THE FANTASY OF THE MATERNAL VOICE: PARANOIA AND COMPENSATION

It has become something of a theoretical commonplace to characterize the maternal voice as a blanket of sound, extending on all sides of the newborn infant. For Guy Rosolato and Mary Ann Doane, the maternal voice is a “sonorous envelope” which “surrounds, sustains, and cherishes the child.” Julia Kristeva conceives of it as a “mobile receptacle” which absorbs the infant’s “anaclitic facilitations.” Didier Anzieu refers to it as a “bath of sounds,” while for Claude Bailblié it is, quite simply, “music.” Michel Chion also subscribes to this general definition of the maternal voice, although he gives it a much more sinister inflection, within his account, that voice not only envelops but entraps the newborn infant.

In this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate that the trope of the maternal voice as sonorous envelope grows out of a powerful cultural fantasy, a fantasy which recent psychoanalytic theory shares with classic cinema. The fantasy in question turns upon the image of infantile containment—upon the image of a child held within the environment or sphere of the mother’s voice. I have described this image as neutrally as possible, but in fact its “appearances” are always charged with either intensely positive or intensely negative affect: Rosolato, for instance, regards the “pleasurable milieu” of the maternal voice as “the first model of auditory pleasure,” whereas Chion associates it with the terror of an “umbilical night.” These contradictory views of the same image point to the profoundly ambivalent nature of the fantasy which is its present concern, an ambivalence which attests to the divided nature of subjectivity, and which underscores the fact that pleasure for one psychic system almost invariably means unpleasure for another psychic system. The fantasy of the maternal voice-as-sonorous-envelope takes on a different meaning depending upon the psychic “lookout point”: viewed from the site of the unconscious, the image of the infant held within the environment or sphere of the mother’s voice is an emblem of infantile plenitude and bliss. Viewed from the site of the preconscious/conscious system, it is an emblem of impotence and entrapment.

By identifying the sonorous envelope trope as a fantasy, I mean to emphasize that trope’s retroactivity rather than its fictiveness—to indicate its status as an after-the-fact construction or reading of a situation which is fundamentally irrecoverable, rather than to posit it as a simple illusion. In other words, I intend to stress the ways in which the fantasy functions as a bridge between two radically disjunctive moments—an infantile moment, which occurs prior to the inception of subjectivity, and which is consequently “too early” with respect to meaning and desire, and a subsequent moment, firmly rooted within both meaning and desire, but consequently “too late” for fulfillment. The first of those moments, which can be imagined but never actually experienced, turns upon the imaginary fusion of mother and infant, and hence upon unity and plenitude. The second moment marks the point at which the subject projects a preexisting structure, a structure which gives order, shape, and significance to the original ineffable experience. That preexisting structure is what Laplanche would call a “parental fantasy,” or what Deleuze and Guattari would describe as a “group fantasy”; it not only anticipates but exceeds the individual subject.

I will begin this chapter with the negative or dystopic version of the maternal voice fantasy, which I will extract in part from Chion’s La voix au cinéma, and in part from dominant cinema, and which I will read as a symptom of male paranoia and castration. I will then turn to what might be called the “operatic” version of the maternal voice fantasy, both as it has been theoretically articulated by Rosolato in “La voix: entre corps et langage,” and as it has been cinematically formulated in texts such as Citizen Kane, Diva, and (most complexly) The Conversation. Chapter 4 will address a third version of the maternal voice fantasy, and one with profound feminist resonances—that collectively “dreamt” by Kristeva, Robert Altman, Laura Mulvey, and Peter Wollen.
Fantasies of origins: the primal scene pictures the origin of the individual; fantasies of seduction, the origin and upsurge of sexuality; fantasies of castration, the origin of the difference between the sexes.

No matter how it is conceptualized, the image of the infant contained within the sonorous envelope of the mother’s voice is a fantasy of origins—a fantasy about preculinary sexuality, about the entry into language, and about the inauguration of subjectivity. That preoccupation is particularly marked in Chion’s *La voix au cinéma*, which associates the maternal voice not only with early infantile existence, but with a moment prior to the creation of the world, and the inception of Christian history. I would like to look rather closely at the passage which most fully encapsulates this “nightmare” of the maternal voice, in an attempt to determine the latent content of what is ultimately a group or cultural fantasy, a fantasy which extends beyond *La voix au cinéma* to dominant narrative film:

In the beginning, in the uterine night, was the voice, that of the Mother. For the child after birth, the Mother is more an olfactory and vocal continuum than an image. One can imagine the voice of the Mother, which is woven around the child, and which originates from all points in space as her form enters and leaves the visual field, as a matrix of places to which we are tempted to give the name “umbilical net.” A horrifying expression, since it evokes a cobweb—and in fact, this original vocal tie will remain ambivalent.

What first commands the reader’s attention about this passage is its vision of complete engulfment, and the panic which that vision generates. However, it is no easy matter to locate the point from which the panic issues, or the subjectivity under siege. The cast of possible characters is a familiar one, consisting of the father, evoked through the deliberate misquotation of the famous opening to the fourth Gospel (“In the beginning was the Word”), but otherwise conspicuously absent; the mother, whose voice is associated with the “uterine night” of a prenatal reality; and the infant, trapped within the vocal continuum of the maternal voice. It is ostensibly this last site from which the family romance is described, and from which the sense of crisis issues. However, the phrases “one can imagine” and “we are tempted to give” show the speaking position to be elsewhere altogether, and point to one of those “deferred” readings so central to the organization of gender.

These qualifiers suggest, in other words, that the familial drama outlined by Chion finds its only performance within an altogether different psychic scene from that inhabited by the child—that it is a construction superimposed upon infancy from a subsequent temporal and spatial vantage. The relation of the newborn child to the maternal voice poses a threat to the one who occupies this subsequent temporal and spatial vantage; in short, to a fully constituted subject. But fresh questions arise: Who is this subject, and why should the relation of the infant to the maternal voice represent such a stress point?

Through the intentional misattribution from John I, Chion opposes the maternal voice to the paternal word, and so identifies the mother with sound and the father with meaning. He also situates the maternal voice in an anterior position to the paternal word, conferring upon it an original (if not originating) status. However, since the maternal voice is associated with the darkness and formlessness of the infant’s earliest experiences, rather than with the form-giving illumination of the *logos*, this anteriority implies primitiveness rather than privilege. Indeed, since “in the beginning” is a reference to Genesis as well as to John, the passage under discussion seems to suggest that the maternal voice could be justly compared to the chaos upon which the divine word imposed its order and illumination at the moment of creation.

The opposition of the maternal voice to the paternal word attests to a quite remarkable sleight of hand, although one which has been so frequently effected within recent theory as to have become almost transparent. It attests, that is, to the displacement onto the mother of qualities which more properly characterize the newborn child. The conceptualization of the maternal voice as a “uterine night” of nonmeaning effects a similar displacement: once again the infant’s perceptual and semiotic underdevelopment are transferred onto the mother.

