interpretations of which film recording is capable." Epstein's cinema machine and its sensory impact on spectatorship would be fascinating to put in dialog with the digital experiments of contemporary film and visual art, where close-miking and soundscapes controlled in postproduction sometimes result in what seems to be a new cinema of attractions. In *Repertoire* recollection takes the form of an unfolding memory work. Mozard is staging a man's personal reflection on a past of drug abuse, violence, loss and grief, life and death. In line with Catherine Fowler's conception of "the gallery film" as opposed to the video installation, my experience of *Repertoire* seemed completed by the full scale and position of the screen and the physical awareness of the room as an important facet

⁸ / Epstein, "The close-up of Sound" in Keller and Jason eds., *Jean Epstein. Critical Essays and New Translations*, p. 366

of the installation.⁹ Also, an important theme in Mozard's work is that of class and social heritage. Since the late sixties and Stefan Jarl's film *They Call us Misfits*, "the social heritage" stands out as a recurrent theme in the history of Swedish documentary. Then how to address the power of voice and the human gesture conveyed by this performance in approximate real-time? I find Epstein's notion of *phonogénie* as an overlooked possibility in exploring further the function of filmic testimonies, disembodied voices, and embodied memory work in documentary.

Before a closer consideration of *phonogénie* and the filmed gesture of recollection in this particular example, there is reason to briefly recall some of the most salient aspects of the testimonial act and the voice in predominant scholarship.

Filmed testimony, blocked out memory and the voice of recollection

In his essay "The Intolerable Image" Jacques Rancière illuminates the ethical dilemmas that are immanent to any filmed testimony; the recorded voice and the voicing of a narrative, the always complex relation between the "speech of the witness" and the "authority of the voice."¹⁰ There is agency in the act of giving a voice to the subject in front of the camera. There are always the political and ethical implications of the author's voice. There are ways of reducing the asymmetry between the filmmaker and the social actor; methods to grant her a voice and to present her as a speaking subject. This is also about the cinematic possibilities to stress the vulnerable act of recollection, and the relation between an irrevocable moment in the past and the narrative process of reconstructing and "forging" its approximate depiction. Rancière refers to Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (and the famous scene with the former Treblinka hairdresser Abraham Bomba), claiming that "the true witness is one who does not

⁹/ Fowler, Catherine, "Room for Experiment: Gallery Films and Vertical Time. From Maya Deren To Eija Liisa Ahtila", *Screen* 45, no 4 (Winter 2004)

¹⁰/ Jacques Rancière, "The Intolerable Image", in *The Emancipated Spectator*. London and New York: Verso, 2009, p. 83-105

want to witness”.¹¹ The most powerful testimony in cinema is the “speech of a man incapable of speaking.”¹² Michael Renov uses the same example to address the unheard knowledge conveyed by the interviewee’s body: “The kernel of trauma, buried and of the Real, erupts less as language, more as signs of bodily distress – grimacing, tears, the cessation of activity.”¹³ In the traumatic context of war and witnessing, or in the related micro-histories of private grief and re-enacted life stories, the framing of speech invokes the timber of voice and the emotional event of facing past events. The “complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the said, and the unsaid”, identified by Rancière and others as immanent to the testimonial act, is very much at stake also in documentary projects where memory work is recognized by author and subject as a painful but healing process of storytelling; and an event to be shared with others.¹⁴

Voice-over is known to be “one of the stylistic signatures of documentary sound”, and a cinematic mode that adds in important ways to the viewer’s emotional response to the film.¹⁵ Beyond the didactic function of the conventional voice-of-God, the documentary voice-over is “an agent of subjectivity [...] that supervenes and restores order [as in the case of, for example Michael Moore’s films]”, and a personal narrator, an invisible and intimate presence through which the point of view of the filmmaker is personalized and, we may add, embodied.¹⁶ The voice in question may be off-frame, belonging to the filmmaker, another narrator, to the subject of the film. It may invade the image (and the screening room), be part of the cinematic motif, or independent of it. Filmed speech, including the silence and

¹¹/ Ibid, p. 91.

