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It is also said that 'the Québécois language is so rich in modulations and variations of regional accents and in games with tonic accents that it sometimes seems, with no exaggeration, that it would be better preserved by musical notation than by any system of spelling.'

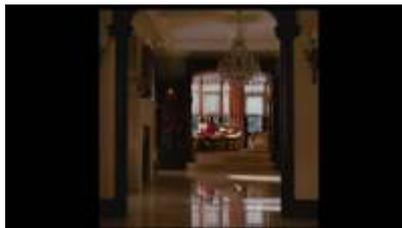
Michèle Lalonde cited by Deleuze and Guattari

Introduction

- 1 Xavier Dolan's film *Mommy* (2014) tells the story of a teenage boy, Steve, and his mother, Diane, that takes place over a limited period of time, perhaps as little as a few days or a week. After being expelled from a juvenile rehabilitation center for injuring another boy, Steve is sent back to live with his mother. That same week, she loses her job. Although they are happy to be reunited, being together again reminds them of Steve's deceased father. Expelled from the last school that would have him, Steve must be home schooled. After a raucous fight between mother and son, their neighbour Kyla comes over to make sure all is well. The three of them become friends and Kyla, a teacher on leave, accepts to tutor Steve. Meanwhile, the injured boy's parents are suing Diane over Steve's actions. In order to gain a minimum of legal counsel, she tolerates the sexual advances of a neighbour who works as a law clerk. This law clerk, however, is not interested in helping Steve; quite to the contrary, he cannot wait to get rid of him. Faced with financial ruin and destitution, Diane decides to put her son out of judicial reach by having him committed to a mental health facility.

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The story is grim, yet Dolan infuses the everyday life of his characters with aching moments of beauty. Take, for example, the highly ironic use of Franz Schubert's music in the scene of the little wild rose. The song "*Heidenröslein*," the little rose on the heath, is playing when Diane begs an acquaintance for translation work and, more importantly, a cash advance. After a zoom in on her clothes, the camera carries out a back zoom in three steps, which punctuates the song of the "wild rose" and gradually expands the field of view. Marble floors and dark woodwork surround Diane, while a voice from another time (Friederike Sailer) melodically enunciates with emotional purity. Like the other songs of *Mommy*'s soundtrack, the sequence is an intertextual musical commentary. Goethe's verses allegorize a young woman, the small heather rose, and her suffering at a young man's rude attentions.



- 3 Despite her best efforts at defending herself, the rose "*must es eben leiden*," that is she must resign herself to suffer. The lied's strange prosody (a carefree music on a violent text) resonates with the visual composition of the sequence. Diane, dressed in a lurid pink jacket with a floral motif, sits in the midst of a luxury indifferent to her suffering. She endures social and financial precariousness because of her teenage son's misconduct, which is exacerbated by a mental health disorder (ADHD) and his pubescent sexuality. Like a reflection of Diane's troubled interior life amidst an impeccably ordered sitting room, the music's structural simplicity and classical clarity contrast sharply with the poem's implicit violence. The choice in the lied's interpretation also accounts for the parallel between the music and the visual frame: a good-natured version such as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's would not have had the same effect. To recall Roland Barthes' expression, the grain of this voice informs the audiovisual poetics of the tableau.

4

Schubert's sexual orientation has been the subject of much speculation (McClary). Does reminding this fact, however, make the pure voice on the recording of this art song queerer for all that? Does the sexual life of the composer give the song a

strange yet familiar aspect? Dolan has denounced these kinds of associations between the artist's sexual orientation and their work when he turned down the Cannes Festival's Queer Palm in 2012 for *Laurence Anyways*.

The existence of such prizes disgusts me. What progress is there in attributing ghettoizing and ostracizing awards, which scream that films made by gays are gay films? It fragments people into small, hermetic communities. I didn't accept the Queer Palm. They still want to give it to me. Never! In my films there can be homosexuality, but it might also not be a topic (qtd. in Verduzier, my translation).

- 5 Taking its cue from Dolan's rejection of the author's voice, this article on queer voices in *Mommy* does not set them up to assume the function of Dolan's voice. In summarizing the challenges voices present to queer theories and in analyzing *Mommy* for its vocal identifications, I propose an approach to queer voices that are a far cry from a veiled metaphor for the figure of the queer author.