An astonishing amount of negative affect accumulates around the maternal voice in the passage quoted above, concentrating primarily around three images of enclosure: the images of a woven enclosure, an umbilical net, and a cobweb. It is through these analogical terms, I would suggest, that we can best grasp both the identity of the fully constituted subject for whom the maternal voice poses a potential crisis, and the motive behind the displacement of the infant’s verbal and auditory impotence onto the mother. All three tropes figure enclosure as entrapment and/or danger, and so represent interiority as an undesirable condition. In each case, that interiority is synonymous with the infantile condition. Trapped within the suffocating confinement of the mother’s voice, the newborn child resembles a prisoner or prey.

Within the theoretical narrative formulated by Chion, interiority is also identified with discursive impotence, and exteriority (at least by implication) with discursive potency. The child hears, but is not yet able to understand, and emits sounds, but is not yet able to make them meaningful. It is wrapped “inside” the sonorous envelope of the moth-
suggest that this system of vocal conventions, like the theoretical formulation advanced by Chion, functions to reverse an imagined primordial situation in which the male child was wrapped in the sonorous blanket of the mother's voice, and was as yet unable either to distinguish or to produce meaningful sounds. In both the cinematic and theoretical paradigms, the discursive potency of the male voice is established by stripping the female voice of all claim to verbal authority. And in both instances that divestiture most pointedly negates the mother's earlier role as language teacher, commentator, and narrator. (I refer to the primordial situation as an "imagined" one because the drama of interiority and exteriority upon which it turns is obviously a deferred reading of the infantile scenario from a position fully within the symbolic—a position already structured by lack. The displacement I have just described transfers that lack onto its culturally sanctioned site, the female subject.)

The moment at which it becomes most evident that both the cinematic and theoretical formulations hinge upon the substitution of the mother for the child within the fantasmatic tableau is also the point at which their symmetry is most marked. The moment in question occurs during an astonishing passage from La voix au cinéma, a passage where Chion describes cinema as "a machine made in order to deliver a cry from the female voice":

The point of the cry in a cinematographic fiction...is defined...as something which gushes forth, generally from the mouth of a woman, something which is not, moreover, inevitably heard, but which above all must fall at a named point, explode at a precise moment, at the crossroads of convergent lines, at the conclusion of an often alembic and disproportionate path—but calculated to give to this point its maximum impact: the film functions, then, like those big animating machines, full of gears and connecting rods, of chains of actions and reactions, here a machine made in order to deliver a cry...The point of the cry is an unthinkable point at the interior of thought, an inexpressible [point] at the interior of the enunciation, an unrepresentable point at the interior of representation...This cry incarnates a fantasm of absolute sonorousness..."13

Again the high drama, the metaphoric excess, the sense of extravagant investment in the female voice. But now, at last, the agenda is out in the open: What is demanded from woman—what the cinematic apparatus and a formidable branch of the theoretical apparatus will extract from her by whatever means are required—is involuntary sound, sound that escapes her own understanding, testifying only to the artistry of a superior force. The female voice must be sequestered (if necessary through a mise-en-abîme of framing devices) within the heart of the diapason, so far from the site of enunciation as to be beyond articulation.
or meaning. It must occupy an “unthinkable point at the interior of thought,” an “inexpressible [point] at the interior of the enunciation,” an “unrepresentable [point] at the interior of representation.” There is, of course, only one group of sounds capable of conforming precisely to these requirements—those emitted by a newborn baby. This, then, is the vocal position which the female subject is called upon to occupy whenever (in film or in theory) she is identified with noise, babble, or the cry.

The last of these sounds is regularly wrung from the female voice in films of the recent horror, stalker, and slasher varieties, but the textual example I would like to cite at this juncture falls slightly to one side of those generic (or subgeneric) categories. The film, Anatole Litvak’s *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), dramatizes one evening in the life of a woman who has been confined to her bed with a “cardiac neurosis”—an evening which ends with her murder. That woman, Leona (Barbara Stanwyck), gains access to the outside world only through her bedside telephone, which she employs constantly until her death. The remainder of the film consists of flashbacks which are activated in one way or another by the telephone calls. These flashbacks offer a very different view of Leona from that provided by the diegetic present; they show her proposing to a man who does not love her, coercing him into marriage, engineering their honeymoon, rifling through the contents of his wallets, and destroying the photograph of another woman she finds there, forcing him to move with her into his father’s house, and—finally—insisting that he adopt a purely titular position in her father’s business. The male character in question, Henry (Burt Lancaster), compares himself at one point to a “pet dog.”

Leona’s usurpation of functions which the film insists are a male prerogative is most dramatically rendered by an accelerated montage of her wedding and honeymoon, the parts of which are held together by her voice-over repetition of the words: “I, Leona, take thee Henry.… Although this voice-over is not disembodied, it exerts enunciative authority over the images, not only organizing them, but in a sense “causing” them. Since marriage vows belong to the category of what L. L. Austin calls “performative” utterances—utterances which effect the performance that they state—Leona could be said actually to assume possession of Henry with the words “I… thee take,” and so to generate the subsequent honeymoon celebration. Despite its brevity, this montage sequence enacts a major transgression in the vocal/auditory system of classic cinema, returning to the mother the symbolic mastery she exercises within the infantile situation.

This transgression does not go unpunished. Confined to her bed and made dependent for all her physical and psychic needs upon the disembodied voices which speak to her through the telephone, Leona is reduced through helplessness and anxiety to a condition of verbal and aural incompetence. At the beginning of the film, a faulty connection permits her to overhear a telephone conversation about her own murder, but she is unable to grasp that she herself is the intended victim. Leona responds to this overheard conversation with a series of hysterical calls to the operator, her husband’s secretary, and the police, not one of which exerts the slightest influence over impending events. A number of subsequent incoming calls emphasize her inability to get even a simple message straight.

Leona is thus placed in an analogous position to the fantasmatistic infant. Sunk in “motor incapacity” and “nursling dependence,” she inhabits an envelope of sounds which remain largely indecipherable to her, unable to exercise linguistic control over her environment. Indeed, the telephone system which determines all of her interpersonal exchanges in the diegetic present is described by titles at the opening of the film in terms which are strikingly suggestive of an “umbilical net”:

In the tangled network of a great city the telephone is the unseen link between a million lives… It is the servant of our common needs, the confidant of our inmost secrets… life and happiness wait upon its ring… and horror… and loneliness… and death.

Ultimately, Leona is asked to establish an even more intimate identification with the vocal status of a newborn child. Overcome with remorse at the last minute, her husband telephones her about her imminent murder, and urges her to run to the window and scream. Her hysterical “refusal” to do so leaves her completely vulnerable to the stranger, who a moment later extracts the requisite cry from Leona by wrapping the telephone cord around her neck.

Reversals of the sort I have been examining here would seem to be facilitated by the double organization of the vocal/auditory system, which permits a speaker to function at the same time as listener, his or her voice returning as sound in the process of utterance. The simultaneity of these two actions makes it difficult to situate the voice, to know whether it is “outside” or “inside.” The boundary separating exteriority from interiority is blurred by this aural undecidability—by the replication within the former arena of something which seems to have its inception within the latter. Rosolato refers to this replication as an
"acoustic mirror," and he hints at its potentially destabilizing consequences for subjectivity:

The voice [has the property] of being at the same time emitted and heard, sent and received, and by the subject himself, as if, in comparison with the look, an "acoustic" mirror were always in effect. Thus the images of entry and departure relative to the body are narrowly articulated. They can come to be confounded, inverted, to prevail one over the other.17

What Rosolato suggests is that since the voice is capable of being internalized at the same time as it is externalized, it can spill over from subject to object and object to subject, violating the bodily limits upon which classic subjectivity depends, and so smoothing the way for projection and introjection. Paranoia—the attribution of material density to hallucinated sounds—is only one possible permutation of this slippage.

