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# The Absent Presence of Voice in Contemporary Artists Film

*Lisa Stansbie*

## Abstract

This paper will analyse the potential of voice to be a signifier of narrative and an immersive instrument within contemporary artists film and their construction, utilising my own practice by screening the digital film *Spitfire Beach* (2010) as a case study. The work of other contemporary artists will be discussed in relation to voice forms and their relationship with film whereby an absent presence is established. When voice conveys language as it does via the storytelling in the discussed work, it also creates an unseen objective identity within the films whereby the voiceover becomes informer and watcher of events as they unfold.

Each of my film works uses a systematic process of narrative construction, involving found lists of words taken from Internet searches. These lists of words are used to multiply associations that suggest stories, reveal themes of nostalgia, journeys and disasters, which are then recorded by voiceover artists.

The notion of multiplicity is also used where tangential associations are developed in the writing of the blogs that document the making process of the films. These associations are constructed specifically via memory. In the [Spitfire Beach blog](#) (2010) the narrative of the blog is structured around the making of the film *Spitfire Beach*. However, the writing in this form becomes more than documentation, as interwoven narratives unfold and a process of remembering is engaged. The voice present within the blog is that of the artist and this voice merges memory and association in an unrestrained and wandering style. Italo Calvino (1988) describes the process of writing used by the novelist Carlo Emilio Gadda in his "*Risotto alla Milanese*" as episodes in which "...the least thing is seen as the centre of a network of relationships that the writer cannot restrain himself from following". (Calvino, 1988, p. 107)

**Key Words:** Multiplicity, voice, artists film, digital storytelling, nostalgia and memory.

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## 1. Voice

‘...what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena, is its inner relationship with meaning. The voice is something which points towards meaning’<sup>1</sup>

In artists video the ephemeral nature of voice disappears. The voice when used as an instrument within film works is captured and with gallery (and Internet) disseminated video works the voice is available to be repeated and looped, sometimes at the control of the listener. Following Derrida’s thoughts on the immateriality of the voice, which he describes as subservient and can only be fixed by the written word, voice gains permanence by being captured via film.

The voice is also open to differing interpretations through the context in which the film works are placed and the widely varying experiences of a multitude of listeners. For example many practitioners use headphones to display film work, attempting to make the sound more intimate, immersive and listener controlled as opposed to a constructed audience listening of a projected gallery film, which draws parallels with the containment that takes place within a traditional cinema.

Shirin Neshat’s video work ‘*Turbulent*’ (1998) contains two subjects within the film. The context of how the work is shown is what makes the immersive sound experience so powerful. It is a two-screen film projection but presented at either sides of the gallery creating a physical gap, which places the viewer in the centre of the work. In this sense the physicality of the space enables the experience of the voices to surround and penetrate a listener. The voices within the piece have a ‘siren’ like appeal to the listener, fraught with longing and expression and one is left with a feeling of disturbance after the viewing. Each subject within the film takes a turn in ‘singing’ so while one actor sings the other stands patiently waiting. As viewers, we also stand waiting, this breaks down the screen-barrier, immediately shifting the viewer into the film space and making the viewer complicit in the performances of each song. The absence of a recognisable voice in the song of the woman (and the empty auditorium she faces) within the video symbolically represents an absence of women in Iranian music, literally a musical metaphor of ‘silence’. The voice of each of the singers is distinct; the man sings an Iranian love song and the women’s voice consists of a visceral wordless song made from shrill and haunting sounds.

