To the extent that sound has been treated as secondary, subordinate, and supplementary to the visual dimension of cinema, critical consideration of its nature and function has often been rendered in terms of gender. Viewed within the frame of the “ideology of the visible” (Doane 1985a: 55) that has dominated Western epistemology, sound stands opposed to vision in an implicitly gendered hierarchy that associates rational knowledge and the mastery afforded by the distance between viewer and object of vision with the sense of sight, and sound in its elusive yet enveloping presentness with “the emotional and the intuitive” (ibid.). In privileging the role of the visible over the audible and seeing over hearing, mainstream film theory and criticism have left these categories largely intact.

Indeed, the first serious academic studies of film sound published in the 1980s can be seen to reinforce the then dominant psychoanalytic paradigm in its understanding of cinema as a primarily visual medium structured by a controlling male gaze. Yet as the work of Laura Mulvey and other feminist theorists was read to exclude a role for women as anything but the projection of male desire, subsequent critics began to look to cinema sound in its different components, including music and voice, as a way to rescue a place for the female subject and feminine agency both within and beyond the film text. Pursuing such a notion, in La voix au cinéma French composer and sound theorist Michel Chion points to the promise of sound and rhythms as a potential “territory of freedom” for feminists, a fluid and musical domain rich in meanings and pleasures (1982: 8–10).

To provide a critical overview of the study of film sound and gender is to trace an arc from those initial and still influential approaches that consider the soundtrack as constrained by the same structural and cultural binaries and biases that regulate the gendered visual regime of cinema—and that largely concentrate their focus on the canon of classic Hollywood cinema—to other, recent studies informed by a plural and experiential model of spectatorship that also venture beyond the Anglo-European film canon. Increasingly attentive to cultural, sexual, and racial/ethnic differences, this work also incorporates a new set of conceptual and methodological models and reading strategies, including empirical and phenomenological approaches and queer studies. In seeking to present the key arguments that have shaped the debates over film sound and gender, I have organized the discussion that follows in two primary blocks, the first devoted to the analysis of film music and the
second to discussions of the voice that lead to a general consideration of the materiality of sound in the context of a body-centered, haptic cinema.

**Film music**

By many accounts, music figures as the most highly gendered and specifically “feminine” of the different components of cinema sound. Such an understanding harks back to long-standing Western suspicions of music that conflate its supposed abstract and non-referential nature and lack of fixed meanings with fears of (feminine) disorder, and emotional and sexual excess. Both Plato and Aristotle warned of music’s moral ambiguity, while classical Greek literature thematized the ambivalent power of music vested in the female voice, on the one hand celebrating its beauty and capacity to immortalize heroics deeds, and on the other, warning of its seductive charms and magical power to lure men to their destruction, as manifest in the songs of the Sirens and Circe in the *Odyssey* (Brett 1994: 11; Segal 1994:17–18). In English Renaissance writings, the linkage between women and music served to upbraid both for their “essentially changeable nature, unpredictable and sometimes irrational … behavior” (Dunn 1994: 57). Music’s sensuous sounds were said to give it the capacity to “penetrate the ear and so ‘ravish’ the mind” (ibid.).

Writing from the context of psychoanalysis, the work of Guy Rosolato offers another angle on the identification of sound and music with the feminine and the corporeal. Rosolato argues for the acoustic origin of the subject’s emergence into selfhood, beginning before birth with the sounds perceived in the “sonorous envelope,” of the mother’s womb. For Rosolato, the infant’s sustained contact with the soothing and “nutritive” voice of the mother provides “the first model of auditory pleasure” and the basis for all subsequent musical experience (1974: 81–2). This positioning of music as feminine has allowed feminist thinkers such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous to embrace the supposed irrationalism and emotionality of music as a source of subversive power. For Kristeva, music resides outside standard signifying practices and is intrinsic to her notion of “poetic language,” a polysemic mode of expression that, in its anarchic force, “borders on the psychotic” (Kristeva, cited in Flinn 1986: 61). Cixous too stresses the privileged role of music within the female imaginary, as the expression of a sexuality that exceeds the codes and classifications of rational thought (1980: 246).