The notion of an "acoustic mirror" can be applied with remarkable precision to the function which the female voice is called upon to perform for the male subject. Within the traditional familial paradigm, the maternal voice introduces the child to its mirror reflection. "Lubricating," as it were, the "fit." The child also learns to speak by imitating the sounds made by the mother, fashioning its voice after hers. However, even before the mirror stage and the entry into language, the maternal voice plays a major role in the infant's perceptual development. It is generally the first object not only to be isolated, but to be introjected:

The child, blind at birth, [is] capable of distinguishing the voice of the mother in a selective manner from the age of [only] ten weeks. . . . [whereas] it is [only] at 5—6 weeks that the look becomes the sense director for the exterior delimitation of the object that is always introjected in the first six weeks, according to non-visual schemes, . . . . One must then recognize the importance of auditory introjections and precocious vocalizations, because it is only in a second time that the organization of visual space assures the perception of the object as exterior.18

The situation just described is one where the object has as yet no externality, since it is no sooner identified than it is assimilated by the child. Nor, since the subject lacks boundaries, does it as yet have anything approximating an interiority. However, the foundations for what will later function as identity are marked out by these primitive encounters with the outer world, encounters which occur along the axis of the mother's voice. Since the child's economy is organized around incorporation, and since what is incorporated is the auditory field articulated by the maternal voice, the child could be said to hear itself initially through that voice—to first "recognize" itself in the vocal "mirror" supplied by the mother.

I would argue that the male subject later hears the maternal voice through himself—that it comes to resonate for him with all that he transcends through language. In other words, through a symmetrical gesture to that whereby the child "finds" its "own" voice by introjecting the mother's voice, the male subject subsequently "refines" his "own" voice by projecting onto the mother's voice all that is unassimilable to the paternal position. As I have attempted to demonstrate in the first chapter of this book, the boundaries of male subjectivity must be constantly redrawn through the externalizing displacement onto the female subject of what Kristeva would call the "abject."19 In this case, what must be thus jettisoned is the vocal and auditory "afterbirth" which threatens to contaminate the order and system of "proper" speech. Thus, whereas the mother's voice initially functions as the acoustic mirror in which the child discovers its identity and voice, it later functions as the acoustic mirror in which the male subject hears all the repudiated elements of his infantile babble.

However, the very reversibility which facilitates these introjections and projections also threatens to undermine them—to reappropriate from the male subject what he has incorporated, or to return to him what he has thrown away. Alan Pakula's Klute (1971) dramatizes the instability of the vocal/auditory system, and the crisis that instability can generate in male subjectivity. It suggests, moreover, that the female voice can become a dumping ground for disowned desires, as well as for the remnants of verbal incompetence.

The film's premise is central to the concerns of this chapter: A prostitute's voice has been taped without her knowledge by one of her customers, who plays it over and over to himself in private. This voice is heard by us repeatedly when detached from the body of the prostitute, Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda), although it is always fully contained within the diegesis. This dislocation creates a kind of ripple effect in the text, which relies to an unusual degree upon voice-off and embodied voice-over.

The words Bree speaks are almost a parody of Freudian discourse. She urges the John, Peter Cable (Charles Cioffi), to suspend all self-censorship, and to give complete expression to his darkest desires ("You should never be ashamed . . . nothing is wrong . . . let it all hang out and fuck it!"). Later she tells him, "I'm just trying to figure you out . . . I'll [succeed] before the evening's over," suggesting that prostitution, like psychoanalysis, has as its final goal the penetration of another's psyche. The comparison becomes even more explicit later in the film, when Cable accuses Bree of forcing upon him an unwanted self-knowledge:
There are little corners in everyone which were better left alone—little sicknesses, weaknesses, which should never be exposed. But that’s your stock and trade, isn’t it? . . . I was never fully aware of mine until you brought them out.

Through this accusation, Cable implicitly acknowledges that he hears Bree’s voice as if it were his own voice—that her voice functions as an acoustic mirror in which he hears an unwanted part of himself, an element of himself which escapes “social rationality, that logical order upon which a social aggregate is based.”20 Cable’s imaginary relation to Bree’s voice is further emphasized by the recurrent image of him listening to the tape in his office at the top of a high-rise executive building, the light from outside casting a sharp reflection of his face and shoulders on the highly polished surface of his desk. At this moment, he is unequivocally locked within a narcissistic exchange.

Cable experiences this return of the repressed as a violation—as an invasion resulting in an unwanted interiority. In other words, he responds to Bree’s voice as though it has the power to confine him to precisely that condition to which cinema habitually confines its female characters. He reacts by attempting to deflect the aggressivity of Bree’s voice away from himself, and against her. Over and over again, Cable plays the recorded conversation to Bree over the telephone, forcing her to play audiatrix to her own words. He attempts to return her voice to her by obliging her to hear herself within it, to recognize herself within the acoustic mirror she earlier held up to him. In other words, Cable tries to make Bree accept ownership—and so responsibility—for what she says on the tape.

He also subjects her to a relentless visual surveillance, spying on her constantly through the skylight of her apartment, and following her whenever she leaves. When Cable finally vandals Bree’s apartment, leaving behind a pool of semen, it becomes clear that all of this scopic activity is calculated to establish her identification with an unpleasurable (and indeed contaminated) interiority, and his own identification with a pleasurable and masterful exteriority. Extreme measures are necessary because these normative identifications have been called into question by the reversibility of the voice.

The film shows itself to be more than a little complicit with Cable’s project, as eager as he to find ways of containing and regulating Bree’s voice.21 It installs John Klute (Donald Sutherland) in an apartment below Bree’s, where he is in a position to monitor all her incoming and outgoing calls. He also compiles a tape dossier of conversations she has with clients, and manages to extract from others information she has given them in confidence. However, not even this elaborate system of auditory surveillance would seem adequate to restrain Bree’s voice, since she must additionally be subjected to that most classic of all solutions to discursive deviancy in women: the talking cure. A substantial portion of the film takes place in an analyst’s office, where Bree pays frequent visits.

The chief obstacle in the way of all these attempts to reach Bree’s voice to her body is her constant recourse to verbal simulation. Not only is she an aspiring actress who does “interesting” accents, but she approaches prostitution as though it were a form of masquerade. Her favorite client pays her to fabricate stories to him about her erotic encounters in romantic locales, while with the others she feigns pleasure and fake orgasm (during one session, her seemingly ecstatic cries are completely undercut by a calculated look at her wristwatch). As she tells her analyst:

For an hour I’m the best actress in the world . . . [I] just lead them by the nose where they think they want to go . . . [I] call the shots . . . and I always feel just great afterwards. . . .

