

## The Female Voice as Echo in Pedro Almodóvar's *The Human Voice* (2020)

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**EN Abstract.** Pedro Almodóvar's *The Human Voice* / *La voz humana* (2020) can be seen as a meditation on the paradoxes of the female voice in cinema. The fact that it was filmed during the pandemic only serves to intensify the paradoxical nature of the voice: at once spectral and intimate. In this article, I use Almodóvar's adaptation of Cocteau's play *La voix humaine* to explore the extent to which Tilda Swinton's voice in the role of the protagonist animates vocal apparitions of the other actresses who have held the role before her in an intertextual acoustic network. Drawing on the figure of the mythological Echo, I view Swinton's performance as an example of vocal singularity and reflect on the ways that this film offers up the female voice as a corrective to the notion of the authority and mastery of the male voice.

**Keywords:** female voice in cinema; Pedro Almodóvar's films; *The Human Voice* / *La voz humana*.

### ES La voz femenina como eco en *La voz humana* de Pedro Almodóvar (2020)

**ES Resumen.** *La voz humana* (2020), de Pedro Almodóvar, puede ser considerada una reflexión sobre las paradojas de la voz femenina en el cine. El hecho de que se filmara durante la pandemia no hace más que intensificar la naturaleza paradójica de la voz: a la vez espectral e íntima. En este artículo, utilizo la adaptación que Almodóvar hizo de la obra de Cocteau *La voix humaine* para explorar hasta qué punto la voz de Tilda Swinton, en el papel de protagonista, anima las apariciones vocales de las otras actrices que la han precedido en una red acústica intertextual. Inspirándome en la figura del mitológico Eco, considero la actuación de Swinton un ejemplo de singularidad vocal y reflexiono sobre cómo esta película ofrece la voz femenina como correctivo a la noción de autoridad y dominio de la voz masculina.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the organisers and participants at the Cine y oralidad symposium at Salamanca University as well as those at the celebration of the work of Jo Evans, UCL, December 2023. Thank you also to Jo Evans, James Williams and the anonymous readers of this article for their helpful comments. For the purposes of this article, "the female voice" refers to the voice of an individual who identifies as female in due recognition of the phantasmatic and psychosocial aspects of voice. While definitions exist about what constitutes a "female-sounding" voice (one fascinating treatment is Chris Chapman's 2016 film *Voice and Identity* which follows two individuals who have gone through gender transition and speech and language therapy, from the Wellcome Collection), as O'Meara (2022: 19) notes, "even the voices of cisgender women can fail to match up to more ostensibly anatomical (and, thus, inherently exclusionary) definitions of what constitutes a female-sounding voice— as well as a young woman's voice". See also Anne Carson, *The Gender of Sound* (2025).

**Palabras clave:** voz femenina en el cine; cine de Pedro Almodóvar; *La voz humana/The Human Voice*.

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## 1. Introduction

Almodóvar was productive during the lockdown caused by the Covid 19 global pandemic. Even though his film adaptation of Lucía Berlín's *A Manual for Cleaning Women* had to be abandoned due to travel restrictions, he published his lockdown diaries and wrote the script for his next feature film, *Madres paralelas*, which was released in 2021<sup>2</sup>.

In 2020 cinema was experiencing a crisis owing to the restrictions on filmmaking imposed by social distancing during the pandemic and as audiences turned to streaming. Almodóvar's *The Human Voice* was a prestige picture designed to get his cinema moving again. Almodóvar conceived of the film as "an exquisite chamber piece to be seen by very few people" (Diestro Dópido, 2021). This gave him the freedom to try out a new length – just thirty minutes – and to finally direct in English. The notion that this is an experiment in sound is suggested by the set – an apartment built on a sound stage in a warehouse. Tilda Swinton, the film's star, remarked that she had always hoped one day to be directed by Almodóvar, but that she had thought she would have to "learn Spanish or play a mute" (Gilbey). In fact, the success of Almodóvar's work with Swinton on this film would lead to his first full-length feature-film in English, *La habitación de al lado* [*The Room Next Door*], starring Julianne Moore alongside Swinton, which was released in 2024.

For the "caprice", *The Human Voice*, Almodóvar had returned to a theme that had occupied him previously: a jilted woman who has a conversation with her former lover on the telephone while she waits for him to collect his suitcase of belongings (Diestro-Dópido, 2021). The fascination with a woman talking on the telephone may derive from the serialised radio soap operas Almodóvar listened to as a child (D'Lugo, 2013: 214). Certainly, it is possible to identify what Kinder might refer to as an "audio-fetish" in Almodóvar's work, "grafted over the traditional visual fetishes", which often emerges as a fascination with voices ("it's the main instrument for actors" [Almodóvar in interview with Hynes, 2009]). Kinder identifies different uses of voices in Almodóvar's work, from early comic cacophonies to undermine official discourses, to a later preoccupation with oracular professions, dubbing and "re-voicements" of Hollywood voices to localise the global (Kinder). Increasingly, Almodóvar employed voices as forms of intertextuality or self-citation and this use of what Kinder calls "retroseriality" in connection with the voice is relevant to a discussion of *The Human Voice* (2013: 299). Both *La ley del deseo* (1987) and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988) were inspired by Jean Cocteau's 1930 play, *La voix humaine*. *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* references Cocteau in the motif of the missed phone-call that punctuates the narrative, while *La ley del deseo* provides a direct quotation in the form of Tina's (Carmen Maura) performance-within-a-performance directed by her brother who functions as one of Almodóvar's first intertextual alter egos – here Almodóvar signals both his admiration for Cocteau and the way that *La voix humaine* functions in his work as a metonym for love, questions of gender, performance, and the endless miscommunications of love<sup>3</sup>. In *Los abrazos rotos* (2009), meanwhile, Almodóvar

2 In 2022 it was announced that Almodóvar had withdrawn from *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, projected to be his first English-language full-length film and to star Cate Blanchett (Mayorga, 2022).