¹²/ Ibid,

¹³/ Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 127.

¹⁴/ Rancière, op. Cit, p.

¹⁵/ Jeffrey Rouff, “Conventions of Sound in Documentary”, in Rick Altman, ed., *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 5

¹⁶/ Michael Renov, “First-Person Films. Some Theses on Self-Inscription”, in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong, *Rethinking Documentary. New Perspectives, New Practices*. (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2008), p. 49.

speaking body of a person who struggles to remember, results in an unfolding event. Accents, slang, idiosyncratic syntax infuse the rich diversity of the documentary voice, while also presenting obstacles for the audience's understanding. Together with the shifting expression of the face and the body, the nuances of the recorded voice add to the experience of a filmed testimony or, more broadly, a first person recollection of the past. Subtitling may translate language and mimic expressions and accents, but cannot convey – what Jeffrey Ruoff describes as “the material texture of unrehearsed speech”.¹⁷ Beyond the authoritative function of the conventional voice-over, the voice in documentary resides on the side of subjectivity and the imaginary, of personal experiences and life stories. This has been exemplified and nuanced in Alisa Lebow's recent volume on “First Person Documentary”, where voice stands for the articulated point of view of both subjectivity and agency, opting for a recognition of the different facets of “subjectivity” and “agency”: “first person singular; first person plural; diasporic subjectivity; virtual subjectivity.”¹⁸

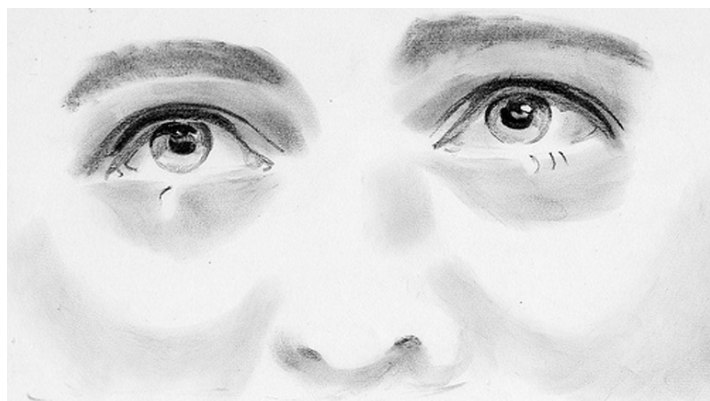
Framing life stories in the shadow of loss and traumatic events, the documentary discourse has often recognized the alternative knowledge conveyed by the filmed face and bodily expressions of the speaking subject. This alternative knowledge also includes the nuances of the recorded voice, its unique timber and tune, its emotional and changing expression, its traces and marks. Bella Honess Roe makes a fine point in reference to Chion in acknowledging the peculiar trace-status of recorded voices synchronized with different styles of rotoscoping.¹⁹ Dennis Tupicoff's animation *His Mother's Voice* consists of a re-enacted radio interview with the grieving mother of a teenager who was shot dead. Aside from the rotoscope technique of the imagined scenes of this authentic recollection, the overall rhythm

¹⁷/ Rouff, op. Cit, p. 5.

¹⁸/ Alisa Lebow ed., *The Cinema of Me. The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), p. 7.

¹⁹/ Bella Honess Roe, *Animated Documentary* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 97-100.

and tempo of Mrs Easedale's voice and the conventional use of film music become structuring principles for a compelling act of memory work. In this film, as in the remainder of this text, the "I-voice" is not that of the filmmaker, but that of the subject; a re-enacted process of recollection referring to the irrevocable chronology of lived time, while bringing attention to subjectivity, imagination and shared experience: Emotional authenticity, rather than documentary veracity; a scarred voice and a drawn, orchestrated gesture of memory work, rather than a filmed testimony.



Mrs Easedale's imagined face in *His Mother's Voice*. Courtesy of Dennis Tupicoff.