For Bree, control turns upon enunciative authority—upon the capacity to effect through discourse. However, the importance which she attributes to play-acting suggests that enunciative authority can come to be invested only in a voice which refuses to be subordinated to and judged by the body—a voice that resists the norm of synchronization. That she in fact aspires to the condition of a disembodied voice (over) is indicated not only by her verbal masquerade, with its nonmatch of body and voice, exteriority and interiority, actions and feelings, but by a remark she makes to her analyst: “What I’d really like is to be faceless and bodiless and to be left alone.”

Pakula’s film asserts the impossibility of Bree’s desire within the classic cinematic paradigm—an impossibility which can be seen with particular clarity from the vantage point of male subjectivity. Bree’s synchronous impulses encounter two particularly virulent responses. One of these, which is directed at her through the figure of Cable, takes the form of a demand that she produce “authentic,” involuntary sound—i.e., a scream. Managing at last to trap Bree in an empty clothing factory, he obliges her to listen to the tape of the death cries emitted by another of his prostitute victims, and then attempts to extract a similar reaction from her.

The other response to Bree’s discursive transgressions is much more insidious, since it does not present itself as a punishment (quite the contrary), and since it is an action on the part of the apparatus rather than on the part of a fictional character. At two key moments in the film,
both associated with Bree’s emotional surrender to Klute, her voice is quite simply extinguished. The first of these aural “blackouts” occurs when Bree and Klute first make love, and the second when they are shopping for a romantic dinner. The elimination of vocal sound is more conspicuous in the second instance, since lips are seen to move, and since other noises fade in near the end of the sequence. However, the loss of Bree’s voice is more significant in the first instance, since it places her fully on the side of the spectator. This sequence represents a systematic repudiation of the tripartite desire Bree expresses to her analyst—the desire to be faceless, bodiless, and alone. It is hardly surprising that when Bree’s voice is returned to her, she should coldly deny that she has experienced any pleasure. Of course, the film uses both her silence and her denial to state the contrary.

As Klute so powerfully demonstrates, the reversibility of the vocal auditory system not only makes possible the systematic projection of all that is culturally debased and devalued onto the female voice, it also poses the constant possibility of the leakage of those same attributes back onto the male voice. The incessant realignment of female characters with diegetic interiority, and male characters with diegetic exteriority, is consequently more than the inversion of an imagined infantile situation in which the child is wrapped in the sonorous envelope of the mother’s voice, and more than a mechanism for aligning the male subject with discursive authority while situating the female voice definitively inside the fiction. It must also be understood as a defensive reaction against the migratory potential of the voice—as an attempt to restrain it within established boundaries, and so to prevent its uncontrolled circulation.

Rosolato offers a much more theoretically sophisticated account of the maternal voice than that provided by Chion. He, too, conceptualizes the mother’s voice as a sonorous envelope enclosing the newborn infant. However, like Kristeva, but in distinct opposition to Chion, he associates that enclosure with plenitude and bliss, and reads it as an emblem of the idyllic unity of mother and child. Rosolato also argues that this primordial listening experience is the prototype for all subsequent auditory pleasure, especially the pleasure that derives from music:

The maternal voice helps to constitute for the infant the pleasurable milieu which surrounds, sustains and cherishes him. . . . One could argue that it is the first model of auditory pleasure and that music finds its roots and its

nostalgia in [this] original atmosphere, which might be called a sonorous womb, a murmuring house—or music of the spheres. 22

Thus, whereas Chion’s maternal voice traps the newborn infant in an “umbilical net,” and plunges it into a “uterine night” of nonmeaning, Rosolato’s maternal voice not only wraps the child in a soothing and protective blanket, but bathes it in a celestial melody whose closest terrestrial equivalent is opera.

Rosolato’s fantasy of the maternal voice also revolves around a second sonorous image: the image of the child harmonizing with the mother, and making its emissions “adequate” to hers. However, he is quick to point out that sounds can be placed in unison only after they have been differentiated from each other, and he makes that observation the basis for a simultaneous reading of musical, psychic, and corporeal separation and restoration. Rosolato stresses that the dream of recovering the mother’s voice can only be born out of the experience of division and loss, and that it consequently testifies to nothing so much as lack:

Harmonic and polyphonic display can be understood as a succession of tensions and of releases, of the union and the divergence of elements that are . . . opposed in their accord, in order then to be resolved in their most simple unity. It is then the whole drama of separated bodies and their reunion which supports harmony. (P. 82)

Rosolato also indicates that the image of the maternal voice as a sonorous envelope derives from a moment well beyond infancy, on the other side of subjectivity and symbolic castration (“The reawakening of the voice always presupposes a break, an irreversible distance from the lost object”).23 He explains that this image is superimposed upon infancy only by means of the backward movement (la démarche rétrospective) of fantasy.

Rosolato thus characterizes the maternal voice as a “lost object.” This characterization helps to remind us that Lacan includes the maternal voice in the category of the “objet (a).” That category, which also includes the feces, the mother’s breast, and the mother’s gaze, designates those objects which are first to be distinguished from the subject’s own self, and whose “otherness” is never very strongly marked. Because the objet (a) is “a small part of the self which detaches itself from [the subject] while still remaining his, still retained,” its loss assumes the proportions of an amputation.24 Once gone, it comes to represent what can alone make good the subject’s lack. The status of the maternal voice as an objet (a) helps to explain why it should be the focus of such a powerful fantasy of phenomenal recovery as that dreamt by Rosolato, Kristeva, Anzieu, Bailblé, and Doane.
However, it must not be forgotten that the maternal voice is also what first ruptures plenitude and introduces difference, at least within the paradigmatic Western family—the voice which first charts out and names the world for the infant subject, and which itself provides the first axis of Otherness. This is a point upon which Denis Vasse strongly insists in *L’ombilic et la voix*, a book which attributes to the maternal voice the role of “constantly reopening the opening which the imaginary object tends to fill.” It is in this capacity that the maternal voice functions as the first voice-over, and the first voice-off—as the generator of sound that proceed from beyond the child’s range of vision, or that precede its ability to see.

As I indicated earlier in this chapter, and as I will have occasion to demonstrate further in my discussion of Kristeva, the sonorous envelope fantasy often forecloses upon this aspect of the maternal voice. It usually works either to reverse the respective positions of mother and infant by situating the former inside the umbilical net, on the far side of signification, or to join mother to infant inside the *choric* enclosure. Rosolato is alone in confronting the lack which fuels the fantasy, and in acknowledging that what is really at issue is not the mother’s exclusion from the symbolic, but the subject’s own, irreducible castration—a subject who is male in Chion’s account, female in Kristeva’s.

This castration has, of course, nothing to do with anatomy, although our culture constantly asserts the contrary. As I indicated in chapter 1, it refers to the differentiation of subject from object, and hence to the loss of imaginary plenitude—a loss which is writ large in the drama of the *objet petit a*. Castration also refers to the fact that the symbolic order precedes and anticipates the subject, providing it with ready-made desires and meanings. Finally, it is a way of designating the cleavage that separates the speaking subject from the subject of its speech—a cleavage which is nowhere in greater evidence than at the site of the voice itself, vehicle of both the cry and the word. In its fantastmatic guise as “pure” sonorosity, the maternal voice oscillates between two poles; it is either cherished as an *objet (a)—*as what can make good all lacks—or despised and jettisoned as what is most abject, most culturally intolerable—as the forced representative of everything within male subjectivity which is incompatible with the phallic function, and which threatens to expose discursive mastery as an impossible ideal.