Despite the liberatory potential of the alignment of music and sound with the feminine in proposing an alternative to the image-centered theories of cinema narration dominated by the structuring male gaze, critics such as Mary Ann Doane and Caryl Flinn call attention to the dangers of consigning music, and woman, to the pre-rational and prelinguistic, to a space beyond signification. Notes Flinn: “The notion of music … cast in terms of profoundly imaginary pleasures of disordered unsurifiability … suggests that woman and music function beyond patriarchal inscription” (1986: 62). While accustomed to inhabiting the margins of patriarchy, she warns, woman should be wary of embracing the “utopian” temptations of self-exclusion. To do so is “to risk losing her[self] and music to imaginary obscurity, meaninglessness and social ineffectivity” (ibid.). For her part Doane warns of the dangers of an “erotics” of music and the voice, viewed here as a form of essentialism: “to mark the voice as a haven within patriarchy, or having an essential relation to women, is to invoke the specter of feminine specificity, always recuperable as another form of ‘otherness’”(1985b: 174).

Nevertheless, such conceptions of music as antithetical or anterior to rational thought continue to shape the analysis of its role in film. In her pioneering 1987 book, *Unheard...*
Melodies, Claudia Gorbman writes that music supplies “a necessary emotional, irrational, romantic, or intuitive dimension” to the other, “objective” elements of film (1987: 79). For the spectator/listener of the classical Hollywood film score, awash in a sonorous “bath or gel of affect,” the primary goal of film music is clear: “to render the individual an untroublesome viewing subject: less critical, less ‘awake’” (ibid. 5).

Subsequent analyses of Hollywood scoring practices by scholars such as Kathryn Kalinak, Anahid Kassabian, and Heather Laing show that film music can signify, but only within the limited parameters of the classical film score, rooted in nineteenth-century European orchestral styles and conventions that draw upon a repertory of shared social and cultural codings. Laing identifies a pattern of meanings and associations grounded in broader social and cultural constructions of gender dating back to the sixteenth century, with music coded as masculine “according to qualities such as clarity, system, understandability, strength, vigor, power, reason and manliness” while femininity was thought to be best expressed in “musical simplicity, tunefulness and modesty of scale,” characteristics also prescribed for female musicians and listeners (2007: 13–14). Kalinak finds confirmation of the persistence of such musical typologies in the portrayal of the “good girl” in Max Steiner’s score for John Ford’s 1935 film The Informer. Emblematic in its characterization of feminine virtue, her theme is conveyed by violins and harp and marked by “simple triadic harmonies” (1992: 122). In contrast, when it comes to representations of women deemed disreputable, Hollywood scoring practices leave little doubt about the dangers of overt female sexuality, deploying the vernacular idioms of jazz, blues, or ragtime to signal their deviation from the norms of proper feminine behavior. Against the lush strings, tonal harmonies, and regular tempos of the standard symphonic repertory, the themes attached to the film’s “fatal woman” feature saxophones and muted horns, chromaticism, dissonance, and syncopated rhythms (ibid. 120). Playing upon their association with urban black culture and its supposed uninhibited sexuality, notes Kalinak, “the classical score used jazz [and related forms] as a musical trope for otherness, whether sexual or racial” (ibid. 167).

