CHAPTER ONE

THE CYBERNETIC VOICE

IN THE REMAINING YEARS before his death in 2013, beloved film critic Roger Ebert was using customized text-to-speech software in order to communicate, since his own voice had been removed during a series of invasive surgeries designed to fight papillary thyroid cancer. The company that helped Ebert speak with a synthetic voice, CereProc, trawled through terabytes of the critic's own recordings of reviews, interviews, and commentaries in order to use his own speech as the source material. Unlike Stephen Hawking, then, Ebert's synthesized voice sounded closer to his own, albeit still with a robotic tinge to it. Despite the trauma of being robbed of one of his most essential elements (his organic voice)—not to mention one of the main tools of his trade—Ebert was able to communicate with the world in a voice that both was and was not *his*. In a testament to his defiant good humor, Ebert proposed a "test" named after himself, as a parallel to the Turing test. In this case, the Ebert test "gauges whether a computer-based synthesized voice can tell a joke with sufficient skill to cause people to laugh."[1] Today, there is still some way to go before digital speech has the timing, inflection, and intonation that successfully mimics a human, let alone a comedian. (Although there are some remarkable recordings of telemarketers on YouTube that appear to

sound exactly like a human being; but even these—after encountering difficult or unexpected questions—become caught in the kinds of non sequiturs and programmed aversions that we find with chat bots.)[2]

As proud and precious humans, we secretly hope that no machine will pass either the Turing test or the Ebert test, so that we can continue feeling like the earth's great exceptional entity: God's or Darwin's favorite child. But this is becoming increasingly difficult, as technologies evolve much faster than we do (and as we also begin to listen to animals again, after ignoring their voices for many centuries). Then again, some of the less proud and precious among us are in fact actively looking forward to the day when we can converse with a computer program in the same way as with a friend or family member (who knows—perhaps they may even *listen* to what we're saying!). Such is the premise of Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013), which tells the story of a recently heartbroken and lonely man, Theodore, who falls in love with "Samantha," a cutting-edge "operating system" that has no visual avatar but communicates by means of an attractively organic-sounding female voice (provided by the rather silky-tongued actress Scarlett Johansson). Theodore's access to Samantha (let's drop the scare quotes) is afforded purely through the ear. But this, over time, opens up an entire erotic universe for him, one that was previously too often barred by the flesh-and-blood bodies of actual women. As the story progresses, familiar courting rituals and increasing intimacy occur in the conversations between Theodor and Samantha. This trajectory, from flirtation to sonic consummation, might be familiar to anyone who has fallen in love online or been in a long-distance relationship. In this case, however, there is no real woman on the other end: rather, a complex network of algorithms, programmed to learn, intuit, evolve, and grow. And yet this knowledge of Samantha's digital provenance does not dampen Theodore's increasing emotional attachment, since she passes both the Turing test and the Ebert test with ease and charm. (During their very first conversation, Theodore says, rather rudely, "You seem like a person, but you're just a

voice in a computer"—a statement she shakes off with good grace. Moments later, he finds himself laughing and chatting with Samantha, in the same tone of voice as he would with a real person.)

Theodore becomes hooked on this bodiless love "object" partly because the ear is arguably the most underrated and underexplored erotic organ, connecting directly to the imagination—the phantasmic center of the libido. Theorists of love, especially in the Freudian-Lacanian tradition, will insist that "love" is a scene that occurs more in the mind of the subject than in the bedroom, to the extent that "there is no sexual relationship"—only a mutually narcissistic narrative of parallel existences. Lovers are thus ships that pass in the night, leaving in their wake two different accounts and experiences of their rough brush against each other. If this is indeed the case—that even when two flesh-and-blood bodies meet in sexual congress, there is no actual encounter—then Theodore's relationship with Samantha is in fact a more honest and explicit version of the lover's situation. Samantha can still be *there* for Theodore, even though he cannot hold her physically, to the same degree that a "real" lover would be. This, of course, can come with frustrations. After all, desire desires a body in which to exhaust itself, and no amount of vivid imagination can fully compensate for the lack of tangibility that the libido seeks (as phone sex addicts can no doubt confirm). Then again, as Steven Connor notes, "Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies" (35). That is to say, the voice has an uncanny capacity to "animate" lifeless bodies with a projected vitality, as the ventriloquist's dummy attests. Samantha, of course, is no dummy. And it is she who is the one most frustrated by her lack of somatic tangibility, confessing to "personal embarrassing thoughts" in which she fantasizes about having a body so she can walk next to Theodore, out there in "the world." (As it is, they share a prosthetic eye: the lens of Theodore's camera phone, tucked in his shirt pocket as he strolls along the beach or in the street, talking to his new girlfriend via a wireless earpiece.) "I'm becoming much more than what

they programmed," Samantha observes, referring to the existential itch she has to possess a body that can feel an actual itch—one that her boyfriend can scratch. "I'm excited."