The first of these scenarios is the fundamental drama behind Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941). Kane not only accumulates the riches of the world in a vain attempt to compensate for the divisions and separations upon which subjectivity is based, but he builds an opera house to enclose a voice within whose enveloping sonorosity he hopes to be encased in turn, and thereby reunited with his lost mother. (It would indeed be difficult to imagine a film which more closely conforms to Rosolato’s account of music, or to his particular version of the maternal voice fantasy.)

The fantasy of the maternal voice as an operatic and utopian enclosure also invades Jean-Jacques Beineix’s *Diva* (1981), which opens with the illicit taping of an opera singer’s voice by one of her fans—illicit because the singer refuses to let her performance be recorded in any way. In thus resisting reproduction, the diva’s voice assumes the status of a completely inaccessible object, of an object which not only remains unattainable itself, but for which there can be no substitute. The singer’s young admirer attempts to bring it within symbolic exchange by surreptitiously recording it (as if to reinforce this point, the film shows him immediately struggling for possession of the tape with a group of Japanese entrepreneurs). That character, Jules, also produces a surrogate object, capable of filling in for the absent and impossible object. In so doing, he disavows not the diva’s but his own castration.

That disavowal takes the form of an imaginary return to infantile plenitude, or, to be more precise, of an imaginary return to the sonorous envelope of what is clearly (given the generational gap between Jules and the diva) the maternal voice. Near the beginning of the film, Jules returns home from the opera “supplemented” not only with the illicit tape, but with the singer’s satin dress, which we watch him appropriate after her performance. He sinks into a chair, embracing the luxurious garment, turns on the tape, and surrounds himself with the rapture-inducing sounds of the diva’s (reproduced) voice. The effect is surely as close as cinema has come to an evocation of *jouissance*.

However, the film which attests more powerfully than any other to the ways in which the female voice becomes the receptacle of that which the male subject both throws away and draws back toward himself, functioning by turns as abject and *objet (a)—*is Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974). The central character of that film, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), is dominated by two contrary impulses, both of which hinge upon his relation to voices. On the one hand, he is obsessed by the desire to establish his complete control over the sounds emitted by others—to overhear, much like the disembodied voice can be said to over-speak. On the other hand, he is strongly and irrationally attracted by the female voice, which activates in him the desire to be folded in a blanket of sound.

Harry’s technological authority is strenuously maintained by the opening sequence of *The Conversation*—so much so that he becomes
closely identified not only with the instruments of his own surveillance activities, but with the cinematic apparatus itself. The scene is crowded Union Square in San Francisco, and the occasion the surreptitious taping of a private conversation between a young woman, Ann (Cindy Williams), and her apparent boyfriend, Paul (Michael Higgins). Everything we hear throughout this sequence conspicuously comes to us through one of the three microphones and tape recorders Harry has placed strategically around the Square (not only do we see the inside of the surveillance van and one of the tape recorders, but we hear electronic static, and miss parts of the conversation when heads are turned away from microphones).

Harry seems similarly responsible for what we see. The sequence begins with a slow roof-top zoom in on the Square, a point of view which is associated a moment later with a cameraman on top of the old City of Paris building, another part of the surveillance “net” Harry has thrown over the Square. Although the rest of the sequence does not proceed by means of a rigorous shot/reverse shot logic, a number of subsequent shots are “signed” by the cross hairs of the camera’s viewfinder.

Exteriority is shown to be the necessary guarantee of Harry’s identification with the apparatus. That exteriority is perhaps most strongly marked in the opening zoom, which at no point aspires to anything like intimacy with its subjects. It remains determinedly outside the scene it records, stopping its descent as soon as it has a clear view of each figure in the Square, and then moving among the various groups and individuals from an extreme overhead position. However, the issue of exteriority remains a central one both throughout the remainder of this sequence and throughout the rest of the film.

When the targeted couple notice the earphone worn by one of Harry’s men, and become suspicious of his proximity to them, he is obliged to return to the surveillance van and surrender his equipment; he has entered the conversation, become part of the profit-in-event, and he can no longer lay claim to discursive authority. Harry feels himself vulnerable to a similar divestiture when, upon returning to his apartment, he discovers that the landlady has managed to penetrate the lock and alarm system designed to prevent uninvited visitors, and to leave behind a birthday present. This “invasion” threatens to transform him from what the film would call a “bugger” to what it would call a “buggee”—to shift him from behind the scenes to center stage.

Harry’s fear of being overheard is as intense as his compulsion to eavesdrop on others. His preferred position is “outside the door,” a metaphor his girlfriend, Amy (Terti Garr), literalizes when she describes him as always standing in the hall and listening through her door before he enters her apartment. However, Harry is never able to exteriorize himself sufficiently. Amy learns to identify the sounds he makes when he stands outside her door, so that she is able to overhear him trying to overhear her. Moreover, Harry is haunted by the thought of a heavenly surveillance system which might at any moment be turned against him. Since “to use the name of the Lord in vain” would be to incriminate himself with the operator of that system, he not only avoids swearing himself, but demands the same from his colleagues.

Harry’s desire to remain at all times on the side of the apparatus is undermined from another direction—from the direction of the maternal voice. Ironically, that threat is activated by the very tape which seems definitively to establish Harry as “the best bugger on the West Coast”—i.e., by the conversation he records in the opening sequence and which he obsessively plays and replays throughout the remainder of the film. That conversation has two nodal points, one of which evokes the imaginary mother/child dyad, and the other of which warns of the intervention of a hostile third term.

The first of these nodal points leads like an umbilical cord “back” to the “uterine night” of nondifferentiation. It occurs in the middle of the conversation, when the young woman, Ann, notices a drunk asleep on a park bench in Union Square. Her reaction is heard through Harry’s apparatus, at the time that it ostensibly takes place, and on four subsequent occasions via the recording. She says:

Oh look! That’s terrible . . . Oh God. Everytime I see one of those guys I always think the same thing. I always think he was once somebody’s baby boy. He was once somebody’s baby boy, and he had a mother and father who loved him . . . and now there he is half-dead on a park bench. And now where are his mother and father and all his uncles? Anyway, that’s what I always think.

This speech intersects with two other details from the conversation, which also resonate with maternal affect, and which are similarly privileged by Harry. One of those details is the sound of Ann’s voice singing matches from the child’s song, “When the red, red robin comes bob, bob, bobbin’ along.” The other is the image of her solicitously removing a speck from her companion’s eye.

The basis for Harry’s investment in these moments in the conversation is not entirely clear until the night of a surveillance convention, when he invites some colleagues back to his office for a party. One of the women in the group, Meredith (Elizabeth MacRae), stays behind after the others leave, and puts Harry to bed on a mattress in his office. He turns on the Union Square tape, and we hear Ann talking once again.
about the lost comfort and security of childhood as the camera zooms in slowly on his prostrate form, stretched out on the mattress in a visual reprise of the bum on the park bench. As the sonorous web of Ann’s voice tightens around him, Harry enters the pronominal center of the tape, and then beyond language, to “an unthinkable point at the interior of thought.”