6

To achieve this goal, I elaborate an interdisciplinary theoretical discourse that starts with a post-structural reading of Québécois swearwords. The exordium reminds us of the musicality of Québécois accents, a musicality I extend to swearwords since they subvert the voice's subservience to speech. The scandal in Québec over the swearing and poor diction in *Mommy* becomes an occasion to think once more of the object-voice, as a subversion of logocentrism. My reading of the materiality of *Mommy*'s voices is further supported by feminist and queer revisions of phonologocentrism. At each turn, the theoretical corpus and the analyses of the film accentuate audiovisual experiences of sound such as theorized by Michel Chion. Steve's queer sexuality is thus foregrounded through the audiovisual remediations of the object-voice. I argue that it is precisely this strange yet familiar side of the voice that critics of the film's level of diction would prefer to keep hidden from sight. Indeed, while critics abroad understand *Mommy*'s diction to be a symptom of larger social issues, in Québec many have lamented its "dirty mouth" (*langue sale*). My line of argument suggests there is something uncanny in the film's use of joul (slang) and swearwords that makes our ears quiver, and that it has also to do with queer vocal identifications rather than simply with transgressions of antiquated moral codes.

The Québécois Controversy Around *Mommy*'s Dirty Mouth

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In October 2014, following the success of *Mommy* at the Cannes Film Festival, an open letter by Paul Warren (a retired professor and film critic) published in *Le Devoir* started a controversy in Québec apropos the film's poor linguistic quality and its overabundance of swearwords.

The 'crisse de tabarnak,' and the 'hostie d'ciboire' that rattle our Québécois dialect from one end to the other of *Mommy*'s square format ('when he blows a fuse [*quand il pète une fiouse*], get out of the way because he plays rough [*ça joue rough*]) worry me. Xavier Dolan does not have a problem with this. One only needs to subtitle the film in French for spectators who speak French... and to express oneself in English during conferences in Cannes. And there you have it! A funny turn of events that is quite scary. *Mommy*, which has had enormous success in Québec and throughout the world, will convince more of our young directors (those who have not yet given

themselves over to Hollywood) that it is quite gainful to swear on the big screen and that our films must continue, now more than ever, to speak the Québécois of the street and to eat the words of our language. (Warren, my translation)¹

- 8 The French critics, on the other hand, were not scandalized by the diction in *Mommy* (Tremblay, “Un film”; Sed). They interpret the film’s linguistic violence as a symptom of the social and mental distress it renders, rather than criticize the filmmaker’s reluctance to adopt a more literary tone. Curiously, while commentators in Québec evoke language’s function for social identity, they also refuse to situate the film in a historical context larger than an intergenerational conflict (Rioux, “L’enfant roi”). Just as a return of the repressed, one might mistake this debate as a page from *Les Insolences du Frère Untel* (1960), a book written by Jean-Paul Desbiens, that criticized the Catholic Church’s hold (at the time) on Québec’s education system. Like the narrator Desbiens satirizes, commentators accuse Dolan, as the representative of Québec’s irresponsible and disenfranchised youth, of massacring the French language that marks their cultural difference in North America. Meanwhile, previous generations of writers, now responsible adults, are put in a category apart for their responsible use of joul. How can Dolan’s joul not be comparable with Michel Tremblay’s simply because the former is younger than the latter? This line of argumentation becomes further incomprehensible following the playwright’s admission that he recognizes himself in Dolan’s work (Tremblay, “Interview”).

9

To culturally inhabit one’s language and not be alienated by the cultural productions of one’s society are problems in Québec that predate Dolan’s films and Tremblay’s plays. According to Karim Larose, twentieth-century playwrights in Québec were confronted with a difficult choice that foregrounded a much deeper cultural unease: they could either devote their theatrical efforts to writing in the grand tradition of French literature and alienate the masses; or they could employ the language of French-Canadian vaudeville and run the risk of losing their artistic credibility in the world of entertainment. Through their critical rejection of this seemingly absence of choice, writers like Gratien Gélinas, Jacques Ferron, and Michel Tremblay found in popular language the means through which to recognize Québec’s cultural identity. Imparting respectability to joul was central in the recognition of Québec’s cultural distinction. When one takes into account the historical contextualization of Larose’s article, Dolan’s success registers as part of a tradition, rather than as a fad for the young and disenfranchised. However, it does refute the idea that joul was symptomatic of a French-Canadian cultural deficiency that would since have been resolved by the instauration of a proper Québécois culture.²