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‘This sound seems to emanate both from the throat and the deepest reservoirs of the body... she seems to offer a crystallisation of human experience across history, an immense catalogue of feeling and sensation.’<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Multiple Voices

‘The story in fact offers the possibility of multiple time-frames and distortions as well of multiple voices and perspectives’<sup>3</sup>

When film is used as a creative vehicle the correlation between images and audio can be manipulated and the potential for multiple narrative interpretations expanded. Artists video containing and exploring sound via voice can specifically create a polyphonic relationship with a viewer due to the sensual dialectic that exists between imagery and voice. The film and sound works discussed throughout this section all share the fact that the subject exists within the films via voice in various forms and never physically through imagery, the narration in the works is through a ‘deboned voice’<sup>4</sup>. A tension arises through this absent presence of the subject often creating a transitory illusion of presence fixed by voice within the films. This is what Dolar terms the acousmatic voice ‘...whose origin cannot be identified...it is a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body, but even when it finds its body, it turns out this doesn’t quite work’<sup>5</sup>. The voice is however shielded by the screen, setting up a potentially unsettling experience that induces imagination on the part of the listener as to the source and identity of this disembodied voice.

*Spiritfire Beach* (2010) is a short video piece with a narrated voiceover story. In differing to traditional cinematic processes the visuals do not match the story being told. In this sense the viewer is asked to process seemingly abstract visuals. The images are slow shots of a sculpture made from Airfix aeroplanes, referencing the way that the narrative was constructed, rather than describing the narrative. The story of *Spiritfire Beach* was constructed by using the top ten best selling Airfix aeroplane kit names in each line of the story, to hang the narrative around. A similar rule based approach to the *OuLipo* Group and the novels of George Perec in particular. A viewer of the film will search for symbolic references to the apocalyptic story, a narrative that takes place on an impossible shoreline, where a queue of people abandon the mementoes of their life into the sea.

Within the film the narration is told in first person, providing a personal insight both descriptively and emotionally (via memory to form attachment with the listener) of the events as they unfold. This opening up of personal memory is at

odds with the voice delivery of the narrative that is distinctly guarded and removed. Via the story we receive descriptions of multiple subjects, environments and perspectives filling the screen space of imagination. The voiceover is measured, precise and flawless releasing the narrative as a timed story. It is free from errors, pauses and any 'thinking' time, so a sense of realism is removed, despite what we hear as being personal experience. The listener is only semi-immersed and passive as the narrative message is delivered to them, further heightened by the steady and dramatic score of the film, which is seemingly traditional, secondary to the voice and merely forms an acoustic backdrop that aids the transitions of the film. ADD in VOICE AND MEMORY

In the [Spitfire Beach blog](#) (2010) The narrative of the blog is structured around the making of the art works that form the Spitfire Beach film. However, the writing in this form becomes more than documentation, as interwoven narratives unfold and a process of remembering is engaged via text.

The voice present within the blog combines a wandering through memories and recollections as the work is produced. Connections are generated through daydreaming that takes place during the making and writing process. This creates parallel stories; one descriptive account of the actual project and the other of nostalgic personal remembering retold through paths that journey back into the past. The makers mind is laid bare.

Through the blog there is one voice but two interwoven narratives. These narratives are reflective and descriptive when talking about the work and anecdotal story telling through the accounts of seemingly arbitrary personal experiences and thoughts, set off by the wandering of my mind. Italo Calvino (1988) describes the process of writing in his essay *Multiplicity* and describes how it is used by the novelist Carlo Emilio Gadda in his "*Risotto alla Milanese*" as episodes in which "...the least thing is seen as the centre of a network of relationships that the writer cannot restrain himself from following".<sup>6</sup> and goes on to say how Gadda "...tried all his life to represent the world as a knot, a tangled skein of yarn; to represent it without in the least diminishing the inextricable complexity or, to put it better, the simultaneous presence of the most disparate elements" Calvino focuses on how Gadda's digressions and descriptions multiply to become almost infinite. He also draws upon the unfinished novel as a result of the process and here there is a direct parallel with the way in which the process used for making my works has the potential to be infinitely expanding.

In Paul Ricoeur's trilogy *Time and Narrative* (1990) he suggests that poetic narrative has the power to change worldviews and actions, rather than remaining self-referential. He moves on to state that our reading of narratives is in a state of flux and describes a hermeneutical process whereby the reader is influenced by the

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history of the narrative's prior readings, which affects subsequent readings. In this sense the narrative is continually evolving with each reading and our prior knowledge of it influences our encounter with it.