This entry into the pronominal center of the tape occurs when Harry anticipates that line which represents the second nodal point of the conversation—the line “He’d kill us if he had the chance.” This is the most fantasmatist element in the entire conversation, both because it is initially obscured by other sounds, and must be doctored to the point where it is virtually constructed by Harry, and because every time it is heard, the emphasis shifts and the meaning changes. Spoken by Paul, it initially seems to refer only to the murderous intentions of the Director. Ann’s husband (Robert Duvall), harbors against the young couple (“He’d kill us if he had the chance”). However, when Harry mentally rehearses the line at the end of the film, it seems more an extenuation of the young couple’s murderous intentions toward the Director (“He’d kill us if he had the chance”). When he utters it on the evening of the surveillance convention, it has yet another function—the function of identifying Harry and Meredith with Paul and Ann. This condensation is effected through the pronoun us, which permits Harry to insert himself into the sentence.

But beyond this fleeting suture—beyond all linguistic identification—Harry is the baby boy about whom Ann speaks, and to whom she sings, the baby boy wrapped in the warm blanket of his mother’s voice. Meredith seems to contribute to the weaving of that blanket when she wipes away Harry’s tears, murmuring: “Angel, it’s going to all right.” The words on the tape become more and more indistinguishable, approximating pure sonorousness, as Harry retreats from signification and symbolic differentiation. In the final shot of this sequence, the camera pulls up and away from the bed on which Meredith now lies with Harry, enclosed within the security wire cage of his inner office. The cage throws a webleke shadow on the sleeping forms, a shadow which is the visual equivalent of the “umbilical net” cast by Ann’s voice.

This shot, which inverts the movement of the opening shot of the film, gives way to a dream sequence, which further clarifies Harry’s relation both to the maternal voice and to the father, or symbolic third term. In that sequence he calls to Ann from the bottom of a hill, while she moves remotely above, shrouded in mist. What he says is startling, since it is an appeal to her to hear his most submerged and private memories—to hear him in ways which situate her in a position of superior exteriority (here emblematized by her spatial elevation and abstractness), and himself in a position of subordinate inferiority:

Listen! Listen! My name is Harry Caul. Can you hear me? You don’t know who I am, but I know you. There isn’t much to say about myself. . . . I was very sick when I was a boy. I was paralyzed in my left arm and leg, I couldn’t walk for six months. One doctor said I’d never walk again. My mother used to lower me in hot baths as therapy. One time the door bell rang and she went down to answer it. I started sliding down, I could feel the water—it started coming up to my chin and nose. When I woke up my body was all greasy from the hot water she put on my body. I remember being disappointed I didn’t die.

When I was five my father introduced me to a friend of his and for no reason at all I hit him with all my might in the stomach. He died a year later. He’ll kill you if he has the chance. . . . I’m not afraid of death. I am afraid of murder.

Harry’s dream attests once again to his desire to retreat from discursive mastery. That retreat is figured through his “recollecton” of the warm baths given to him by his mother when he was a child, with their domestic evocation of oceanic intimacies. However, the fact that the baths were a treatment for paralysis marks this “memory” as a fantasy—as a retrospective view of infantile plenitude, motivated by the crisis of symbolic castration.

At the same time that Harry’s “reminiscences” testify to his desire to have all wounds healed and all losses recovered, they also acknowledge the impossibility of that desire. The unity of mother and child is interrupted by the intrusion of a third term—of that very term whose trace Harry carries on his body in the guise of a paralyzed arm and leg, forfeit pounds of flesh. His mother is called away by someone “outside the door,” i.e., by someone occupying the position to which he himself aspires in his capacity as surveillance expert. That someone is thus clearly another inscription of Harry, or at least of the paternal legacy to which he lays claim in his waking life.

The first of the dream inscriptions of Harry, which can perhaps best be characterized by the phrase “baby boy,” implies his identification with the mother—an identification which has the effect of inducing him to accept as his own that burden of lack which is conventionally displaced from the male to the female subject. That identification can be discerned in the logic of male castration, suffering, and masochism which informs the dream at every point, a logic which expresses itself with particular clarity when Harry says, “I remember being disappointed I didn’t die,” but which also manifests itself in the progression from “I was very sick” to “I couldn’t walk for six months,” “One doctor said I would never walk again,” and “I started sliding down.” The
second of the dream inscriptions of Harry—the one which is compatible with his surveillance work—implies an identification with the father, and necessitates the return of lack to its customary female site.

The degree to which the two inscriptions function to negate each other is indicated by what happens in Harry’s dream when the doorbell rings. Not only does his mother leave the bathroom, thereby disrupting his imaginary plenitude, but Harry-as-baby-boy almost drowns. The negation works in the other direction in the second part of the dream, where it is the father in himself that Harry attempts to disown. That repudiation takes the form of a generalized aggression against the paternal function, here represented by Harry’s actual father, by a friend of his father, and by the Director, among whom the male pronoun circulates indiscriminately (“When I was five my father introduced me to a friend of his and for no reason at all I hit him with all my might. He died a year later. He’ll kill you if he gets the chance”). Of course, since Harry’s aggression takes such a familiar Oedipal path, it attests to the very identification it attempts to deny.

Harry ends his confession by reiterating his moral and psychic distance from the sadistic father, and his moral and psychic identification with the suffering mother (“I’m not afraid of death. I am afraid of murder”). However, that confession is followed by five “dream” shots which situate him once again “outside the door”—in this case the door of room 773 of the Jack Tar Hotel, the place specified for a rendezvous in the Union Square conversation. The first of those shots shows Harry standing in front of the door. The next shot locates us inside the room, facing the door as Harry slowly opens it. The last three shots depict in a fragmentary and confused way the murder Harry thinks will occur in room 773—first a long shot of Ann standing against the pebbled glass doors leading to the balcony, opening her mouth in a noiseless scream as the Director moves threateningly toward her, then a reverse shot through the gauze curtain, smeared with blood, of the ensuing struggle, and finally a shot through the bathroom door of the toilet, blood streaking the walls.

Several days after the dream, Harry actually goes to the Jack Tar Hotel with the vague hope of somehow preventing the murder of the young couple. He checks into the room next to 773, and after a brief examination of the premises goes into the bathroom, and there, at the empty site of what figured within his dream as the staging place for infantile plenitude, reestablishes his auditory mastery. He drills a hole in the wall, flushing the toilet to drown out the noise, and inserts a microphone. What Harry “hears” during this reenactment of the primal scene is almost entirely fantasmatic. Excerpts from the Union Square tape are the only sounds that come through with any distinctness, and they are clearly marked as originating from that tape. Indeed, at the climactic moment in this eavesdropping episode, we hear the tape being rewound to a particular point, followed by the words: “I love you.”

The status of those three words is extremely complex at this juncture. For Harry, they seem to issue from the other side of the wall, whereas for the viewer they clearly issue from the tape, and beyond that, from the Union Square conversation. In fact, however, they are elicited only through Harry’s desire to hear them. Ann’s voice, like that of her companion, is actually a voice “inside” Harry, which he has projected outward as sound. The inclusion of the rewind noise reminds us that the voices of Ann and her friend have been produced by Harry all along—that we have never heard them except through either his technological or psychic “apparatus,” and that there may consequently be a much closer connection between those two systems than at first appears.