3 Willem (1998) discusses the relationship between *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* and Cocteau's play. The play remains in a latent form, according to Almodóvar, but as he needed to expand the material

recreates a scene from *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, this time with Penélope Cruz acting meta-cinematically in the role originally played by Carmen Maura. Aside from Almodóvar's versions, there are a host of international adaptations of Cocteau's play which span theatre and opera as well as TV and film and which have featured A-listers including Ingrid Bergman, Sofia Loren and Anna Magnani<sup>4</sup>. These remediations have been delivered in a variety of languages, such as Anna Magnani's "gravelly romancesco" in Rossellini's Italian-language *La voz humana* (*Una voce umana*) of 1948 (Chiapetta-Miller, 2015: 367).

Almodóvar's previous attempts to film in English, such as his film-project *Silence*, an adaptation of Alice Munro's short stories, which was to star Meryl Streep, had foundered as Almodóvar balked part-way through at working in English, and at the Canadian cultural specificity of Munro (Romney, 2016). Despite its English soundtrack, *The Human Voice* brandishes Almodovarian hallmarks, both visual and acoustic, including a score by Alberto Iglesias and the traditional cameo from his brother Agustín, who here plays a Spanish shopkeeper who speaks in accented English. With *The Human Voice*, Swinton presents us with a remediation of Maura's iconic performance in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. Where Maura dubbed Joan Crawford into Spanish in that film, a re-voicement that endowed Maura with the aura of a Hollywood star, here Swinton remediates Maura and in the process Swinton-the-Hollywood-star is culturally reinscribed within an Almodovarian universe, complete with a soundtrack in English.

## 2. A Woman on the Telephone

Cocteau's *La voix humaine* starred the Belgian actress Berthe Bovy and premiered at the Comédie Française in Paris in 1930 during the twilight of the European theatrical avant-garde. It featured a woman and a telephone on stage. More than half a century after its invention, the telephone was seen as a banal yet deadly instrument. The telephone, often associated in the public imagination with women's idle chatter or gossip, became a killing machine, as if to suggest that women's speech was to be punished with violent death. The telephone is "literally a woman's lifeline" (Lawrence, 1991: 133). Lawrence discusses Rossellini's adaptation alongside *Voces de muerte* (*Sorry, Wrong Number*, Anatole Litvak, 1948) and *La vida vale más* (*The Slender Thread*, Sydney Pollack, 1965) in which "the telephone is our means of access to the 'star' - and the purpose of the narrative is to ensure that she keeps talking - that is, stays alive. The women are 'alienated and isolated, and the telephone is their only means of tenuous contact'" (132). In *La voix humaine*, Elle, the protagonist, suffers interruptions from the operator, crossed lines and wrong numbers during her conversation with her ex- before she is dramatically strangled by the telephone cord and the line disconnects.

Anticipating a feminist backlash in 2020 to a film about a woman, "con ese nivel de sumisión" [with such a high level of submissiveness], Almodóvar was keen to stress that his film is a "adaptación libre" [free adaptation] of Cocteau's text, noting that, "reescribí el 80%. Le di la vuelta y esa sumisión ya no existe" [I rewrote 80% of it. I turned it around and that submissiveness isn't there anymore] (Zurro, 2020)<sup>5</sup>. But in spite of the updated technology - Swinton connects her call with a smart phone and air pods - as a mediated female voice ("I'm an automaton", she remarks), Ella's voice resonates with the gendered acousmatics of a matrilineal genealogy that reverberates horizontally and vertically from telephone operators to the "contemporary chorus of smart devices" (Flaig, 2018: 107) such as Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri and Microsoft's Cortana, that in 2020 were "typically styled as female 'personal assistants'" (O'Meara, 2022: 70)<sup>6</sup>. It is perhaps unsurprising that Amazon Alexa's voice is transmitted through a so-called "Echo device", given the resonances between virtual female voice assistants and the figure of Echo as told by

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for a full-length feature, he devised the story of the forty-eight hours leading up to the phone call (Willem, 1998: 47).

- 4 For further remediations of *La voix humaine*, see Karatonis (2021) and Goehr (2016). Significantly, Poulenc adapted the play for opera in 1958.
- 5 Translations my own. Reception of the film appreciated the feminist retelling, in the main, even if some reviews saw the stylishness of Ella's apartment and clothes as providing "surface dazzle" which detracted from any message (Bhatia, 2021).
- 6 I shall refer to the unnamed woman of the text as "Ella" in Almodóvar's version, to draw a distinction with Cocteau's text.

Ovid, who was punished for her chattiness by a curse which allowed her only to repeat the final part of the phrases uttered by her beloved Narcissus (Ovid). Neither Alexa nor Echo can initiate conversations, and both merely respond to the voice of another. Devices such as Amazon's Alexa were, as an article in *El País* explained, compliant, anxious to please, and “creadas por hombres para servir” [female voices created by men to serve]<sup>7</sup>. Ella, too, can be seen like the mythological Echo as a mere acoustic reflection of her unrequited desire for her former lover, a reflection of the power his voice commands over her<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. The Voice in Lockdown

In 2020, the global pandemic provided a new sense of urgency to technology as a lifeline to the outside world. The technology of the telephone had advanced – video-calls were the currency of communication – but questions about how technology could overcome isolation and distance were still central preoccupations while silence (the absence of communication) was associated with a real threat of death in the acoustic landscape of lockdown. *The Human Voice* is not set during the pandemic – Ella is free to shop unmasked at the local hardware store and to leave the apartment and warehouse at the end of the film. Nevertheless, lockdown has left its mark in the sense of enclosure and isolation that pervades the film. In a still from the film released for publicity, Swinton appears in close-up in scarlet Balenciaga ribbed-knit separates (Fall 2019 collection) towards the front of the frame in a slightly high-angle reminiscent of the boxing-off of the video-call screen. The beautiful apartment behind her appears like the unlikely, aspirational rooms in the virtual background of a video-call, while the haute couture (for example the glorious dome-shaped crinoline Balenciaga Spring 2020 dress that opens the film and that feels operatic in its mournful drama) makes her seem like “an urban sophisticate caught in [...] claustrophobia, [...]”, engulfed, isolated, and “all dressed up and nowhere to go” (Criales-Unzueta [2021] quoting Swinton).