Rather than providing a source of feminine self-expression, argues Laing, the consequences of this gendered musical inheritance result in a frustratingly restrictive position for women (2007: 10). The common practice of assigning leitmotifs or themes to characters can also be seen to bear this out, in the differential treatment of female and male protagonists. James Buhler argues that the frequent “doubling” of the love theme with the theme for the female lead suggests that she has no existence beyond her relationship with her male partner. This lack of symmetry, in which the heroine is denied an independent musical signature while the theme “for the hero establish[es] a musical identity for him that cannot be reduced in the same way,” reinforces a male dominated point of view (2014: 367). Nevertheless, the persistent association of music with emotion and the irrational troubles its identification with male characters. Laing argues that since women are not expected to control their emotions, their close relation to music is taken for granted as a reflection of that fact. Normative masculine behavior, on the contrary, requires men to demonstrate their command over emotional expression so their distance from music represents a sign of that control. Thus Laing compares the profound implication with music experienced in Letter from an Unknown Woman (Max Ophüls, 1948) by the title character, Lisa, for whom it provides a source of intense emotion and pleasure, with the more distanced, professional relation to music evinced by the pianist and male protagonist Stefan (2007: 176–7). The playing that first attracts Lisa and comes to represent for her a kind of audio-fetish that stands in for his unattainable love also carries a counter meaning as evidence of his wasting
of his artistic gifts and the love she would offer him, in favor of a series of sexual dalliances and the immediate but transitory gratification of fame.

Other studies, in several cases by these same critics, chafe against an overly monolithic view of the role of film music, identifying significant exceptions to these scoring patterns, even within the corpus of classical Hollywood films. Flinn proposes readings of the melodramas Back Street (John M. Stahl, 1932) and Now, Voyager (Irving Rapper, 1942) in which music “work[s] to make the female subject’s special relationship to music active, pleasurable and meaningful” (1986: 69). In her analysis of David Raskin’s score for Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944) Kalinak examines the ways the “positive” musical characterizations of the title character challenge the dominant conventions for representing female sexuality and highlight the tensions between the visual depiction (and opinions of the director and screenwriter) of Laura as a fallen woman and a more nuanced conception rooted in the novel by Vera Caspary on which the film is based (1992: 159–67).

More recent approaches seek to broaden the focus to account for significant changes in the nature and function of music in contemporary cinema within and beyond Hollywood. In Hearing Film Kassabian stresses the need to look beyond conventions based in nineteenth-century Romanticism, arguing that music “outside the classical Hollywood semiotic code” offers a wider range of possibilities for female characters (2001: 71). In contrast to the “unheard melodies” (Gorbman 1987) of the traditional composed score that tries “to maintain fairly rigid control over perceivers [the designation she prefers to the vision-centered term spectator]” (Kassabian 2001:2), she focuses on the increasing use of compiled scores, selections of pre-existing music and especially popular songs that invite audiences to bring to the film experience their individual associations and histories. The compiled score is thus held to favor not the passive assimilation of Gorbman’s “untroublesome” spectator but an “affiliating identification” that “depend[s] on histories forged outside the film scene … and [that] allow for a fair bit of mobility within it” (Kassabian 2001:3). Kassabian finds an example of this opening to alternative identifications and subject positions in the music for the lesbian romance Desert Hearts (Donna Deitch, 1985) whose compiled score consists of some nineteen popular songs that stem from a range of idioms, although primarily country and western, and rock. In moving away from the “tight meaning system of classical Hollywood scoring practices” film listeners can draw on a range of associations that include the connotations of the music’s respective genres but also more individual meanings produced by their relationship to specific songs. Kassabian argues that these musical choices are key to the film “escaping the trap of trying to represent lesbian sexualities in terms of Hollywood heterosexual feminine sexuality” (ibid. 73). By triggering spectator memories and emotions and bringing them into conscious awareness, she writes, the songs “both particularize [the two women’s] relationship and provide particularizable paths of entry for identification” (ibid. 73).