10

Readers and viewers should therefore be skeptical of critics who totally refuse Dolan’s film the cultural and linguistic status of Tremblay’s theatre. Analyses based on intergenerational conflict can become the cover for larger ideological arguments, such as the racist and homophobic comments that young gay authors are not legitimate defenders of socialist values and that their solidarity is a mere pretence for the sole benefit of the box office and their careers. For example, Christian Rioux accuses Dolan and other gay artists of cashing in on socialist hopes as a kind of branding, which would make them vulgar opportunists instead of politically active public figures (Rioux, “Méfions-nous”). Although the present article condemns such retrograde moral lessons, I will not dignify them with direct answers. In recalling with Larose Québec’s history of

filthy language, I am not drawing a portrait of Dolan as a protagonist in a debate over linguistic nationalism. Instead, the following arguments will explain how the swearing in *Mommy* sheds light on a vocal materiality whose sonorities transgress the usual function of speech. When spectators speak of their uneasiness with Steve's use of slang and swearing, they fail to consider how they are part of the film's larger problematic of vocality, including his singing. Indeed, beyond its use of swearwords, the film further dissociates vocality and speech through its staging of lip synch, play-back and karaoke as sites of queer performative vocal identity. Ultimately, *Mommy*'s queer vocal identifications and their appropriation of a traditional locus, the Québécois swearwords, confront audiences to disquieting sexualities.

Swearing and Voice Qua Sonorous Object

11

Warren claims that *Mommy* needs to be subtitled in French “for spectators who speak French,” as in the past the French-Canadian film *Le curé de village* (The Village Priest, 1949) by Paul Gury “would have needed dubbing” in France (Larose 18). This might be the case for accents and some of the idiomatic expressions in joul; however, the grammar of Québécois and French swearwords are mostly similar: “the rules are identical, only their field of application differ” (Léard 136, my translation). Swearwords and curses share a range of qualitative and quantitative combinations that allow a minimally musical French ear to find its bearings in *Mommy*: “the first impression is disconcerting, because of a French language of which one more or less understands the meaning or, in any case, the music, but whose words, treacherous words, slip through our lips” (Lefort, my translation). Even when combinations are not qualitative—as in “a fucking nice car” (*un crisse de beau char* in Québécois; *une putain de belle caisse* in French)—but quantitative, one may still remark upon elements for comparison: *crisse de tabarnak* (an expression akin to “Jesus fucking Christ”) is not that different than *putain de merde* (“fucking shit”), although English translations do not emphasize the additive nature of this form of cursing disclosed by the preposition *de* (of), as in “son of a bitch,” for example. There is, however, an important shift from semantics to affects that should be noted: Québécois swearwords are now dissociated from their original signified and their transgressive value is no longer associated with the invocation of the Catholic cult's sacred objects. This is further evidenced in how the transliteration of the swearwords differs from these various cultic objects: for example, *p'tit crisse* does not refer to *petit Christ* (Christ child), but becomes a common noun that translates into “little shit.” The transgression shifts from semantic and moral registers to an affective register: the sonorous irruption of swearing in a given social context is disruptive not because of the words' meanings, but because of their expressive intensity and emotional load. In other words, swearing is now frowned upon because one imposes upon those in earshot the emotions that overflow and override the voice's usual strict correspondence with speech. Québécois swearing swaps the forced politeness of irritated speech for a sonorous vocal coarseness that is strangely disturbing.

12

Going a step further than the polite apology of swearing as a symptom of the protagonists' social and mental misery, one can also listen to the sonorities expressed by these dirty mouths. An initial listening strategy would treat these vocal sonorities—or

vocalities—like music. The combination of accumulative swearing (the quantitative kind analyzed above), by its rhythm and its sonorous repetitions, provide key musical elements, especially when the curses do not qualify a person, thing or event: *hostie d'crisse de tabarnak*, for example (Silverton 226). To claim that swearwords are meaningless because they have no fixed signified, would amount to say that music is also meaningless.³ Such a claim is especially dismissive when the analysis is based on an artistic endeavor rather than a miscellaneous news item or a conversation overheard on the street. To understand the swearing in *Mommy*, one must listen to the musicality of the voices that express the cursing in order to avoid moralistic interpretations that ultimately seek to restrain their subversive impact. One could start by asking the following question: are all swearwords pronounced in the same tone of voice?