It seems not coincidental that Almodóvar should have returned to the voice at this time. The voice is as central to the lockdown video-call as it is to cinema. Both screen media raise the volume of the voice, to create vocal intimacy, or “vococentrism” (Chion, 1999: 5). At the same time, both rely on ventriloquism: to account for how sound and image interact in film, Richard Altman (1980) suggests that the body onscreen is a ventriloquist's dummy designed to hide the mechanical sound of the voice coming out of the speakers<sup>9</sup>. Meanwhile, in the video-call in lockdown voices often took precedence over images as the audio-glitch was potentially more disruptive to communication than the freezing of the screen. Video-screens separated individuals from one another as well as voices from bodies (we have only to think of the lawyer who famously attended a virtual meeting as a cat) in what Baron, Fleeger and Lerner have described as “an elaborate act of ventriloquy” (2021: 1).

### 4. The Female Voice in Cinema

In *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Lawrence draws on Ovid's myth to discuss cinema's representational possibilities. Echo is a reverberation, an acoustic reflection. When she spies Narcissus in a forest, she is smitten even though he spurns her. “May I die before I give you power o'er me”, he declares. She replies, repeating the end of his phrase, “I give you power o'er me”. Eventually, Narcissus is cursed by an unsuccessful suitor and condemned to unrequited love, staring at his own reflection in a pool of water. Meanwhile, Echo wastes away, becoming just bones and an echoing voice that bounces off the rocks. Lawrence notes that “in cinema, everything we hear and everything we see isn't there anymore. It is an echo and an illusion” (Lawrence, 1991: 2). Sound is conflated with the feminine in this cinema,

<sup>7</sup> The option to make Alexa masculine did not appear until 2021 (Franco, 2023). Schantz (2012) explains why female voices were preferred to male for telephone operators, which included their capacity to exert, “a soothing and calming influence upon the masculine mind, subduing irritation and suggesting gentleness of speech and demeanor” (329). See also Ronell (1989).

<sup>8</sup> Her red dress is a nod to Marisa Paredes's turn in *La flor de mi secreto* (1995), expressing the “defencelessness of an inrequited passion” (Diestro Dópido, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Altman refers to cinema speakers, but in the age of streaming speakers can also refer to the speakers on a computer, thereby creating even further similarity with the video-call.

“assigned the role of the perpetually supportive ‘acoustic mirror’ that reinforces the primacy of the image” (Lawrence, 1991: 111)<sup>10</sup>. For Lawrence, as indeed for Silverman (in *The Acoustic Mirror*), in classical Hollywood cinema the female voice is claustral and locked-in – both to the interiors of rooms and in the sense that it is rooted in women’s bodies and not permitted to roam free as in a voice-over, for example, which is a space reserved for male voices. Whereas, in *Women’s Voices in Digital Media*, Jennifer O’Meara contrasts the classical with the digital era, drawing on the work of Lawrence and Silverman to explore the way that female screen voices, in fragments or wholes, “travel in the digital era to occupy new spaces and formats”. She asks, “what it even means to refer to women’s screen voices as ‘embodied’ or ‘disembodied’ in a contemporary cultural environment so characterised by bleeding boundaries and transmedia storytelling” (O’Meara, 2022: 8). If anything, lockdown intensified the paradox of voice. Isolated, we relied on the relationship of the voice to the body as our prime mode of communication with the outside world. And if on the video-call we were “continuously monitoring our own voices for what we might be letting slip about ourselves” (Baron et al [2021] quoting Connor: 35) (just as Ella does obsessively at the start of her conversation with her former lover), the voice’s link to embodiment on screen received renewed vigour. At a time when voices stood in for absent bodies and physical contact was restricted, we were also searching for traces of the materiality of bodies (yearning for the physical presence of another person) in the voices we heard on screen.

As Norie Neumark has noted, all voices, even in the digital age, and not necessarily on screen, exemplify paradox: at once emanating from a body yet not quite being “disembodied” (Neumark, 2010). Steven Connor (2000) and Mladen Dolar (2006), from their cultural-historical and psychoanalytic perspectives, both choose ventriloquism as the figure that expresses this paradox of the voice’s “spectral autonomy” and its “acousmatic” relationship to the body. In recorded or mediated bodies this paradox is perhaps intensified further still by notions of “liveness” (which is associated with live performance), or “deadness” (the recorded voice is shot through with associations of the reanimation of the dead)<sup>11</sup>. Paradoxically, the on-screen voice can be associated with the live body with whom the voice originates even as it resounds with associations of deadness. For Grover-Friedlander (2005), the voice can also be inflected with the echoes, or reverberations of the voices of others, some alive and some dead – what she calls “vocal apparitions”.

As we shall see, Swinton’s voice as Ella animates vocal apparitions of the other actresses who have held the role before her. These vocal shards or acoustic mirrors work intertextually to create an acoustic network that surrounds the female voice. Drawing on the notion that Ella might be viewed as the prima donna in an opera, Swinton’s performance in the role of Ella, the protagonist of a melodrama, can be seen to engage with liveness and agency which allow her to counter the submissiveness and death associated both with her designated role, and with the female voice. Adriana Cavarero’s 2005 theories of the materiality of voice endow the voice with singularity that chimes with feminist accounts of the mythological figure of Echo, consistent with the search for bodily traces in voices during lockdown. In this way this film offers a corrective to the notion of the authority and mastery of the male voice.