In her 2007 article, “Auteur Music,” Gorbman also attests to the scope of recent changes in film scoring practices, pointing to the shifts in industry economics (including the commercial potency of the soundtrack album, see Smith 1998), the influx of new musical idioms, the development of new digital recording and video editing technologies, and a “vastly more flexible range of ideas concerning the nature, placement and effects of music in movies.” One major result, she announces, is that “[m]elodies are no longer unheard” (2007: 151). Her list of auteur melomanes—i.e. directors for whom music functions as an “integral aspect” of directorial style—is long and varied and includes Agnès Varda, Quentin Tarantino, Jean-Luc Godard, Spike Lee, Sally Potter, Wim Wenders, Aki Kaurismäki, and Tsai Ming-Liang (ibid. 150–1). Gorbman highlights Tsai’s The Hole (1998), a film that
features a series of highly choreographed lip-sync performances by the female protagonist of pop songs by 1950s and '60s Taiwanese singer and actress Grace Chang that erupt in the otherwise drab and depressing setting of the film. This repurposing of earlier musical sources evokes, with significant differences, the work of another noted cinematic mélomane, Pedro Almodóvar. Over the course of his career the Spanish director has demonstrated his ability to mobilize the existing cultural associations of the Latin American bolero with its melodramatic declarations of romantic suffering rooted in exaggerated gender binaries in the service of individual expressions of transgressive desire. Inclusive rather than exclusive in their address, Almodóvar's musical choices give voice, for example, to the desperation of the gay lovers who converge for a last night of passion to the strains of Los Pancho's “Lo dudo” in Law of Desire (1987) while actively attending to the emotional needs of fellow characters and the film audience alike. In a strategy similar to the inclusion of songs by lesbian and gay icon Patsy Cline in Desert Hearts (Kassabian 2001: 73), Almodóvar has also recruited a roster of performers—Chavela Vargas, k.d. lang, Caetano Veloso, and Concha Buika—whose own mobile sexual (and national/racial) identities open pathways to multiple forms of engagement for spectator/listeners (Vernon 2005, 2013).

The voice in cinema

In cinema histories that treat the transition from silent film to sound, what is really at issue, as Rick Altman reminds us, is the ability to synchronize the sound of the human voice with the image of the actor viewed on screen (1980: 67–8). The work of Altman and Doane along with that of Michel Chion in France has been essential in setting out the terms of research and debate on the role of the voice in cinema. While Doane speaks of the "subordination" of the voice to the screen that "makes vision and hearing work together in manufacturing the hallucination of a fully sensory world" (1985b: 171), Altman reverses the equation, arguing for the priority of vocal sound over image. In its insistence on assigning the voice to a body—to the moving lips of a speaker—cinema engages in an act of ventriloquism: "pointing the camera at the speaker disguises the source of the words, dissembling the work of production and technology," and hiding the fact that it is words and language that stand at the origin of the world portrayed on screen (1980: 69). Although perhaps not the primary focus in these early writings, gender soon came to play a significant role in the attempts to unravel the relations not only between sound and image but also among voice, language, body, and technology.

In Echo and Narcissus, Amy Lawrence's study of women's voices in classical Hollywood cinema, she proposes a framework that is helpful in our analysis of significant work on the topic. In it she distinguishes three distinct but overlapping aspects of the female voice: the first relating to the reproduction of the voice by means of cinema/sound technology; the second regarding the woman's relationship to language and verbal discourse; and the third having to do with her access to self-expression and discursive authority (1991: 3). Lawrence's own study begins with an investigation of the pre-cinematic history of sound recording, the origins of an "ideology of the voice" that she argues has also shaped the treatment of the female voice in film (ibid. 9). She identifies a recurring concern in documents that chart the commercial development of sound technology in phonography, radio, and sound film with the "problem' of recording, transmitting, or reproducing women's voices" (ibid. 29). Far from a "neutral" technology, she argues, sound recording was from the beginning grounded in the ability to record and reproduce the male voice, with
women’s voices viewed (or heard) as deficient, “naturally” less powerful, high pitched, and less pleasing to the ear (ibid. 29). Lawrence contrasts the negative responses to recordings of women’s speaking voice with the generalized acceptance of the female singing voice. A speaking woman, in contrast to a woman singing, asserts her claim to a position of authority and is perceived as a threat to established gender norms and hierarchies (ibid. 18). Hence the subtext of the classic 1940s Hollywood films analyzed by Lawrence in their emphasis on women’s voices as the primary “source of textual anxiety” (ibid. 5, emphasis in the original). In films such as Blackmail (Alfred Hitchcock, 1929), Notorious (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946) and Sorry, Wrong Number (Anatole Litvak, 1948), she argues, the material products and practices of sound and recording technology, “[t]elephones, phonographs, voice-overs and dubbing,” are brought to the foreground as the means to “silence women and restore the primacy of patriarchy and the image” (ibid. 6).