13

Take for example Steve's comments when he returns home and, in his mother's bedroom, finds old photos, the familiar smells of clothing and blankets, and the songs his father burned on a CD: "*Crisse... est folle 'stie... Bien tabarnak!*" (Christ... she's fucking crazy... Holy shit!). Although Steve's voice connotes surprise, the swearwords are pronounced with obvious tenderness. These swearwords are expressed with a soft and matted voice. Furthermore, the soundtrack plays a background of held chords played on a synthesizer along with sounds of a babbling stream (excerpt from Craig Armstrong's "Chilhood"). Meanwhile, the camera captures the opaque undulation of curtains that shimmer in the afternoon sun.⁴ Between these sensory renderings foreign to sight (hearing and smelling) and therefore of space, Dolan places images that recall the fluidity of water. Outside of space, we reach back in time and accompany Steve's submergence in an indefinite past. Diane abruptly ends this oneiric moment by hollering from the kitchen. She wants Steve to put an end to her perception of cacophony by having him shut off the music he is listening to in her bedroom. Instead of shutting off her own radio and going to talk to him, she screams over all the noise while the diegetic radio blasts "*Provocante*" ("Provocative") by Marjo. In this sonorous diegetic layout, Steve is calm and lost in his memories until the sonorous intrusion from the kitchen renders us sensitive to the violence that abruptly interrupts his reassuring visions. This sequence shows us how Steve does not only swear to express his frustrations and refusal of social norms, but also to express for himself his intimate emotions, like his filial love and his quietude at being reunited with his family. It also introduces us to the film's use of competing sounds in order to convey social and psychological friction.

14

This scene of two radios recalls the cinematographic techniques involved in what Michel Chion calls the *acousmètre* in *The Voice in Cinema*. As I argue below, the film's multiplication of voices call forth an absent character, namely Steve. Like post-structuralist thinkers before him, Chion is interested in the voice not only as the bearer of linguistic meaning, but also as an object. In the very first pages of his book, he pays tribute to Denis Vasse for his psychoanalytic work on the voice.

And building on Lacan, the excellent book by Denis Vasse, *L'Ombilic et la voix* (*The Umbilicus and the Voice*, published in 1974), proposed one of the first consistent and dialectical approaches to the topic. Vasse's work allowed us not only to speak 'around' the voice, but also to consider it as an object, without either becoming lost in the fascination it inspires or reducing it to being merely the vehicle of language and expression. (Chion 1)

- 15 Indeed, the fifth chapter of Vasse's book is an excellent place to start thinking of the type of listening that is needed in order to hear aspects of the sonorous voice that cannot be expressed through speech.

There is in the 'dialogue of the deaf,' for example, which often represents a 'discussion,' a way of not listening, of not letting the other's voice resonate within ourselves, in pretending to let ourselves fall for the sole coherence of discourse, of reasoning. Everyone knows, who has experienced it, that there is no subtler aggression than that which consists in shackling someone in his own words. Speech thus finds itself *cut off*, separated from the site whence the subject seeks to say itself. (Vasse 178, my translation)

- 16 There is therefore a more absurd paradox than the one I am proposing here, namely demanding a generous form of listening to the swearwords in *Mommy* based on the theoretical work of a psychoanalyst member of the Society of Jesus. And this absurdity would call upon us to invoke poor diction and curses without signifieds in order to justify turning a deaf ear to the vocality of these supposedly dirty mouths. One cannot simply deplore the abuse of swearing in the film as an impoverishment of diction. Granted, one might not want to listen to the swearing and cursing of the first person who comes along; however, this judgment call should not serve as a precedent that deafens us to the sublimated intimate sonorities of a film in which such interjections are, by far, more contextualized, not to mention artistically rendered.

17

Chion's sensibility to the voice's sonorous materiality also comes from his composer's craft. In the early part of his career, Chion was an assistant to Pierre Schaeffer and also composed *musique concrète* or acousmatic music. By dissociating sonorities with the bodies (or instruments) that produce them, electroacoustic music deconstructs the idealist and formalist definition of music as an abstract art form. The dissociation of sound from the body or instrument that produces it, however, is not the sole prerogative of the twentieth century and its technologies of audiovisual reproduction. As Chion and Mladen Dolar both remark, the legendary veil which separates Pythagoras from his novices obscures the sources of esoteric knowledge and makes it acousmatic: the veiled origins of the master's voice would have been the inaugural theatrical device of philosophy (Dolar, *A Voice* 60-71). With this theatrical device, speech and truth are shielded from critical gazes in order to form on their own the binary cement of knowledge. The figure of the master whose face remains veiled from the gazes of non-believers presents us with critical theory's problem with the voice, as testified by Derrida's triptych about the entanglement of logocentrism and phonocentrism.

18

The musical voices in *Mommy* help untangle this zone of epistemological confusion. Long before the mechanical reproduction of sound and the Derridean critique of phonocentrism, music occupied the ambiguous sonorous space that makes the voice a sonorous object, i.e. a sign with multiple signifieds. In following the French psychoanalytic tradition of the object-voice, including Michel Poizat's work on opera, Dolar glimpses the subversive potential of vocal materiality in the underside of Plato and Augustine's observations on sung music.