## 5. The mastery of the (disembodied) male voice

In *The Human Voice*, Ella’s ex-lover’s voice comes to her only as a technological voice – “you’re a robot”, she says to him, as his voice glitches. If the voice on the telephone might be described as a “deformed acousmètre” (Grover-Friedlander, 2005: 124) in the sense that we never hear the voice on the phone (in Rossellini’s adaptation, we occasionally hear a buzz on the end of the line), we may not be able to conjure up what Connor (2000) would term a “vocalic body” to match the voice, even if we may be able to infer one from the designer suit that is laid out on the bed. Cocteau never offered a visualisation of the former lover in *La voix humaine*, nor allowed us to hear his voice. But in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Almodóvar gave us Iván, the narcissistic voice-actor played by Fernando Guillén. The smooth vocals of this ageing Don Juan open the film as he walks through a set filmed in black and white and speaks empty words of love to a series of women. Iván

<sup>10</sup> The term “acoustic mirror” is the title of Kaja Silverman’s book of 1988.

<sup>11</sup> See Stanyek and Piekut (2020) on the deadness of sound recording.

encapsulates the power of the acousmètre – the disembodied male voice that is associated with mastery and authority (Chion, 1999). Iván's voice has such an aura that Pepa runs to hear it on the phone and she faints at the sound of it in the dubbing studio when she asynchronously adds her part, dubbing Joan Crawford alongside Iván's vocals for Sterling Hayden for a scene from Ray's 1954 film *Johnny Guitar*. Peter Evans highlights how Lucía, Iván's former lover, is entranced by his “seductive, bewitching voice”, which provokes her into “drastic, demented action”. This is a voice and a reaction that is “shaped by Lucía's father and by López Ibor” (the clinic where Lucía is receiving treatment is named after the Francoist psychiatrist) – Evans links the male voice with a lineage of male paternalistic voices of authority from the Franco regime (Evans, 1996: 27).

In *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Almodóvar reveals the power of the male voice even as he offers disruptions to its acoustic regime. Iván's work as a dubbing artist shows he has the “voz del galán” [voice of the leading man], a phonogenic, rich and resonant voice that is often amplified – by the microphone, on the telephone, on the answer-phone – to stress intimacy and agonising distance<sup>12</sup>. Dubbing gives rise to uncanny doublings between the voice of the dubbing artist and the actor, as Artaud noted in his essay where he compares the dubbed film to the *dybbuk*, the restless spirit of Yiddish folklore which roams searching for deceased bodies to inhabit. In dubbing, as Yampolsky explains in his article on Artaud's work, the mouth appears to devour the voice of an alien being and “the intrusion of foreign acoustical matter into the body, caus[es] deformities on the surface of the body that can be defined as the ‘events’ of dubbing” (Yampolsky, 1993: 62)<sup>13</sup>. Here, it is Iván whose mouth does the devouring, his lips shown in extreme close-up. But the ‘event’ of dubbing seems to cause disruption on the surface of the film itself such as when Iván's son Carlos (Antonio Banderas) reads postcards between Iván and Pepa and we hear their voices coming out of Carlos's lips. Furthermore, Carlos's stutter arguably disrupts the smooth genealogy of the male voice – Carlos has not inherited Iván's smooth vocals, even if his stammering voice is haunted phantasmatically by them.

In *The Human Voice*, for the main part of the film at least, the aura of the mediated male acousmètre is intact. Both Ella and her lover's dog, Dash, an Australian Shepherd, are “both in mourning for the same man” (Diestro Dópido, 2021). Dash is also an echo of Ella, and his whimpers stand in for her voice – “I'm an animal”, she claims. Significantly, in the scene with the axe, Ella tells Dash to “shut up”, as if to quieten the voices of protest sounding in her own mind. When Ella goes to attack the lover's suit with an axe she bought earlier from the hardware store, shots of Swinton are cross-cut with Dash barking in disapproval – the combination of Swinton's angry slashing, the axe striking set to the strident strings of a violin and the dog's bark of protest present a scene of violence<sup>14</sup>. If Dash is an amalgamation of direct sound blended with barks and whimpers from the library archive, he is also, perhaps, a remediation of the painting created by Francis Barraud in 1898-9 of his brother's dog, Nipper, who is depicted sitting on his brother's coffin listening intently to the dead master's voice coming out of the gramophone. Barraud sold the painting to The Gramophone Company and it later became the trademark for the music production company HMV (His Master's Voice). The trademark played on the notion of the dog's poignant confusion to express the fidelity of sound reproduction while trading on the dog's loyalty to his master. In our case, the former lover's suit is laid out on the bed as if he has died, while Dash, in an echo of Nipper, listens intently when he senses his master's voice on the telephone.

12 Guillén also worked as a dubbing artist where the “galán” (attractive male lead) was his signature. On the vocal orthodoxies and typification of voices in Spanish cinema, see Vernon (2021). On the sound of dubbing, see Whittaker (2017).

13 Yampolsky notes that all of Artaud's examples on dubbing involve female stars, potentially because, like Adorno, he saw the female voice when recorded as “needy and incomplete”. He cites the “pulpy and hard mouth of Joan Crawford” – the mouth of a cannibal (60).

14 *Un perro andaluz* (*Un chien andalou*, 1929) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, also features a woman staring at a man's suit lying on a bed in a mixture of desire and murderous intent (my thanks to Jo Evans for this observation).