Artifice and authenticity: Epstein, *Repertoire* and the gesture of a speaking subject

The close-up referred to in Epstein's early writings as the "soul of cinema". My re-reading of Epstein is informed by Christophe Wall Romana's interpretation of *photogénie* as a notion invested in bodily affects and non-visual sensations. For example in the 1923 essay "On Some Conditions of *Photogénie*" collected in *The Cinema Seen From Etna* (1926), Epstein clarified: "I will term *photogénie* any aspect of things, beings and souls that enhances its moral quality through cinematic reproduction". Wall Romana accounts for the contradictions in Epstein's own definition of the notion, but he argues for a recognition of Epstein's parallel interest in the cinema machine *and* in the emotional event of spectatorship: "Photogénie is a hyper-

aesthetic phenomenon – a heightened mode under which things and beings animated by film appear to perceivers; and second, *photogénie* involves an emotional response by the perceiver to this very mode of appearance [...]. (Wall-Romana, p. 53). The sonic counterpart, *la phonogénie* (discussed in the 1955 essay “The Close-up of Sound”) would be the intimate voice – cleaned of any surround sound or noises. Or, it would be the invading sound effect, the single sound of the wind, or the sound of approaching steps, or maybe heartbeats that have been filtered to be heard above the chaotic noises of any direct sound. Interestingly, as noticed by Trond Lundemo, “the only moments of *phonogénie* [...] recorded so far have been in faulty fragments of actualities.”²⁰ Hence, *phonogénie* was coined as a neologism, but may nevertheless be an inspiring notion for the consideration of the mediated voice and the telling moments of silence that clearly add to the screen attractions of recorded speech and filmed testimony. But we will have to look beyond the authority of voice and the discursive function of the speaker, to be able to grasp the affective impact of the voice and the speaking subject.

This is illuminated in *Repertoire* and reinforced by the way Tova Mozard choose to stage the memory work of her subject in theatrical fashion, by arranging a static mode of framing and a distanced camera to prepare for a scene invested in the shared effort of communication, identification, and imagination. At odds with the conventional use of the close-up to propel emotional response, the static long shot stresses the vulnerability of the subject, the asymmetric relationship between him and the filmmaker behind the camera. The closeness of the man’s voice contradicts this visible distance, the painful story he tells is also felt in the bodily performance at hand: While responding to unheard questions off frame, he has apparently been instructed to dig and shovel in the ground.

The opening scene shows a forest glade in perfect stillness. The black and white image brings attention to the contrast of light and shadows, and the abstract quality of the fixed

²⁰/ Trond Lundemo, “A Temporal Perspective: Jean Epstein’s Writings on Technology and Subjectivity”, in *Jean Epstein*, op. cit, p. 210

framing. The sound of footsteps anticipates the man's entrance into the frame, and the moment he appears and puts his shovel into the ground, the glade transforms into a stage. Everything about this scene is artificial and instructed, except from the middle-aged man, who hesitates, rests on his shovel and, looking into the camera, starts telling his story. What is most striking is the personal mode of address and the man's voice: the accent of a specific Stockholm neighborhood, the sonic index of a working class background; the voice and body of someone marked by a hard life. During the following 30 scenes, fragments of his life story are being told in cinematic tableaux of varying length, separated mostly by black frames, and shot by a static camera from the four different sides of the excavation produced by the act of shoveling and cutting into the ground.

Duration is the temporal mode of *Repertoire*, and it is the theme of Bergsonian duration and the gallery experience of performed speech that motivates my cross-referencing to Mozart's work and Epstein's recognition of the human body transformed into a cinematic event. Hence, duration in the cinematic realization of an "ek-static dimension of Time", a process of becoming where the viewer is being aware of the passing of Time itself. In documentary, the poignant event of time passing often seems to result from the assumingly spontaneous performance of the filmed subject. Signs of intimidation, a pause for effect or a frown of irritation may be emphasized by camera work, sound, and editing into a poignant slice of time.