Music may well be the element of spiritual elevation beyond worldliness and representation, but it also introduces, for that very reason, the indomitable and senseless puissance beyond the more tractable sensual pleasures. There is no assurance or transparency to be found in the [Platonic understanding of the

singing] voice, quite the contrary, the voice undermines any certainty and any establishment of a firm sense. The voice is boundless, warrantless, and, no coincidence, on the side of woman.... One can draw, from this brief and necessarily schematic survey, the tentative conclusion that the history of 'logocentrism' doesn't run quite hand in hand with 'phonocentrism,' that there is a dimension of the voice that runs counter to self-transparency, sense, and presence: the voice against the logos, the voice as the other of logos, its radical alterity. (Dolar, "The Object Voice" 23-24)

- 19 In short, if the sonorous voice, like music, cannot accommodate itself with the sonorous limits of speech, this is not necessarily an admission of their insignificance. The materiality of voices, their extra-linguistic sonority, would also explain why *Mommy*—and its abundance of cursing, joul, and accents—was acclaimed outside of Québec.

Towards a Queer Theory of Vocality

20

While the review of *Mommy*'s reception has already afforded an opportunity to demonstrate how criticizing diction can turn into moral and political attacks on gay artists, the post-structuralist detour through the object-voice demonstrates the need for a performative definition of voice, one that is not simply concerned with espousing the signifying limits of speech. Because vocality presents elements of communication that are not contained by the sonorous normativity of speech, our listening must unfold. A generous type of listening is needed when dealing with vocality, since in order to do justice to the sonorous particularities of a voice, one's listening must reinvent itself upon meeting each voice encountered. This is precisely how queer theory can inform studies on vocality.

21

Queer theorists have taken some time to approach vocality.⁵ Two theoretical discourses were opposed to the materiality of the sonorous voice (vocality) as defined above in relation to psychoanalysis and audiovisual or media studies (object-voice). On one hand, we find the foregrounding of writing and textuality in Derrida and deconstruction; on the other, the importance of the body's plasticity in the performance of identities in early queer theory, such as in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. In order for these three theoretical corpuses to meet, critical theory required a re-evaluation of the voice. No one disputes the ideological function of the voice in the history of the Verb's transmission and its far-reaching consequences, as touched upon in previous sections. Over the past decades, however, philosophers and theorists have pondered the problem of sonorous voices. Might phonologocentrism obscure phenomena that are not transcending as such, namely the multiplicity of sonorous voices that oppose the univocal character of the author's voice or the voice qua autoaffective presence? These new thinkers of voices criticize the hypothesis that Western knowledge was produced and organized by a privileged relation to speech and argue that vision dominates our epistemology. Anti-ocular criticism of the history of ideas starts with Don Ihde's *Listening and Voice* (1976) and is followed by Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* (1994) and Jean-Luc Nancy's *À l'écoute* (*Listening*, 2002). Anti-ocular or anti-videocentric criticism questions, for example, Plato's rejection of the fluid ontology elaborated by Heraclitus and his adoption instead of Parmenides' more static conception of being. It also examines the heliocentric

Verb and the analytical reasoning of the Enlightenment, and concludes that vision, not speech, dominated and still dominates the organization of knowledge (Dyson21-28).

22

Closer to the field of research that interests us, Adriana Cavarero published in 2003 *A più voci: filosofia dell'espressione vocale*, translated by Paul Kottmann as *For More Than One Voice* (2005). In the book's postface, Cavarero writes of her admiration for Derrida and his analysis of the historical devocalization of the logos. She disagrees, however, with his solution to avoid the return of certain ideological topics of metaphysics, namely how he hinders the return of an unquestioned or presupposed conception of the voice as autoaffective presence, by valuing instead the multiplicity of writing. After hundreds of pages of literary and philosophical analyses of nonconformist and subversive voices, Cavarero argues against Derrida that Plato's forms and ideas are part of a videocentric order to which sonorities and voices are submitted (213-241).

23

In the wake of Cavarero's publications, other feminist and queer theorists have revisited the argument and widened its scope or frame of application. After Frances Dyson, Annette Schlichter has underlined the absence of voice in a fundamental text for queer theory, namely Butler's *Gender Trouble*. According to Schlichter, Butler's argument rests on a central lyric figure who, paradoxically, does not have a voice. She questions this theoretical aphony modeled on the drag scene.