## 6. Vocal echoes

Intertextual echoes of previous incarnations of Elle ripple fleetingly across the surface of Swinton's performance from theatre, film and opera. To mention but a few: Ingrid Bergman's chain-smoking downtrodden victim from 1966 cannot bear to look at herself in the mirror while her desperate "Hallo... hallo" down the phone in her signature Swedish accent recalls many of the screen women of classical Hollywood cinema who are trapped by the telephone<sup>15</sup>. Swinton's Ella echoes the "Hallo" greeting, but in contrast she enjoys applying her lipstick with a smack of her lips in her mirror which is studded with dressing room lights. Anna Magnani's powerful vocal presence seems to spill over the constraints of the role, her throaty voice demanding to be heard and at times she resorts to guttural sobs which seem to resound in Swinton's performance, even if it is more reserved. Sofia Loren's performance is more melancholic and resigned, with a voice that is at once warm, nurturing and evanescent much like the tactile objects it dwells on, symbolic of the lost lover (Almodóvar's production similarly focusses on the aura of objects such as the little bag of letters). Due to the trademark "Almodovaria" (Variety, 2024), Swinton's performance also relates to that of Carmen Maura from *La ley del deseo*, where she plays a trans woman who performs Cocteau's *La voix humaine* on stage and while her ward, Ada, lip-syncs Maysa Mataraso's version of "Ne me quitte pas". In *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Maura's Pepa deftly moves from comedy to tragedy, cementing the wide-eyed, picaresque look and the sincere tone of voice that she is famous for (Martínez). *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* pulsates with women's voices (indeed, with "fast talking dames", testament to its roots in the Hollywood screwball), from Pepa's throaty Castilian, which, through the re-employment of Joan Crawford, "helps her [character] to become a strong, modern woman who can live without a man" (Kinder, 2013: 291), to Candela's fast, breathless Andalusian accent (Smith, 1994: 99)<sup>16</sup>. Candela (María Barranco) chatters, babbles and talks fast, leaving endless messages on Pepa's answerphone. Even Marisa, Carlos's bourgeois girlfriend, who is consigned to silence for most of the film, finds power in the silent shudder of pleasure (Marisa's dream is like a remediation of Eva's [Hedy Lamarr] silent orgasm in the film *Éxtasis* [*Ecstasy*, Gustav Machatý, 1933], a transitional film between silent and sound and the first filmic depiction of a woman's pleasure, an "unheard climax that reverberates through the decades" (Pettman, 2017: 24)<sup>17</sup>. These intertextual reverberations work across Almodóvar's work as forms of self-citation. Maura's performance leads us directly to Penélope Cruz's Lena from *Abrazos rotos*, her voice lower than habitually as she is playing a "woman who had a bad experience and is very rough and tough" (Hynes, 2009). Almodóvar's films are so knotted together intertextually that one reference leads to others in a mise-en-abyme. These vocal shards, echoes or acoustic mirrors spread out around Swinton's Ella like a vortex (Sjogren, 2006). As O'Meara (2022) points out, with voices it makes little sense to speak of containment or linearity. Rather, these voices spill out across "bleeding boundaries and transmedia storytelling". Thus, Ella's voice, far from merely echoing the words of others, is surrounded by reverberations as that resound in an acoustic network of chattering, babbling noises of solidarity.

## 7. Swinton's Performance

The relationship between director and muse is embedded in the text of *The Human Voice* – Cocteau wrote the original play for Berthe Bovy apparently after complaints from his actresses that his works were too director-dominated. One critic wrote of Rossellini's direction of Magnani that Rossellini was "the lover at the other end of the line". In the case of Almodovar's *The Human Voice*, he has noted in interview that, "Tilda está dirigida palabra por palabra" ["Tilda is directed word for word"], a process that hints at the legendary control he exerts over the actresses with

15 Lypsinka, the brilliant lip-syncing drag artist John Epperson from the 1980s parodies such scenes in his "Telephone Mix" where she allows the voices of female Hollywood stars to briefly inhabit her body, delivering lines from Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and others as she holds her fingers to her face, mimicking the phone as auditory prop. The set is interrupted by strident telephone rings that become more urgent as the voices of the women become more desperate.

16 See DiBattista (2001) on Hollywood's "fast talking dames".

17 Rossy Di Palma notes that she was supposed to drink the gazpacho and fall asleep. She asked Almodóvar for a bigger part and he suggested the orgasmic dream (Saner, 2016).

whom he works (Zurro, 2020). In his earliest filmmaking, Almodóvar would mash-up parodies of popular and underground genres, creating a form of live cinematic performance in which he “functioned like a live karaoke machine” (Kinder, 2013: 284). These movies were silent as sound recording for Super 8 is difficult and, as Almodóvar explained, “I’d stand next to the projector and add the voice of each character” (Strauss, 1996: 2)<sup>18</sup>. In the rehearsal process for his films, which he describes as being like a theatre read-through, Almodóvar listens to the musicality of the dialogue or acts out the lines for the actors to hear and to repeat back to him. In this case Swinton may appear like the figure of Echo, able only to repeat the lines that are suggested to her. But the fact that Almodóvar was working in English, for the first time seems to have left him a little less in control than usual (“creo que he perdido el 75 % del miedo que tenía a hacer una película en inglés” [“I think I’ve lost 75% of the fear I had at making a film in English”]) he is reported as saying. In spite of his fears, he maintains that:

the fact that it is in English sounds much better to me, because this film is the stuff of the *bolero* and having it in English gives it a certain distance from that sentimental bravura. English retains and contains and that is good for the film. With a Spanish actress I think it would be too melodramatic, and although I recognise that it’s melodrama I don’t want to make it soapy or sensational<sup>19</sup>.