As I will attempt to demonstrate in a moment, Harry’s psychic apparatus, like classic cinema’s sound apparatus, is in part a machine made to extract a cry from the female voice. After all, Harry has been drawn to the Jack Tar Hotel as much to hear the mother’s scream as he has been to prevent her murder. However, it is his desire for the sonorous envelope of the maternal voice rather than his need to be in discursive control which manifests itself through Ann’s “I love you”—a sound which impels Harry to rip off the earphones and run into the other room, horrified lest he be obliged to listen to that scream which only a moment before he was struggling to hear. He sits down on a chair in the bedroom and stares intently at the first of the four infantile inscriptions which punctuate this sequence—the baby-blue waves of an oceanic painting.

Shortly thereafter, Harry goes out onto the balcony and looks toward room 773. As he does so, he “sees” something whose fantasmatic dimensions are as pronounced as those of the sounds he “hears” in the bathroom—another view, as it were, of the murder he earlier “sees” in his sleep. That view consists of a brief image through pebbled glass of a bloody hand reaching out toward someone standing in front of the glass, back toward the camera. The form is vaguely recognizable as Ann, wearing the same dark dress she earlier wears in Harry’s dream. On the soundtrack can be heard a sound which is conspicuously absent from the earlier version of the same events—conspicuously because it is implied by Ann’s open mouth. That sound begins as a human cry, but is quickly transformed into an electronic scream.

As with the fragments of the Union Square conversation Harry
"hears" in the bathroom, the scream clearly issues from his psychic apparatus. Like classic cinema, that apparatus is full of "gears and connecting rods, of chains of actions and reactions," all calculated to "deliver a cry" from the female voice. And as in classic cinema, the sought-after cry "incarnates a fantasm of pure sonorousness." It is, in other words, a mechanism for disavowing the male subject's early history, and for displacing onto woman all traces of corporeal excess and discursive impotence. However, the electronic scream activates what it is intended to neutralize, sending Harry back into the bedroom, and into a fetal position under the bedcovers. He turns on the television at full volume to drown out the intolerable cry, which continues to assail him as an external sound.

When Harry opens his eyes after an indeterminate interval, a cartoon is playing on television, and the voice of Fred Flintstone can be heard talking loudly about taking his wife to the hospital to have a baby. Regression is inscribed here both through the return of the by now ubiquitous infant, and through the reversion to the Stone Age. Of course, the supreme irony of this double inscription is that the Flintstone family is pure simulation—that the "innocent" world of cartoons is in no way anchored to a profilmic referent, and is without any grounding in actors, material objects, or even three-dimensional space. It is a textual form, moreover, where the voice can make no claim to derive from the body—where the voice is openly superimposed upon the body, much like the sounds from which Harry flees.

As usual, Harry is unable to sustain his retreat from auditory mastery, and a moment later he has resumed his characteristic position "outside the door." After checking out of his own room, he listens for a moment outside 773, then picks the lock, lets himself in, and embarks upon a careful inspection of the place. Once again it is the bathroom, fantastic site of both infantile plenitude and his own near-death, which preoccupies him. After tearing aside the shower curtain from the bathtub (an item whose semitransparent plastic is reminiscent of his own habitually worn raincoat), he begins a painstaking search for traces of what was an intolerable thought just moments before—for traces that is, of the mother's death.

Harry focuses most of his attention on the two openings through which waste materials are eliminated: the bathtub drain and the toilet bowl. In other words, he solicits what has been thrown away, and is thus unassimilable to male subjectivity, in a grim reprise of the fortda game. He beckons to the object, and with a flush of the toilet it returns to him, contaminating the room and his own subjective boundaries. Even before Harry reaches for the flushing mechanism, an electronic scream analogous to the one heard on the balcony starts to well up, reaching a crescendo as blood and tissue spew out of the toilet.

Unlike the earlier scream, this one is electronic from start to finish, and so no longer identifiable in any way with the voice. Instead, it bears Harry's "signature"—his technological, but also his psychic, signature. The blood and tissue spilling out of the toilet are similarly dissociated from the female body. Harry is ostensibly looking for an "afterdeath," but there is nothing to distinguish what he sees from his own "afterbirth"—from the sonorous web or membrane from which he must establish his separation in order to maintain a position of discursive mastery. ("Afterbirth" also refers, significantly, to a child who is not covered by the father's will, and who thus falls outside the parental word.)

The meaning of Harry's last name comes fully into play here. "Caul" designates "the amnion or inner membrane enclosing the foetus before birth" (OED)—i.e., the sheath that protectively encloses infantile plenitude. However, the amnion is the same membrane which subsequently becomes the afterbirth. Harry's name thus conveys both his desire to be restored to the "uterine night" of a preembryonic wholeness—to be enclosed once again in an envelope of pure sonorousness—and his desire to hold back that night by establishing his control over (and exteriority to) sound. Depending upon which definition is activated at any given moment, the female voice assumes the status of an objet (a) (of a beloved part of himself which Harry seeks to reincorporate, or of the objet (of that which defies, and which must consequently be jettisoned). Through a constant oscillation between these two contradictory relationships to the female voice, Harry attempts, on the one hand, to make good his symbolic castration—to recover the lost pound of flesh—and, on the other, to demonstrate his discursive potency; in short, to disavow the two lacks which afflict him.

In the sequence which follows, where Harry learns that it is the father rather than the mother who has been killed, he rewrites history. He mentally replays the Union Square conversation once again, and reopens the door to room 773. What he now "hears" has a totally different meaning from that of what he heard before, and that meaning produces a fresh set of images. The wifely solicitude with which Ann had seemed to remark, "I don't know what to get him for Christmas. He already has everything," is now dissipated by the portentous implications of Paul's response: "He doesn't need anything anymore." As Harry "listens" to this part of the tape, he "sees" the Director's corpse lying on the hotel bed, wrapped in a plastic bag (the third item in the series that includes the raincoat and the shower curtain, a series that
reiterates Harry's guilt). That image appears again, a moment later, after a fragmentary reenactment of the bloody struggle already imagined by Harry twice before. This time, however, all the violence is aimed at the Director. As Harry "looks" for the second time at the Director's corpse, Paul's voice repeats for the last time the pivotal line, now brought into a new and chilling focus: "He'd kill us if he had the chance."

This sequence exposes as an utter fiction Harry's claim to auditory control. Far from being in a position of secure exteriority to the sounds he manipulates, his subjectivity is completely imbricated with them—so much so that it is often impossible to determine which originate from "outside" of him, and which from "inside." Moreover, that very distinction is radically called into question both by the reversibility of the voice (a reversibility which *The Conversation* is at pains to dramatize), and by Harry's obvious libidinal implication in everything he hears. Finally, the conspicuous part played by cameramen and sound technicians in this scene only underscores Harry's isolation from the apparatus (he is standing all this time in a crowd of people looking on as the press fire questions at Ann about her husband's death).

Significantly, this time when Harry "listens" to the tape, he censo all those portions where Ann's voice approximates the maternal voice. The latter has suddenly assumed an altogether different status, and no longer represents a protective sheath. Instead, Harry now seeks shelter within another figuration of corporeal unity—within the sonorous envelope of his own music. *The Conversation* cuts away from the Director's corpse to a shot of Harry sitting on a chair in his apartment, improvising on his saxophone to a jazz record.