Not only does Butler miss out on theorizing the voice, she eventually presents us with voiceless bodies. A relevant act of silencing occurs in one of the arguably most influential scenes in the history of queer and feminist theories: the deployment of drag as a vehicle of the denaturalization of gender.... Because Butler focuses on the picture of gender, while excluding the voice as one of the relevant aspects of 'significant corporeality' of the dramatic performance, her 'little theoretical theater' of gender trouble remains fully contained by the logic of the visual. The repression of the voice in the spectacle of drag turns the drag scene into an allegory of gender performativity as a theory which attempts to make bodies speak but simultaneously mutes their voices. (Schlichter 32-33)

- 24 Although Schlichter disagrees with this imposed silence on the queer voice, she offers in counterpart arguments to avoid a supposed natural identity of voices. Her arguments rest on the ethnomusicology of Nina Eidsheim, among others. Eidsheim refutes the supposed racial characteristics of vocal sonorities and timbres. Schlichter also discusses issues of gender related to the breaking of male voices during adolescence, citing scholarship that demonstrates how the transformation is not solely dictated by biological imperatives, but also heightened by social and cultural factors.

25

This summary of scholarship on queer vocality brings us to Freya Jarman-Ivens' *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (2011). Although Jarman-Ivens' book does not cite Schlichter's article, as they were published the same year, they come to similar conclusions. Jarman-Ivens questions three icons of singing in the past fifty years—Karen Carpenter, Maria Callas, and Diamanda Gallas—as she elaborates a theory of queer vocal identification. In order to avoid the normalization of the subversive potential of these voices, she cites numerous definitions of the word queer and its resistance to naming identities (Jarman-Ivens 13-17). She thus reminds her readers of the necessity to forego the containment of these voices and the bodies from where they emerge, as well as the impulse to impart them with sexual orientations. In this perspective, she invites us to

think of queer voices while letting them maintain their strange familiarity, in order to counter any preconceived ideas about so-called natural or normal vocal identities. It is precisely the notion that voices are “natural” with static and stable identities that produces the cultural biases that endure and continue to foster discrimination against people who do not identify with normative vocalities. For Jarman-Ivens, vocal identification challenges the prejudiced notion that natural voices are matched to natural bodies. In place of a natural voice, and in combination with many other social factors, vocal identifications are formed and transformed by singing along to play-backs of music recordings and even through lip-synching: “The queerness of the uncanny, then, makes it possible to say that in the very processes of vocal identification—central in some ways to our articulation of our selves—are queer processes at heart” (37). Although Jarman-Ivens refers to Freud’s interpretation of “The Sand-Man” to insist on the relations between the uncanny and the queer, she misses the occasion to underline Freud’s own videocentrism.

26

In elaborating his notion of the *Unheimlich*, Freud cites a commentary by Ernst Jentsch about E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Night Pieces*: “One of the surest devices for producing slightly uncanny effects through story-telling is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton” (qtd. in Freud 135). While Jentsch is content to reference Hoffmann’s stories, Freud moves beyond a purely literary reference and ventures into musical territory through his mention of Jacques Offenbach’s operetta, *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (1881). However, Freud misses the opportunity to explore the uncanny dimension of Olympia’s voice, a role in which a coloratura soprano incarnates a singing mechanical doll: “the seemingly animate doll Olympia is by no means the only one responsible for the incomparably uncanny effect of the story” (136). He prefers discussing the blinding of Nathanaël as a metaphor for castration anxiety. Freud’s own blindness on the tie between the voice and what he calls homosexual paranoia is the pertinent object of the first article on queer voices (Hanson 1993), which also considers topics that prefigure current scholarship on posthumanism and voice.

27

In brief, queer vocal identification can be thought of as an intertextuality of vocal performances. The identification is not only social, but also technological, as we are influenced by the voice-objects of media. These remediated voices integrate our speech and singing (via play-back and lip synch) and remind us that our vocal identities are always already denaturalized. Queer vocalities are at once known and strange, because they transform habitual vocal sonorities and underline this ongoing process of vocal transformation. Consequently, they challenge vocal prejudices and herald a multiplicity of vocal identifications and expressions.

Queer Vocal Identifications in *Mommy*

28

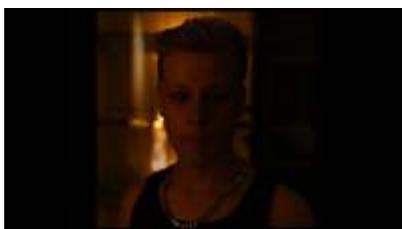
When Steve sets out on his longboard, the extradiegetic soundtrack plays “Colorblind” by the Counting Crows. Yet the skater’s gestures and the scraps of sound we hear bleeding from his headphones help us realize he is listening to a different song, namely “Blue” by Eiffel 65. Why the deliberate discrepancy between the extradiegetic and diegetic sound? Are we blind to Steve’s mood? Is he also blind to his own blues? No matter how we interpret the sequence’s musical intertextuality, the superposition of both songs

recalls the same narrative device of vocal confusion Dolan previously employs in the sequence of two radios. The viewer is in a soundscape parallel to Steve's and barely hears his voice as he sings over the play-back.

