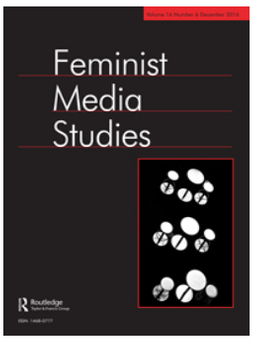

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What "The Bechdel Test" doesn't tell us: examining women's verbal and vocal (dis)empowerment in cinema

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Discourse surrounding women in cinema is increasingly structured around metaphors of the voice. In the past five years "The Bechdel Test," which measures women's film dialogue using a simple quantitative formula, has become a digital sensation. Despite originating with a comic artist rather than in film studies, Alison Bechdel's "test" is frequently employed to address a perceived silencing of women in cinema. Bechdel's comic strip stipulates that to pass a film must (1) include at least two women, (2) who have at least one conversation, (3) about something other than a man or men (Alison Bechdel 1985). The test is overly-simplistic and, given its comic strip origin, it was never intended to be used as a serious model for the analysis of gender representation ("Fresh Air" 2015). And yet, in 2013, Swedish cinemas began to rate films according to their ability to pass the test. Related media discourse stresses the corresponding need for women in cinema to "speak up," with the 2014 hashtag campaign #AskHerMore aiming to improve the way the media "talk to women on the red carpet" (Jennifer Siebel Newsom 2014). References to women's silencing exist alongside praise for those screenwriters, directors, and performers who "call out" the inherent sexism of the film industry. Recall the viral gif of Cate Blanchett as she asks the camera-operator who is panning up her body, "do you do that to the guys?" Despite all this, little academic research has been conducted on women's voices in relation to contemporary cinema. The continued impact of Laura Mulvey's conception of the visual objectification of women, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), has focused attention on women's visual, rather than vocal and verbal, representation.

There have been four book-length studies of women's dialogue and voices in film, but each of these focuses on Hollywood cinema in the period between the 1930s and 1950s. According to Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988), and Amy Lawrence in *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1991), women in film are frequently attributed unreliable speech, punished for talking, or silenced altogether. More than a decade later, in *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (2006), Britta Sjogren questions Silverman's and Lawrence's influential claims, in order to offer a more empowered account of how women's voices function in relation to 1940s Hollywood cinema. Her account followed Maria DiBattista's celebration of the verbal dexterity of screwball comedy heroines in *Fast-Talking Dames* (2001). For DiBattista, the genre provided an important stage for empowering the women of Classical Hollywood through

speech. Each of these studies provides rich and important insights but, taking their historic subjects together, the books also highlight how little research has been carried out on female dialogue and voices in the past sixty years of cinema. There are only a few exceptions, such as Martin Shingler's brief account of the dramatic power of Bette Davis's voice as part of a broader article on "The Dramatic Human Voice in Film" (2006, 1). Liz Greene's "Speaking, Singing, Screaming: Controlling the Female Voice in American Cinema" (2009) takes a wider, more gender-focused approach, analysing female sonic representation in several David Lynch films, in addition to several from Classical Hollywood. More recently, through an examination of voice-over in the experimental films of Leslie Thornton, Pooja Rangan has critiqued the long-held associations between verbal commentary and textual authority (2015).

Only through further detailed studies can we uncover if different kinds of filmmaking (documentary, independent, avant-garde) are more likely to provide alternative treatments of women's voices. Such analyses might allow us to identify a potential hierarchy amongst women's voices (on the basis of race, age, or class), in addition to the typical gender hierarchy. These underexplored issues, and the insights provided by the rare, afore-mentioned studies, have created an impetus for my current research into women's verbal and vocal (dis)empowerment in contemporary film and television.[11] Reassessing the usefulness of "The Bechdel Test" is another major stimulus for the research.