Is it the English language that constrains (the traces in Swinton’s voice of an upper-class white female celebrity), or Swinton’s star-presence? With gender flux and mutability “as her signature qualities”, for Jackie Stacey (2015), Swinton embodies “flat affect”, a mode of affect that runs counter to the modes of sentimentality bounded by melodrama and romance that Lauren Berlant has identified as associated with feminine “intimate publics” (243). Stacey identifies Swinton’s “styles of underperformed emotion” (245) as connected to an undoing of traditional feminine modes and this could extend to Swinton’s vocal style, which avoids the full-blown raw emotion of Anna Magnani, for example, or the female vulnerability mimicked by Maura or Cruz.

Scholars have noted the capacity for an actress’s performance to endow the actress with agency, in contradistinction to traditional notions of the muse (Chiappetta-Miller, for instance, notes how Magnani’s vocal presence allows her to manipulate her own authorial voice [2015: 364]). Swinton exhibits powerful vocal presence in *The Human Voice* - her rich and modulated performance captures not only the desperation of a jilted lover but contains other shades as well. Swinton has remarked that the film for her is about the “self-consciousness of being a cliché”. In part this is the self-consciousness that a lover feels when performing a set of formulaic actions in the wake of being abandoned. The set’s lusciously decorated apartment, conceived of as a “lovers’ nest” by Almodóvar, is, through its fabulous artwork (some of which was borrowed directly from Almodóvar’s own collections), strewn with women who have been abandoned, wronged, or assaulted. Such as the image of silent film star Olive Thomas painted by Alberto Vargas, who died after consuming her husband’s syphilis medication, allegedly after learning of his infidelity. Or Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Venus and Cupid* (ca. 1625-30), painted ten years after her sexual assault by the painter Agostino Tassi. Thus, notions of interior and exterior are muddled by Swinton’s performance as Ella seems to step outside herself to observe her situation at certain points. This artificiality is enhanced by the artificiality of the set and by the self-consciousness of the costumes - Ella is in some senses performing heartbreak. Mladen Dolar (2006: 70) has stated that voices are projected from the body to circulate out there - a voice is “a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal”. Voices, rather than being contained, spill out into the air - they refuse to be contained. Stephen Connor notes that there also is a performative aspect to all voices, which suggests agency when “I produce my voice” (2000: 3). This self-consciousness also seems to work extra-diegetically - an element of the self-consciousness of performance in a deeper, darker tone which perhaps also notes the

<sup>18</sup> Almodóvar also dubbed the character of Gloria in Zulueta’s 1979 film *Arrebato*.

<sup>19</sup> “Después de hacerla [película], porque es un texto muy melodramático, he visto que el hecho de ser en inglés me suena mucho mejor, porque esta película es carne de bolero y que sea en inglés le da una cierta distancia a esa bravura sentimental. El inglés lo retiene y lo contiene, y eso es bueno para la película. Con una actriz en español creo que sería demasiado melodramático, y aunque reconozco que es melodrama no quiero caer en lo folletinesco” (Zurro, 2020).

industry appeal of being Tilda Swinton, actress and Almodovarian muse. “Women of my age are in fashion again. Apparently, people like my pallor”, notes Ella, as her white skin almost glows in luminescence: “that mixture of madness and melancholy”, but then she follows up with a darker tone, uttered almost under her breath: “I think it’s a fucking joke”<sup>20</sup>.

Swinton has noted in interview that “Almodóvar is not really operating in any language, he’s operating in a kind of energy, and you see that in his cinema: the frame is his language” (Variety, 2024). She goes on, “when we had less language in common, we used to speak in terms of film references, you know, a little bit more *Dark Victory* here, all of that” (Variety). This comment may help us to understand Swinton’s delivery in the film. The reference to Bette Davis’s performance in *Amarga victoria* (*Dark Victory*, Edmund Goulding, 1939) is telling – Davis is known for a performance style that “might not be naturalism but it is credible, pleasurable and most certainly dramatic” (Shingler, 2006a: 1). In *Amarga victoria*, Davis plays the part of a woman who is dying of a brain tumour – her performance passes from the overly bright, light tone to cover up her dismay that we also hear in Swinton’s performance, to her later desperation and then finally her fortitude. As Martin Shingler has noted, Davis’s signature style is “epitomised by a clipped mid-Atlantic accent and an upper-class intonation” which is created by a “stress on the consonants”, creating “rhythmic beats” (Shingler, 2006b: 47). In his discussion of Davis’s performance in *La extraña pasajera* (*Now, Voyager*, Irving Rapper, 1942), Shingler notes that Davis exhibits a “bravura display” as she “glides through her character’s ever-changing thoughts and emotions” (Shingler, 2006b: 47). She uses breath to suggest mental anguish – the “breaths and cracks in her voice, the audible intakes of breath, the projecting and flinging of words, the elongation of small critical words, the softening of her voice and the use of her last breath” are elements that may help us to understand Swinton’s performance. Swinton uses her breath in a variety of ways, such as the pretence of casual lack of interest when she first answers the phone, “Oh, it’s you”, with a letting out of the breath on the carefree seeming “oh” to the whoosh of breath for “you”. Here we might, as Labelle suggests, “detect the life of the voice, its arrival, as a slow irruption between the lips, and which irritates the air in front with sudden force” (Labelle, 2014: 129). With the gap that is produced, Labelle suggests, “we might capture the body as it tries to move forward, as it seeks to propel itself into a second body, the body shimmering in the wake of speech – what Annete Stahmer calls the ‘voice body’” (129). In this case, the hesitation produced by the holding of breath suggests an attempt to seem casual and a body and mouth held in careful tension, as if Ella were attempting to personify a bright, casual loftiness to replace her own dark mood. Later, her voice cracks and breaks up with her breath as she discusses her need for, “expert help.... So, I went... to a therapist”, her mouth contorting with tongue getting in the way of lips, suggesting that she is distraught, but the orchestrations required of the mouth finally delivering a forthright decisiveness. At other times, her sentences rush over one another as she releases breath – “even though I don’t want to do anything... even though I’m like an automaton”<sup>21</sup>.