- 29 If this intertextual process “shows” us voices that characters cannot hear, the film also employs sonorous ellipses. Take, for example, the irruption of Kyla into Steve and Diane's lives. Although the camera shows her heading home and coming back with a first aid kit, we must imagine that she had first heard their (acousmatic) fighting from across the street. That evening, or the next, Kyla comes to dinner. The mother and son compete for her attention. Once again, Diane provokes Steve and repeatedly cuts him off. He responds in kind. Kyla, however, suffers from a stuttering problem. Her slower response time compels them, almost against their will, to listen more attentively. First, they stop to listen to her and, as a result, they listen more carefully to each other. The partial aphasia of their new friend brings order to the loud duo's cacophony. Screaming, swearing, competing radios, interrupted conversations: the film multiplies conflicting sounds in order to demonstrate how Steve's voice often goes unheard in the mayhem of his social situation. Steve relates to Kyla not only because her speech impediment forces her into a passive listening role, but also because her difficulty at expressing herself resonates with his experience of not being heard. When Steve feels heard by others, he becomes more comfortable at expressing parts of himself that are otherwise drowned out by the noise. Steve then leaves swearing behind for singing.

30

Following their meal, all three characters congregate in the kitchen to dance and sing to a song by Céline Dion, “*On ne change pas*” (“We do not change”). If we were following Butler's account, we could not easily interpret this scene as queer, especially in light of the classical example of drag. Consider the visual details of the sequence: Steve is dressed in black, his hair is slicked back like the singer used to wear hers, and his eyes are only lightly made-up with mascara. We are a long way from a full drag and a silent lip synch over “You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman,” which Butler and Schlichter reference to discuss the denaturalization of gender by the drag queen (Butler 29-30; Schlichter 32). However, following the theoretical trajectory of the queer voice as I have laid it out above, we can now understand how singing over a play-back is an integral part of the scene's queer vocality. The denaturalization of normative gender identities does not need to occur solely on a visual level, but can also operate through vocal identifications. Steve, as is quite clear, knows the song for having sung it numerous times.



- 31 He sings over the recording, in play-back. While he does not wear a dress, his dancing moves (fist raised with an upward movement initiated at the elbow) recall those of the singer. The song is part of those strange things he reconnects with when he comes home and that initially make his mother and the neighbor feel uncomfortable and strange.

32

Jarman-Ivens' theory of vocal identification can also help to understand how queer voices are not only critical tools, but also sites or spaces for building ties. In this sequence of singing to Céline in the kitchen, Diane and Kyla start by looking disconcertedly at Steve's transformation. Then they listen to the music and the words of the song. One by one they pick up the tune and listen to each other sing over the play-back. Then, to punctuate the sequence, the camera zooms out in a dolly shot to capture this intimate kitchen party. The use of the dolly makes for a more fluid zoom out than the "*Heidenröslein*" sequence I discuss in the introduction above. As an intertextual scene, the visual comment on "*On ne change pas*" becomes an ode to harmonious diversity. Yet, there is something uncanny about this play-back singing: the "visualized sounds" of this music, to recall Chion's term, show something other than the song's words without, however, putting a finger on it.



33

So far, the analysis of *Mommy*'s queer voices has moved from the diegetic competition of two radios, to extradiegetic musical encroachment on the music bleeding from Steve's headphones, to diegetic singing over a play-back of a Céline Dion song. The next step in this progressive attempt to liberate Steve's voice takes place in a bar. Steve accompanies his mother on a "date" with Paul, a law clerk who might help them with their legal troubles. Devastated that his mother might sleep with the man in exchange for shoddy legal advice, Steve turns to the bar's karaoke machine to express his feelings. In choosing a song his father had left them on the mix tape—*Vivrà per lei* with Andrea Bocelli and Giorgia—Steve attempts to shield his mother in this male-dominated social situation. However, instead of the kind parental rebuttal he got at home, Steve is heckled and scorned this time by the boisterous members of his heteronormative surroundings. The young bucks at the nearby pool tables are not only intent on dominating their females companions, but also any male who does not conform to their standards of behavior. Similarly, Paul socially and psychologically dominates Diane and proposes an intimate weekend at his cottage in exchange for his so-called legal expertise. When Steve steps in to call him on his manipulation, the man hits him in the face, a physical extension of the male domination at work in the scene. This is a tragic scene for Steve, since it spells the

end of his vocal expression through song and, as the audience finds out later on, also the end of his hopes of social integration.