When presented, the film works have descriptive text conveying how the narrative was structured that is displayed in the museum/gallery alongside the film and this prior knowledge can affect a viewer's reception of the story. It has been found that listeners will actively search for the names from the list, which was the core starting point for the narrative and is usually displayed in front of them.

Helen Buss (1997) uses Ricoeur's theory relating to his methodology of separating historical and fictitious narratives and suggests that the two genres can be interactive through the use of the imagination as an 'archive'. In the construction of each narrative for the film works, events from imagination relating to real life experiences are interwoven between the fictitious or extended versions of real life experiences. In this way the archival imagination, shares a similarity with the piece of work titled the [Digital Archive](#) (2005 – 2010) The archive was the starting point for the construction of each of the films narratives, one word taken from this vast database becomes the origin for the list that the story will expand from. It also becomes a storehouse for further potential connections.

The structure of each of the written narratives for the film works possesses a linear sense of time, as with traditional narrative structure. There is a distinct start to each narrative, referencing the first name on the found list alongside, a sense of drama created in the opening lines that acts as a mis-en-scene for the story. In turn this creates an expectation on the part of the listener that there will be a climax, a dénouement and it is this expectation that can be experimented with in approaches to narrative. The narratives written for the film works contain a duality comprising of ending and non-ending, leaving a final opening, a gap for further possibilities and contemplation.

The voice in Spitfire Beach delivers descriptive processes that act to generate visual images within the mind of the listener, particularly in relation to the fictitious environments within each story. There is a strong impression of place for example in the previous film to Spitfire beach named [Apprehension](#) (2007) :

Natalma the owner was already lighting candles in readiness around the semi-circle of the bar. This gave it the appearance of a fairy bridge, propped up with soulless creatures who, without a bold reason to consider leaving, remained in their special places.

The Wings was a dreary place, even with power. The grimy image hanging above the bar of a high hawk appeared to be circling over the customers, most of whom were out of work miners from Shirley Heights.'

With *Apprehension* the work has developed outside the frame of the film, with *The Wings* (2009) being made into an installation of the bar. The stage set is created after and based upon these descriptive processes in the film.

Within the films sequencing and editing Mulvey's 'inertia'<sup>7</sup> is deliberately aimed for as an essence of the film. The inertia within the image contrasts with the action within the narrated story. The presence of a voiceover results in the listener/viewer of the film generating their own imagined images (as with the reading of a story) while simultaneously being confronted with inert image sequences, many of which appear abstract. This leads to a dual experience of the work, a coupling of two sets of imagery, often instilling a deliberate confusion through a "...montage of multiple modalities"<sup>8</sup> The reception of a story via audio is less interactive than reading from a book, the listener has to receive the story at a given pace '...the listener accedes to the slippage of time'<sup>9</sup>, and sometimes the pace of the audio combined with the images leads to states of confusion, compounded by the semi-abstractness of the narratives themselves. These states of confusion are sometimes created by the unusual words (from the found lists) which work to create ambiguities within the story, offering potential for different layers of meaning and a tension between text and image.

The recording process of the voiceovers has previously been in the hands of the narrator and the digitisation that expertly smoothes and encodes the voice might be disrupted so that ambient noise, glitches and interference could be incorporated. In transferring a sense of reality into the film narratives, errors, both with the voice and recording might assist in the reception of the sound. A comparison perhaps between the digitisation of film, whereby the grainy original footage harks back to the archive and a sense of originality.