Swinton stammers over certain consonants to suggest her mental anguish: “I’ve loved you s-s-so much!” and “Kill you? N-n-no... n-n-never!” and “to s-s-save you and to s-save me!”. She chokes on her words, stammering as the “words become matter”, as if something foreign were entering to block her throat and causing her to tremble, gasp or finally break down (Labelle, 2014: 33), as the “n-n-n” sound shows her resistance and the sibilance, an attempt to expel the unwanted matter. Elsewhere, the stammer becomes an expression of anger: “You told me to go out. Escape, go out. What does it matter? It’s the s-s-same thing”, the sibilance now a “catlike hiss” (Labelle, 2014: 17).

At other times, she is calm and resigned, the stammer gone now, no longer a “mouth in search of words [...] of a voice” (Labelle, 2014: 31): “Yes, your cases are packed” and this calmness begins to take over her performance until at the end she returns to being casual, carefree, “well, I can’t

20 Almodóvar was asked specifically about that line, but he claims that the “comment about herself [and the pallor], I wrote it since the beginning thinking of an actress like her. I wasn’t sure that she’d be there, but I thought about a person like Tilda. [...] it was half-based in my ideas of that situation of being abandoned by someone, and the idea of someone like Tilda, who was going to perform it” (Handler, 2021).

21 Dialogue editor Anna Harrington reported in interview that the fact that the film was recorded on a sound stage, during lockdown, meant that there was practically no need for ADR or redubbing and Swinton’s breath was captured in the direct sound (often Harrington will even substitute her own breath if it is required for a particular film). From a personal interview with Anna Harrington in 2021.

think of any other way of stringing this goodbye out...”, with a touch of self-conscious irony. And there is an element of madness in her tone as she discusses the fire she has lit in the apartment, dressed in dramatic Dries Van Noten gold lamé punk, her eyes shining<sup>22</sup>. She delivers a forthright: “I’m not asking you where you are, who you were with... I’m just asking you to look out of the window and turn to where we lived together”. “I’m what’s burning, my love”, which is delivered with self-direction, self-protection and fortitude – she is back in control of her emotions.

Swinton’s voice has great range in the film, and her voice retains the stutters, sobs and pauses that suggest the materiality of her voice, what Barthes famously termed the “grain” of the voice, and which suggests a body that has produced the voice. I suggested earlier that lockdown sets the scene for us to take acoustic pleasure in the materiality of Swinton’s voice. Thus, where Silverman and Lawrence view the rooting of the female voice within a body as an attempt to keep the female voice contained (classical cinema has focussed so closely upon synchronisation to combat the permeability of the voice, its tendency to “violate the bodily limits upon which classic subjectivity depends” [Lawrence, 1991: 27]), we might view materiality differently. Influenced by lockdown, materiality becomes a way to seek out the physicality of the other traced in the voice – in other ways it becomes a way to combat isolation and containment and to revel in the material sonority. Furthermore, the materiality of the voice is also what lends the speaker singularity, as Adriana Cavarero has observed (the phonic emission of voice communicates “the true uniqueness of the one who emits it” [2005: 5]). Focussing on what she terms “vocality” allows her to reverse the philosophical tendency which has traditionally subordinated speech to a “mute immaterial order of signification”. Avoiding metaphysical logocentrism allows Cavarero to evade its tendency towards patriarchy. She has recourse to opera: “In that setting song has a more powerful impact than the words accompanying it; the vocal triumphs over the semantic; the ‘feminine principle’ vanquishes the masculine” (124; 126-30).

Speaking of Magnani’s performance in *La voz humana*, Grover-Friedlander (2005) has identified what she terms the “vocal close-up”, which depends on “nuanced inflections in Magnani’s voice [which] pits claustrophobic visuals against intense expansions in sound” (126). She terms this vocal presence the “operaticness” of Magnani’s voice. In opera, on the stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing (Clément, 1989). But as Clément shows, the voice of the diva transcends language, conveying affect that cannot be fully symbolised or controlled (Clément).

Swinton, too, is a prima donna pronouncing a coloratura that refuses to be contained. This affords her performance agency and allows her to make the role her own, rather than merely being presented as just one more voice in a seriality of divas in the role. She becomes far more than what Cocteau described as just another “unexceptional victim” (Cocteau’s stage notes, quoted by Willem [1998: 143]. Rather, the materiality of her voice discussed above presents a liveness that works counter to the deadness of sound recording<sup>23</sup>. She moves through desperation, lying, honesty, anger, grief, acceptance and defiance, refracted through the vivid, expressive designer costumes that mirror her emotional intensity, but also reflected through the fluctuating tones of her voices that create a texture of their own.

Scholars have noted that Ovid’s Echo gains some measure of paradoxical agency for herself in the way that her voice alters the meaning of the phrases she is doomed to repeat: in this way, she is able to break out of the role she has been assigned. For Cavarero (2005), the repetition creates a sonic surplus that detaches words from their original intention or control. For example, when Narcissus calls out, “Is anyone near?” (“*ecquis adest?*”), Echo is able to respond, “she is near” (“*adest*”). In this way, the end of a phrase, when echoed, becomes something new: she enacts a repetition, but she also originates speech (Folkmarson Käll, 2015). In the case of Swinton, she is repeating the words of the other actresses before her, and the instructions of the director, but the

22 Costume designer Sonia Grande notes that the idea was never to show a woman who is so heartbroken that she has a careless appearance. On the contrary, she is always impeccably dressed. Nevertheless, there is a shift in the final scene, to signal a change in her way of thinking and behaving (Paiella, 2012). It is possible, of course, that the whole dialogue is taking place within her mind – the scandalous fire gives weight to that reading.