34

That evening, like a few evenings earlier at home, Steve's singing voice was meant to be built in tune with women's voices: it is part of his father's bequeathal symbolized by the burnt CD, which contains the music he plays in the film and his titled in marker "DIE + STEVE MIX 4EVER," where DIE is short for Diane. However, when singing karaoke, one cannot count on the same kind of vocal identification found in lip synch and singing over a play-back. Without the help of his father's mixed tape to mediate this male-dominated culture and without sympathetic listeners at the bar, Steve loses sight of his vocal identifications.

35

Failed vocality, in this case, demonstrates how Steve does not have "voice," if one employs the term as a metaphor for social agency. Steve's failed vocal identification is not simply the linguistic symptom of his social misery or of his mental disorder, but also foregrounds blatant gender struggles in a heteronormative culture—struggles that are much more disturbing than the film's abundance of swearing and its poor diction. In this sense, one might say that Steve's vocal identifications are queer even though the film is unclear about Steve's sexual orientation.

Conclusion

36

Near the train station in Utrecht, an old chapel has been converted into a bistro where patrons stand at the bar if they do not want to eat. On Friday evenings, under the imposing pipe organ now silent, a mass of men commune in cacophony at the bar, while women, couples, and friends, sitting in the aisles and the balcony, crane their necks to hear each other speak. In the noise imposed upon this congregation by homosocialization, one could swear as much as one wanted to and no one would mind, not only because male noises would drown out the interjections, but because we no longer have the same moral codes as those of the world of yesterday. If silence characterizes sacred spaces, our movie houses are now more suitable to ethical reflection than are old religious buildings of which only appearances remain.

37

Mommy navigates the cacophony of our world in order to help us better understand the helpless, the outcast, and the abandoned, and without moralizing from the pulpit. The voices in *Mommy* are not impeded by the characters' limited means of musical expression (lip synch and karaoke). Dolan plays on all the vocal registers available to his characters in order that his message might be heard over the fray of a patriarchal society in perfect communion with its own interests. We must not, therefore, lament the poor diction, filthy language, and dirty mouths in *Mommy* under the pretexts that it might culturally impoverish the next generation of directors or that it is a branding scheme to profit from socialist hopes. Instead of balking at swearwords and slang, we should ask ourselves why certain spectators are disturbed by these voices. Indeed, Québécois swearwords are neither strange, nor unfamiliar, but have always been a space of recognition in popular culture. The voices in *Mommy* are queer, because they subvert and appropriate the traditional male space of Québécois swearing. The spectators

commenting on the film's linguistic quality are not really disturbed by the *hostie de tabarnak* and the joul; swearing is never a problem when it resounds from sports bars or locker rooms. These spectators are indisposed, rather, by what we might call a sonorous redistribution of the sensible, to refer here in passing to Jacques Rancière. They are uncannily disturbed by the return of Québécois swearing in the vociferations of poor, uneducated women and their queer sons. In turn, they are deaf to Steve's musicality and the tragic loss of his voice. In short, the queer voices in *Mommy* invest intimate spaces of Québécois culture in order to subvert them and therefore be better heard by the population at large. Why, then, should we want to wash out their supposedly filthy mouths?

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NOTES

1. For a guide in English to Québécois swearwords, see Bergeron 1983. I depart from his translations, since I pay attention to the syntax and rhythm instead of the intensity of frustration.
2. For a similar discussion, see Pusch 2014.
3. This has been a musical common place of literary criticism since Derrida and de Man, which the musicologist Carolyn Abbate effectively argues against in the introduction to *Unsung Voices*.
4. The soundtrack of the film has not been released. However, one can listen to most of the film's music (sans Schubert) on Spotify, the music streaming service, at the following link: <spotify:user:purecharts:playlist:1EOT68n22qaLzUslrtLB0e>. Accessed 2 Jun 2016.
5. There are some exceptions, which this section discusses. One should also consider queer musicology's earlier attempts to discuss voices. For example, see Joke Dame's contribution in *Queering the Pitch*, in which she discusses the best way to cast castrato roles—mezzos or countertenors—in new productions of baroque operas.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the vocal materialities of Xavier Dolan's film *Mommy* (2014). It focuses on the film's swearing, competing diegetic voices, disruptive soundtrack, as well as its scenes of lip synch, play-back, and karaoke, in order to convey queer vocal identifications. The article's interdisciplinary methodology includes audiovisual theories of the voice-object, post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, and revisions of the voice's place in queer theories via critiques of videocentrism.

INDEX

Keywords: lip synch, queer theory, swearing, vocality, Xavier Dolan

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