If Lawrence focuses on the uses of sound technology in the attempt to deny female characters a voice, Kaja Silverman, in The Acoustic Mirror, takes the absence and impossibility of the female voice, in the sense of an independent or authorized point of view, as her point of departure. In classic Hollywood cinema, she writes,

[w]omen’s words are shown to be even less her own than are her “looks.” They are scripted for her, extracted from her by an external agency, or uttered by her in a trancelike state. Her voice also reveals a remarkable facility for self-disparagement and self-incrimination. … Even when she speaks without coercion, she is always spoken from the place of the sexual other.

(1988: 31)

Silverman effectively assumes the subordinate role of sound, as manifest in the female voice, portrayed here not only in the service of the filmic illusion but as “a fetish within dominant cinema, filling in for and covering over what is unspeakable within male subjectivity” (ibid. 38). With an approach positioned squarely within the psychoanalytic paradigm (the subtitle underlines the predominance of the focus on “The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema”), the book depicts the role of sound and voice as constrained to that of acting as an echo, or “acoustic mirror” of the structuring male gaze. Rather than offering an alternative to the vision-centered account of cinema production and reception, Silverman’s study doubles down on the terms of the sound/image, proximity/distance, object/subject, passive/active, female/male binaries that define the model. Hence the male voice is said to aspire to the attributes of “invisibility and anonymity” that characterize the cinema apparatus while the female voice is identified with an objectified “spectacle and the body” (ibid. 39). Synchronized sound, the matching of voice with body in the Hollywood soundtrack, works to engender “a complex system of displacements which locate the male voice at the point of apparent textual origin, while establishing the diegetic containment of the female voice” (ibid. 45). The ultimate demonstration of this opposition of subject and object, power and powerlessness is found in the emphasis on the use of voice-over or voice-off, as a prerogative identified almost exclusively with the male:

voice-over is privileged to the degree that it transcends the body. Conversely it loses power and authority with every corporeal encroachment. … Pascal Bonitzer describes the embodiment of the voice in terms of aging and death, remarking that as soon as its source is revealed, it becomes “decrepit” and “mortal.”

(ibid. 49, emphasis in the original)
In her 2006 study, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film*, Brita Sjogren highlights the persistent visual bias in work such as Silverman’s, finding that the latter goes farther than even Mulvey in her insistence on aligning subjectivity with a male-centered vision posited as “bodiless,” “imaginary/visual,” and “distanced” (2006: 27), a scenario she deems “unlikely to account for the experience of feminine subjectivity, or for the effect or the experience of the acoustic register of film” (ibid. 13). One approach shared by Sjogren and Lawrence that would better capture the experience of film sound, and the voice in particular, as sensory phenomena, targets the nature of vocal performance, both spoken and heard. Countering Silverman, Sjogren’s reading of the female voice-over (she prefers the term voice-off) examines the final scenes of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, in which Lisa’s voice “speaks” the words of the letter read by Stefan. At that point in the film, for him, “Lisa’s voice is unknown and anonymous, just as the title prepares us to find her. Magnified, lyrical and invisible…. [t]he quality of her voice here is at least as remarkable as the words” (ibid. 66). Indeed, despite their different conclusions, Silverman, Lawrence, and Sjogren each acknowledge the inescapable duality of the voice, as the intersection between body and language, “meaning and materiality” (Silverman 1988: 44). Despite its passage through the process of mechanical reproduction, the recorded voice retains its corporeal traces (Lawrence 1991: 22–3)—what Roland Barthes has famously called “the grain of the voice”—a discernible texture that carries “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (Barthes 1977: 182). Where Silverman describes the particularizing traces of individual performance—in the guise of accent, speech impediment, timbre or ‘grain’”—as a “submersion” of the voice in the body, distant from the production of meaning (1988: 61), Lawrence reads these same distinctive markers as a source of authorial power in the case of the adult narrator Scout, voiced by Kim Stanley, in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962). Insisting that “it is the voice in sound that makes dialogue matter” (1991: 98, emphasis in the original), she affirms that Stanley’s “specifically regional, feminine, embodied, voice on the sound track fills the emptiness of the words-as-language with a definite sensual pleasure…. [A]ccent, enunciation, and vocal timbre … call attention to the space outside of language and return us to the body—here, undeniably a woman’s body,” (ibid. 184, emphasis in the original) thus enriching and asserting the authority of the woman’s voice in the film.