23 Arguably, if we are reminded of Guillén’s voice as the former lover down the line, Swinton and Guillén may appear to be engaged in a “necro-duet” which may work to emphasise Swinton’s liveness in relation to the dead actor (see Stanyek and Piekut [2010] on the necro-duet).

singularity of her voice means that by definition she must bring something of her own, something new. In interview Swinton is carefully submissive, noting that, “it is important to surrender to the director’s vision... It never occurred to me that he would ever find space in a corner of his frame for me” (Tartaglione, 2024). But the fact that the film was in English redistributes the traditional relationship between Director and muse: “the amazing thing is that he’s not really listening to the language, he’s listening to the music. [...] We rehearsed for six months and he would ask us over and over again to repeat our lines; it’s like he was trying to understand the music of the English” (Denney, 2024). Here, Almodóvar is cast as Echo, obsessed with the phonics, hanging on to Swinton’s every word<sup>24</sup>.

## 8. A possible latent silent intertext

I want to put forward a painting as a latent silent intertextual image for this film. The painting in question is not associated with the film (it does not feature on the walls of the apartment, and it has not been mentioned by the director) – however, other paintings by the same artist, Sigfrido Martín Begué, have featured in other films by Almodóvar and he is known to have works by Martín Begué in his personal collection<sup>25</sup>. In this painting, *El oído - Santa Cecilia* from 1990, we see a woman, St. Cecilia, dressed in a glorious scarlet Balenciaga gown, much like the one worn by Swinton at the start of this film<sup>26</sup>. She is seated at an organ, but here the pipes are mouths that are vocalising the vowel sounds. She has her finger to her lips, and she is playing the organ, as if to suggest that her voice is the sound coming from the organ. If the painting had sound, we would presumably hear vowel sounds babbling from the pipes.

At St Cecilia’s feet is a dog, a clear homage to Nipper, who is listening intently to the sound coming out of a modernist rendition of the gramophone on the floor. Martín Begué is interested in the pictorial representation of sound: “la pintura no tiene sonido. Pero Sta. Cecilia puede leer los sonidos como pinturas” [“paintings don’t have sound. But St Cecilia can read sounds as if they were paintings”] (Corazón Ardura, 2016: 129)<sup>27</sup>. Significantly, Nipper in this version is listening to the voice of St Cecilia, as if his master’s voice has been replaced by his mistress’s voice. We have something similar happening at the end of *The Human Voice*. At the end of the film, as Ella reports to her former lover that she has burned down the apartment they shared, she prepares to leave with Dash. To a certain extent, we might see this ending, so different from the one envisaged by Cocteau, as a lockdown dream: Tilda leaves the isolationism of the apartment with the dog and they step outside into the sunshine of the street. Furthermore, Dash, associated with Nipper, comes to refer not only to sound technology, but through the way he represents the woman who is also yearning for ‘her master’s voice’, he becomes symbolic of what Silverman (1988) would term the mastery of the male voice in film<sup>28</sup>. It is therefore all the more significant when, in the final sequences, Ella notes to the

24 Furthermore, if the director and muse paradigm is deeply embedded in the backstory to this work, we might seek out new paradigms for this relationship than the one of the controlling Director. In fact, the first female voice on film may have been that of Conchita Piquer, who was contracted by Lee De Forest to display his sound-on-film Phonofilm technique in New York at the Rivoli Theatre in 1923. After dancing and singing (a jota, a copla and a fado), Piquer recites an extended joke from Spanish vaudeville, acting out the voices of the participants. When she has finished, she looks up at the director and issues the instruction to “Stop”, one hand on her hip, her lips parted to express her impatience with team filming her. The eleven minute film, *Far from Seville* (Lee De Forest, 1923), was found in 2010 in the Library of Congress: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzYuMmTSwLs&ab\\_channel=ulecrag](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzYuMmTSwLs&ab_channel=ulecrag)

25 For example, *La mala educación* (2004) features Begué’s *La máquina de hacer cine* (1992) and *Dolor y Gloria* (2019), *Las costureras. Los autónomas* (1996) and a companion piece to *El oído - Santa Cecilia*, named, *El olfato - Santa Casilda* (1986).

26 Martín Begué notes that the Balenciaga dress is also modelled on the Man Ray photograph *Le violon d’Ingres* (1924). Her neck looks rather long, presumably in deference to the violin-shape, but it is also because Begué professes to be fascinated by the sculpture which he attributes to Bernini, but he presumably means the one by Stefano Maderno in a similar style to works by Bernini. St Cecilia is in a foetal position in the sculpture, and she has a cut around her neck from where she was decapitated. See Corazón Ardura (2016: 128).

27 Begué cites a Bauhaus rendition of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and Kandinski abstracts amongst other influences (Corazón Ardura, 2016: 128).

28 Almodóvar says that the ending of the film was a chance, written due to Dash’s excitable nature who, true to his name, wanted to leave the stage (Diestro Dópido, 2021).

dog, “I’m your master now”. Ella has gained autonomy not only over herself, but as a vocal echo of her previous incarnations, like Echo, she has changed her own ending.

*The Human Voice* emerges as a meditation on the paradoxes of the female voice in cinema. Its production and release during the pandemic only served to emphasise the voice’s paradoxical spectrality and intimacy. Layering Cocteau’s play with echoes of earlier performances, Almodóvar situates Swinton’s Ella within a genealogy of women whose voices have been confined and continually reanimated across media. Swinton’s turn, shaped by Almodóvar’s direction yet imbued with her own vocal singularity in performance, transforms Ella into an agent of sound. In declaring herself Dash’s “master”, she wrestles authority away from the disembodied male voice, to assert that the female voice, long cast as echo, can reverberate with material power.

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