In *Repertoire*, the action is framed in a static long take, erasing all environmental sound. It is the unrealistic arrangement of "characters in long shot with closely miked voices [...]" that adds to the emotional authenticity of the staged event.²¹ Despite the pronounced markers of cinematic artifice (aside from the soundscape: the camera, the black and white image, the invoked scene and instructed gesture, the lighting), the man's performance reads as sincere,

²¹/ Michel Chion, 129

personal, as a social testimony of family relations and private memory. On the side of the untold is the background story of how this man agreed on being the subject of a gallery film. The asymmetrical author-subject relation seems to be balanced by this collaborative effort.

The metaphor of the psychoanalytical session is of course suggestive to compare with the joint effort of both filmmaker and subject to build a relationship of trust, without which the re-enacted performance would never have been realized. This is of course a stylized mode of enactment that stresses the interrelation (the match or mismatch) of bodily expression, speech, and the spoken world – something that has always been important to psychoanalysis. In *Repertoire*, the framing of memory work is propelled by a joint effort of storytelling. Apparently, the subject is eager to embody and perform this mode of recollection, and it is clearly not the first time that he attempts to address these circumstances of the past. In a recent publication, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* (2014) Agnieszka Piotrowska discusses the author-subject relation from the point of view of the filmmaker and the creative process of making a documentary. She appropriates the psychoanalytic notion of “transference”, “the attachment between the analysand and the analyst” to address the quite overlooked dimension of the time invested in the relation between the filmmaker and her subject, an important question being that of voice: “How is the speech of the subject of the film produced?”²²

Comparing the seemingly different examples of *His Mother's Voice* and *Repertoire*, what they both accomplish is an articulation of memory and a process of recollection that unfolds as an emotional event. The role of imagination in the ways these artists have chosen to picture memory work as a painful process, also opens up to the their techniques of re-enactment. When I asked the artists about their personal motivations for finding the right *mise-en-scène*, both referred to personal experiences: Tupicoff recalled hearing the live

^{22/} Agnieszka Piotrowska, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 8-9

transmitted radio interview while driving his car. Mrs Easedale's voice brought back memories of the shock and grief that he experienced at the news of his younger brother's death in a car accident. Similarly, Mozard's video is strongly informed by her father's death as he, different from the subject of *Repertoire*, did not make it and died of an overdose. In addition, *Repertoire* aligns with another film by Mozard, *The Great Scene (Stora scenen 2011)*, a more overt autobiographical work where the artist, her mother and grandmother compare their mother-daughter relationships, personal memories, and their notions of loss in relation to the tragic deaths of Leif, Mozard's grandfather, and Lars, her father.

The subject of *Repertoire* remains an anonymous person but it is clearly someone who addresses Tova Mozard behind the camera. At display on the screen is a partial representation of a dialog; a communication conditioned by the re-enactment at hand, and by the interrelation between the artist and her subject. The major reason why I find this example to be of conceptual interest resides in the fact that it is a gallery film and not a documentary; a memory work re-enacted and framed in approximate real time, but painfully anchored in the Real. After all, the scarred voice combines, to paraphrase Lebow, with the performance of a narrative in *the first person plural*, a filmed speech and a project negotiated and realized thanks to the collaborate effort of Mozard and her stepfather. This is not a documentary, but the gallery film posits the longstanding documentary project to re-enact a life story into a social narrative of more general cultural and existential implications. The scarred voice maybe even a political gesture in how the familiar documentary motif of drug abuse, the outsider, and the stigmatized other transgresses into the space of the art gallery. My appreciation of this unfolding confession builds decisively on the particular exhibition space at Kulturhuset in Stockholm, where the film appeared on a thin fabric that hang a few inches in front of one of the four walls of the black box. The audience – typically, that day at noon, it only consisted of myself and an unknown woman – was seated on the single bench in the

center. The voice filled the black box in a way it would not have done in the movie theatre. It was as if his voice, in a Brechtian sense, bounced off the wall of the art gallery, out into the city square of Sergelstorg, merging with similar experiences of life chances conditioned and structured by social context, of struggle and despair, as well as of hope, shared experiences and strategies of survival.

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