In Elizabeth Price's 2009 film *User Group Disco* the narrative is delivered via text rather than a voiceover. The text appears machine typed in different formats at specific intervals throughout the film, delivering ardent messages. The text is taken from found texts, a combination of management and knowledge-organisation theory, with elements from apocalyptic essays by Theodor Adorno, Edgar Allan Poe and Jorge Luis Borges. The text, sound and visuals are all choreographed to appear at specific intervals, creating a building sense of expectation and intensity that fits with the seductive high definition futuristic shots of functional objects, which appear to be moving on their own. The music by Jem Noble creates a sci-fi sense of disquiet in its pauses and silences but builds into rhythmic seductive

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melodies from popular songs that create a sense of exhilaration. However, there is an unseen presence of what might be termed a voice, and one that falls between Derrida's claims on speech and text. The authority of the voice via text is reinforced as the text appears in a typewritten (subject controlled) time-based 'transition', the viewer feels receptive to the machine and as the authenticity of text is accepted. This moving, unfixed text persistently appearing on screen floats between speech and text and aligns itself with the ephemeral qualities of the immaterial voice.

What of the truly disembodied voice? Without visuals the voice holds the listener entirely and is an all-immersive instrument. Artist Janet Cardiff's [The Missing Voice](#) (1999) is an audio-walk situated in London and it succeeds due to what is physically experienced by the user/viewer. It consists of a multi-layered fiction that requires the listener to follow a set path. The piece features a female narrator present as two voices, a voice that guides you through the present environments of the city, and as a recording that recounts personal and civic traumas. The piece is intended to be heard on headphones while walking to create a personal experience; the narration is directed at you. The audio itself is a rich layering of voice and audio directly relating to the narrative and sites of the journey. The listener is fully immersed in the sense they are physically within the environments described (working even when the described environment has changed over time) combined with the immersion enabled by the 3D sound design, layering voices and meticulously crafted sounds that create sonic fiction in a parallel world. This treatment of sound combined with a complex and changing narration adds a psychological element to the narrative and provides a more interactive relationship between what is seen and heard. Cardiff builds on the spectacle of what is experienced bodily via physical environments and how acoustic exaggeration and manipulation can create coincidences and new individual narratives for the listener.

'J. Borges' nightmare invocation of the library in his 1962 short story *The Library of Babel*, where characters live and die in the endless Library, searching in vain for a mythical code which will give meaning to the gibberish in the books, resonates with Stansbie's suggestion that the attempt to find meaning in a cacophony is an intrinsically human gesture. Her repeated reference to written fiction, both as source material and narrative style, alludes to the notion that there is truth to be found within fiction and sense within nonsense. Readers of fiction and viewers of art approach texts with interpretive intent: prepared to decode, decipher, deduce and figure out, they anticipate obliqueness of meaning and underlying truths. Re-curating



information, connecting the baffling and senseless, the arbitrary and illogical, Stansbie reveals the human capacity to *make sense*.<sup>10</sup> (Parlane 2008)

## **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Mladen, Dolar. *A Voice and Nothing More*. (M.A: MIT Press, 2006),14-15.
- <sup>2</sup> Barlow, Geraldine, *Turbulent* (Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, 1998)
- <sup>3</sup> O'Neill, Mary. *Introduction: Theories and Criticism in Telling Stories: Countering Narrative in Art, Theory and Film*, edited by Jane Tomey and Gillian Whiteley, 2-3. Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Kahn, Douglas *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (MIT Press, 1999) 7
- <sup>5</sup> Mladen, Dolar. *A Voice and Nothing More*. (M.A: MIT Press, 2006), 60-61
- <sup>6</sup> Calvino, Italo *Six Memos for The Next Millenium* (Vintage International, New York, 1988) 106 – 107
- <sup>7</sup> Mulvey, Laura *Death 24x a Second* (London, Reaktion Books, 2006)
- <sup>8</sup> Ricardo, F.J *Literary Art in Digital Performance*. (New York, Continuum Books, 2009) 58
- <sup>9</sup> Toop, David *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (New York, Continuum Books, 2010) 7
- <sup>10</sup> Parlane, Anna *The Disorder of Things: The Work of Lisa Stansbie* (Catalogue Essay, 2008)