This attention to what we might call the phenomenology of the voice in cinema has gained currency in the work of Martin Shingler and others who would move beyond psychoanalytic approaches, citing the calls by Altman, toward more historically grounded studies of film sound based on “close analyses of particular films rather than on ontological speculations that presume to cover all possible practices” (Altman 1992: 39). Shingler’s 2006 article opens with an analysis of Bette Davis’s distinctive vocal style in *All About Eve* (Joseph A. Mankiewicz, 1950) that details timbre (“firm and steady, deep throaty resonance, husky [not croaky]”), accent and inflection (“slight drawl, snide”) and rhythm and intonation (“clipped pronunciation, staccato rhythm, punchy and percussive”), deeming it “totally unrealistic, totally theatrical, yet convincing.” Davis’s performance, he concludes, “might not be naturalism but it is credible, pleasurable and most certainly dramatic…. and represents simultaneously one of the highpoints of the movie, of Bette Davis’s film career and of classical Hollywood cinema” (2006:1).

Many critics (and audiences) have noted the importance of distinctive voices in the creation of bankable “picture personalities” and the establishment of star systems in Hollywood and elsewhere (deCordova 1990). It is telling that many of the most recognizable star voices notably depart from gendered vocal stereotypes. David Bromwich has
called attention to the “signature touch” of Jimmy Stewart, in his use of a soft, higher pitched voice and stammer, often deployed in intimate scenes with women (cited in Shingler 2006: 2). Both Silverman and Lawrence point to the low and husky voices of female stars of the 1930s and 1940s like Mae West, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Lauren Bacall, although they draw opposite conclusions about their effects. While Silverman considers the vocal “excess” entailed by the alignment of a male sounding voice with a female body, as conferring “a privileged status vis-à-vis both language and sexuality” (1988: 61), Lawrence deems such voices “particularly apt for fetishizing and thus controlling” (1991: 88). Writing on the role of the voice in screwball comedy, Sarah Kozloff signals the importance of voices that elude gender conventions, noting that the most successful female stars of the genre such as Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Carol Lombard, or Claudette Colbert exercise virtuosic control over voices that are “not conventionally pretty—that is, soft and melodious—they have edginess, perhaps raspiness” (2000: 194). For her part Erica Carter reminds us that the implication of voices and bodies in the cinema is not confined to the actors. Describing the effects of the rich contralto voices of stars like Dietrich and Sarah Leander on spectator/hearers, she evokes their androgynous quality, “transcendent and liquid,” that “travel through the auditorium of a movie theater and resonate through the bodies of the audience” (cited in Shingler 2012: 80).