Music performs an important diegetic role throughout the film, where it is usually associated with infantile pleasure. During the Union Square sequence, an off-screen band can be heard playing "When the red, red robin comes bob, bob, bobbin' along," phrases of which Ann subsequently sings, and are "captured" on tape. Shortly after that sequence, Harry listens to a jazz record at home, and accompanies it on his saxophone, just as he does in the final sequence. Much later, on the night of the party, the background music forms a sonorous enclosure within which he feels secure enough to confide in Meredith. Finally, when he wakes up in his room in the Jack Tar Hotel, a jazz saxophone is superimposed over the sounds of "The Flintstones." All of this seems in strong support of Rosolato's contention that music images the fusion of child and mother—that it returns us to the "primordial experience of corporeal harmony." (Interestingly, Rosolato also notes that wind instruments, such as the saxophone, function as an extension or "giant prosthesis" of the voice.)

As in the childhood memory recounted by Harry in his dream, the harmony he produces by improvising with the record at the end of the film is interrupted by a call from the symbolic. Here that interruption takes the form of a ring on the telephone rather than on the doorbell—of a call from the Director's office which begins by playing back to Harry a tape of his own music, and ends with the warning: "We'll be listening to you." This intrusion is the secular realization of his theological anxieties about being overheard by someone whose powers of audition exceed his own. His initial relation to the apparatus has been completely reversed: instead of exercising control over the sounds emitted by others, the sounds he himself makes now fall within the reach of a superior ear. He has been displaced from the position of "bugger" to that of "buggee."

Harry dismantles his apartment in an attempt to locate the hidden microphone and so establish his superiority to the anonymous eavesdropper. In the middle of his search, he comes across a bookshelf of brick-a-brac and sweeps everything into the trash but a small Madonna, dressed in a baby-blue robe. The mother is still so closely identified with infantile plenitude that it is inconceivable to Harry that she could be complicit in his discursive castration. Later, however, he returns to the Madonna, and in a fury of violence smashes open its body and turns the hollow form inside out. The icon is empty, brilliantly demystifying the notion of interiority, and suggesting that the faculty of a superior and mastering audition can no more be localized in the maternal body than can the cry.

The degree to which the maternal voice nonetheless continues to exercise a fantastmatic hold upon Harry's desire is indicated by his reverie shortly after this act of aggression to that image from the Union Square conversation which seems most fully to sketch the possibility of reintegration with the mother—the image of Ann removing a speck from Paul's eye. The film cuts there to a shot of Harry playing his saxophone once again, the one object he has overlooked as a possible location for the hidden microphone. This time he plays solo, without the record. However, he is not "alone." He is accompanied (as he has been all along) by the symbolic, evoked here both by an extradiegetic piano and by the final image of the film.

*The Conversation* concludes with a shot which forcefully reasserts Harry's diegetic interiority—a shot of him sitting in the middle of his ruined apartment, whose overhead angle and back-and-forth panning motion associate it with a surveillance camera. Like the phone call from the Director's office, this shot inverts Harry's earlier relation to the apparatus, transferring him from a position behind the camera and tape
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recorder to one in front—from a position “outside the door” to one “inside the door.” Moreover, whereas in the opening shot of the film we look at and listen to Union Square through Harry’s bugging equipment, here we look at and presumably listen to him through someone else’s. That someone else remains invisible and unlocalizable, manifesting himself only through the disembodied voice of the telephone call.

In The Ego and the Id, Freud shows the ego “wearing” a “cap of hearing” on one side. In the New Introductory Lectures, however, he gives the same position to the superego. Otto Isakower draws an interesting conclusion from the substitution of the superego for the cap of hearing, a conclusion which is more than a little relevant to the present discussion. He suggests that the superego is determined primarily by the activity of listening.

Isakower points out (as does Freud) that a word must always be heard before it can be articulated, and that language must consequently be understood as coming to the subject from “outside”—from what he calls an “auditory sphere” or “aura.” He argues, in other words, that the acquisition of language proceeds through the internalization of others’ voices—most particularly, of course, those of the parents. These voices, which provide a model as well as a source of linguistic information, also form the core of the superego:

We know that the child is not capable by itself of constructing new words to say nothing of a language, but that he has to build up his speech from linguistic material which is presented to him ready made. But this very fact sets in motion the process of developing an observing and criticizing institution.

The following formula then suggests itself: just as the nucleus of the ego is the body-ego, so the human auditory sphere, as modified in the direction of language, is to be regarded as the nucleus of the super-ego.

Isakower’s equation of the superego with an auditory aura is literalized by one of the patients he cites, who complained of his superego that “I seem to hear everything that has ever been said to me in all my life” (p. 346).

Like the other theoretical models I have examined in this chapter, Isakower’s turns upon the dialectic between “inside” and “outside,” and upon the image of a sonorous receptacle. Once again interiority implies discursive dependency, and exteriority discursive authority. However, Isakower indicates that interiority is the inevitable effect of subjectivity, rather than a condition that somehow rhymes with femininity—the inevitable effect, that is, of having been inserted into an already existing linguistic structure. His theoretical model also focuses in a way the others do not upon the replication of this inside/outside structure within the psyche itself—upon the setting up of the auditory aura within the subject’s own self, in a position of superior exteriority to the ego. Isakower thus shows the subject to be “inside” the symbolic, and “under” the supervision of the superego. He suggests that we can never get “outside the door,” in the way that Harry attempts to do.

At the risk of giving Isakower’s model too much metacritical weight, I would like to suggest that it is ultimately this auditory aura against which dominant cinema arms the male subject through the textual operations discussed in chapter 2. Hollywood’s sexually differentiating drama of interiority and exteriority works to disavow the fact that the male subject, like the female subject, is surrounded by and constructed through voices which he also incorporates as an internal regulatory agency. By folding the female voice into diegetic recesses, submitting it to the “talking cure,” and anchoring it to the female body, dominant cinema attempts to move the male subject from a position of linguistic containment and subordination to the one which Freud and Isakower associate with the superego—a position of superior speech and hearing. That position is in turn only a reflection of the symbolic order or auditory aura.

The image of the maternal voice as a sonorous envelope has a similar derivation, although it elicits a wider variety of psychic responses. The paranoid fantasy of entrapment which surfaces both in Hollywood and in Chion’s La voix au cinéma is quite clearly a disguised expression of the double interiority which is endemic to subjectivity, but incompatible with the phallic function. The anxiety which that double interiority generates is fantasmatically resolved by reversing the respective positions of the mother and the infant subject, both by stripping the sounds which the mother makes of any linguistic status, and by moving her to the interior of the sonorous envelope. Rosolato, on the other hand, dreams alternately of transforming interiority into jouissance by substituting the mother’s singing voice for the father’s prohibitory voice, and of replacing the hierarchy of ego and superego, subject and symbolic with a “veritable incantation of voices,” configured by the lateral vocal interaction of mother and child. Kristeva’s choric fantasy, as we will see in a few pages, is motivated by the desire to retreat from the superego and the symbolic rather than by the desire to approximate the position of discursive mastery which they represent. By returning to a moment prior to the entry into language and the articulation of subject/object relationships, it attempts to fuse mother with child, and so to