Blogs and websites are increasingly scoring films out of three on Bechdel's basis. In the period between May 2014 and November 2015, the number of films analysed on bechdeltest.com more than doubled from approximately three thousand to over six thousand. Comments on the site reveal a certain competitive urge amongst users to find some vindicating dialogue, even if only a single line, which allows a film to pass. Worryingly, this means that despite good intentions to promote female-led narratives, contributors may actually legitimize low, one-dimensional standards for women's verbal and vocal representation. This is because it is not enough to ask how many female characters talk, and whether they talk about men, without also considering the broader complexities of their speech: what do they discuss? When and where do they discuss it? How do they phrase it? How it is performed? Are their words acknowledged, praised, or dismissed by other characters? Are their words repeated by film-goers, and immortalized in lists of memorable dialogue? Addressing these questions can help to create a more pluralistic understanding of female dialogue, one which resists the tendency found in literature on Classical Hollywood cinema to reduce all female speech to a single set of norms.

In certain ways, The Bechdel Test is more likely to conceal than reveal. Crucially, it disregards which kinds of women are granted dialogue, thus ignoring the silencing of women of colour, women of certain ages, and those for whom English is not a first language. It is worth looking outside film studies to see the kind of rich insights provided by more interdisciplinary voice studies. In linguist Elaine W. Chun's (2004) study of Margaret Cho's use of a mock-Asian accent, a convincing case is made for the Korean-American comedian's critique of mainstream racist ideologies through a style of vocal performance that has generally been used to marginalize and "other" Asian-American performers, including in cinema. Indeed, this is the precise subject of Hye Seung Chung's more recent essay on "Asian Images and Yellow Voices in American Cinema" (2013). In her comedy, Cho has thus found vocal empowerment by appropriating the kind of stereotypical vocal markers typically used to oppress. It is the performance of language—rather than its content, or whether it is directed at a

female character—which Cho uses to her advantage. Bechdel's test does not accommodate important nuances such as these.

Moving from the overlaps between comedic and cinematic speech, to those between musical and filmic performance, the recent Nina Simone documentary, *What Happened, Miss Simone?* (2015) and Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016), suggest that the vocal power attributed to African-American women in cinema can be an extension of their singing voices. In the HBO, TV movie version of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé provides an extensive voice-over, something seldom granted to African-American actresses. At points, her narration seems to be addressed to her husband, Jay Z, whose fidelity she questions through the spoken word as well as lyrics: "You come home at 3am and lie to me. What are you hiding?" These moments are in sharp contrast to the kinds of exchanges prioritized by the Bechdel Test: those which take place between women, and about something other than a man or men. And yet, by forcing her husband to pay the price, publically, for his behaviour, Beyoncé surely finds empowerment through her controlled voice-over, much as she does through singing. Indeed, at one point she narrates how "inside me, coiled deep, was the need to know: are you cheating on me?" Through *Lemonade*'s voice-over revelations, Beyoncé indicates that she equally felt a need to share this personal pain with her global fan-base. The one-sided exchange allows her to provide the single, authoritative version of events: she gets the last word, while Jay Z (anonymous, but implicated through lyrical references to her wedding ring) remains silent.

As these cursory examples suggest, further research is needed in order to fully understand the representation and reception of the voices of women in cinema, and audio-visual media more generally. With regard to the silencing of female characters based on age, we can learn from Hanah Anderson and Matt Daniels' data analysis of two thousand screenplays, on the basis of both gender and age (2016). The pair conducted this large-scale survey after receiving criticism for a previous, Bechdel-based analysis. The second survey proved much more informative, with detailed graphs demonstrating that dialogue available to women over forty decreases substantially, while the opposite trend is observable for older male characters (Anderson and Daniels 2016). Although their analysis, and my brief examples, are drawn from English-language cinema, care must also be taken to ensure that the verbal and vocal (dis)empowerment of women in World Cinemas, and other non-Anglophone cinema, does not fall on deaf ears.

The Bechdel Test, and related quantitative studies, have usefully highlighted that audiences and filmmakers should take heed of gendered verbal dynamics. Media scholars have also being paying increased attention to male dialogue and voices in contemporary cinema (Kevin Alexander Boon 2008; Debbie Ging 2013; Donna Peberdy 2013). It is now the responsibility of feminist media scholars to ensure that attention is paid to the finer points of female dialogue and voices.

Note

1. At the level of public engagement, my interest in this topic is also reflected in the theme of the 2016 Feminist Film Festival Dublin: "Othered Voices: The Female Voice on Screen." As one of the organizers, a few of this essay's opening points are also included in the description I wrote for this year's festival theme (Feminist Film Festival Dublin 2016).

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