Such an understanding of the nature of sound, also articulated by Sjogren, as a “closer cousin to the ‘senses of contact’ than sight, as it penetrates the ear, activates the eardrum, inhabits the body” (2006: 31), brings us to an alternative model of the film experience proposed in theories of haptic cinema (Marks 2000) and embodied spectatorship (Sobchack 2004). (For more on phenomenological and haptic approaches to cinema see Chamarette, this volume.) In this conception, a film is received not simply by an eye (and ear), “not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole” (Marks 2000: 145). Consistent with a larger critique of an ocularcentric ideology of the visible, the focus on sound and the body challenges the “myth” of the transcendent and distant spectator “centered” by the voyeuristic gaze. In its place stands a notion of cinema perception occurring across “multiple spatialities” within a continuum in which “the opposition between object and subject, inside and outside, here and there coincide in vigorous simultaneity” (Sjogren 2006: 34). Although Laura Marks acknowledges the lack of detailed attention to the soundtrack in her study of “intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses,” The Skin of Film, she points to the haptic dimension of sound, noting the important role of “[m]usic, talk, ambient sound and silence” in such films, and for “the feeling of embodied experience they produce” (2000: xiv–xv). Marks reclaims the alignment of the body and the senses with women and feminism, not as some intrinsically feminine quality, but as a “strategy that can be used to describe alternative visual [and, I would suggest, acoustic] traditions” (ibid. 170). As a mode of creative practice and reception, embodied cinema proposes new forms of knowledge, shrinking the distance between perceiver and the object perceived; it “tends less to isolate and focus upon objects than simply to be co-present with them,” as such corresponding to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s notion of “speaking not about, but nearby” (ibid. 164) the objects and issues addressed in her films. The result is a significant reorientation in the role and position of the spectator whose attention and engagement, rather than being organized around identification with one or more specific figures, is “labile, able to move between identification and immersion” (ibid. 188).

Emerging from a cinematic context at some remove from both Marks’s intercultural documentaries and the classic Hollywood cinema studied by Sjogren, the films of Argentine director Lucrecia Martel propose a sustained meditation on the immersive nature of film.
sound. In conjunction with a distinctive visual style marked by decentered and fragmented close-ups and a refusal to provide spectators a clear sense of spatial or temporal orientation, sound in Martel’s films works to unsettle and subvert traditional perceptual and cinematic hierarchies. Set in the northwestern Argentine city of Salta, her three feature films, La ciénaga/The Swamp (2001), La niña santa/The Holy Girl (2004), and La mujer sin cabeza/The Headless Woman (2008), present as their setting and subject the claustrophobic domestic spaces of the provincial middle class dominated by women and children. In La ciénaga, the densely-layered soundtrack of rumbling thunder, buzzing insects, creaking bed springs, ringing telephones, and the drone of TV echoes the oppressive summer heat at the same time that it masks the lack of genuine communication among the family members who gather at a run-down country house. In a video-essay included with the Criterion collection DVD edition of the film, Martel proposes a lecture-demonstration on the properties of film sound. Presenting “La pileta invertida” (The Sideways Pool), the director displays a transparent tank of water tipped on its side, its rectangular shape and volume an analogue of the movie theater, the movement of the waves a visual representation of the effects of sound on the perceiver of cinema. Addressing the viewers she explains: “You see? Sound cinema has always been three dimensional” while the flat rectangle we see on screen “is an illusion … an optical illusion … called perspective.” Sound is another matter, in that “[t]he space occupied by sound is real and material, the sound waves touch the spectator.” While acknowledging the artifice involved in the creation of her cinematic universe, Martel stresses the continuities between the experience of film and our existence in the world, in the mutual implication of bodies and subjectivities submerged in a shared “ocean of air.”

Martel is certainly not alone in her exploration of the heightened expressivity of the acoustic realm in recent cinema, made possible by the introduction of multitrack Dolby technology and its ability to (re)produce sounds with “their own materiality and density, presence and sensuality” (Chion 1994: 149). This attention to the expanded signifying capacity of the soundtrack coincides with the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of sound studies that has brought together scholars from the social sciences, humanities, and experimental sciences along with architects, artists, and composers. Investigating the ways soundscapes condition and express diverse experiences and identities within and across historical periods and cultures, these discussions provide a stimulating framework for ongoing studies of sound and gender.

Related topics
Patrice Petro, “Classical feminist film theory: then and (mostly) now”
Jenny Chamarette, “Embodying spectatorship: from phenomenology to sensation”

References