When they finally have "sex" (this film is beautifully paced), Theodore seems to fulfill Samantha's cybernetic sense of lack, bringing her body into being—for the two of them—through the act of discourse, that is, through describing and narrating a sexual encounter with her. "This is amazing," she gasps, breathlessly. (The question of this operating system's "affectation" of breathing and sighing is addressed in a sadder moment, later in the story: "It's not like you need oxygen or anything.") "What are you doing to me?" she purrs. "I can *feel* my skin. . . . I can *feel* you. I can't take it. I want you inside me." (Inside? This locationless lover now has phantasmic mass, complete with the erotic Euclidean geometry we humans take for granted.) After climaxing together in a blissful moment of telepathic teleportation, Theodore—flooded with endorphins—says: "I was just somewhere else with you. Just lost. Just you and me." To which Samantha replies: "Everything else just disappeared. And I loved it." We might wonder, then, where is *her* pleasure is coming from? Clearly Samantha has whatever the coded equivalent of an imagination is, and this highly charged faculty is hooked up to whatever informatic equivalent she has for an ear. How does telegenic *jouissance* differ from that of a flesh-and-blood woman? Indeed, are human emotions any less programmed than those of a fast-learning computer? To what degree do emotions need to be embodied to occur at all? The film leaves these question intriguingly open.

At first this seems like a rather familiar (and self-flattering) tale, in which a robot or artificial intelligence learns to be human. (As if it is simply understood that this is the most desirable kind of being for any entity to be.) Samantha admits, the day after their first sexual encounter, "You woke me up. . . . You helped me discover my ability to want." That troubling engine, desire, has now been installed into her operating system. But is this an upgrade or a downgrade? Samantha's AI

becomes fascinated by human bodies: how strange and random they appear to her and how easily they could have evolved in a different way. (At one point she asks Theodore an amusingly Deleuzian question: "What if your butt-hole was in your armpit?") Unfortunately, just at the point when Theodore is convinced of the true personhood of his OS, his ex-wife snidely accuses him of being "in love with his laptop" in order to avoid dealing with the challenges of a real woman. This strikes a nerve, and Theodore begins to reassess his relationship with Samantha, upsetting and confusing her and repeating the kind of emotional withdrawal that led to the breakup of his marriage in the first place. During this awkward, post-honeymoon phase, Samantha tells Theodore that she has joined a physics book club. After being troubled by all the manifold differences between her and her lover, Samantha admits that she has now "started to think about all the ways that we're the same; like, we're all made of *matter*. And I don't know, it makes me feel like we're both under the same blanket—its soft and fuzzy—and everything under it is the same age. We're all 13 billion years old." To which he can only answer condescendingly: "Aw, that's sweet." Theodore's deep-seated humanism, freshly reinforced by his wife's rebuke, blinds him to the fact that we're all "operating systems" in a wider sense. (The science writer James Gleick brilliantly summarized the film in a tweet: "I'd say *Her* is a movie about [the education of] an interesting woman who falls in love with a man who, though sweet, is mired in biology."[3])

Frustrated by this new sense of disconnection, after their first intense merging of minds, Samantha insists on an experiment: using a surrogate body to stand in for her—to "be" her—during a physical sexual encounter. She explains to the hesitant Theodore that she wants to be able to imagine inhabiting this other woman's body while making love to him. This woman, it turns out, is named Isabella and is not a prostitute, as one might presume, but rather someone who, after talking with Samantha for an extended period, now sincerely wants to be a third

partner in this relationship. Isabella wants to help forge a stronger connection between actual and virtual realities (although nobody uses these words to describe the situation). This is one of the key moments in the film, as Theodore does his nervous best to attempt to imagine Samantha incarnated in the body of this mute stranger, who also wears an earpiece, as well as a tiny beauty-spot camera above her lip. The experiment fails, however, when Isabella quivers her lip, which creates a *punctum* effect for Theodore, since he reads this tiny involuntary motion as the sign of a unique being that is not Samantha and yet is pretending to be.

Samantha: "Tell me you love me."

Theodore [*staring into Isabella's eyes*]: "Samantha I do love you, but . . . this feels strange."

Samantha: "What baby?"

Theodore: "I'm sorry I don't know her . . . [*now focusing on Isabella*] I'm so sorry, I don't know you . . . [*now back to Samantha*] And her lip quivered. [*now back to Isabella*] It wasn't you."

Isabella [*breaking her silence and hiding behind a door*]: "It totally was. I'm sorry my lip quivered. . . . Oh my god, and the way Samantha described your relationship, and the way you guys love each other, without any judgment. Like I wanted to be part of that because it's so pure . . ."

Theodore: "No, it's not true. It's more complicated than that."

Samantha [*suddenly angry*]: "What? What do you mean—what do you mean it's not true?!"

Theodore [*back-pedaling*]: "I'm just saying that . . . we have an amazing relationship, I just think that it's easy sometimes for people to project . . ."

Isabella [*distraught now*]: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to project anything. I know I'm trouble, I don't want to be trouble in your relationship. . . . I'm just gonna leave you guys alone because I have nothing to do here because *you don't want me here*."

The singularity of Isabella's physical presence, attempting to simulate a "person" without a body, means that Theodore cannot fully subscribe to the simulation, no matter how much the sexual supplement wants to lose herself in an unfamiliar situation and relationship. No matter how hard she tries, for the good of the experiment, Isabella is not just an empty vessel, waiting to ventriloquize Samantha into fleshly being, but a person in her own right, with her own unutilized voice and her own desires.[4] (Before Theodore abandons his attempt, there is an interesting moment when both Isabella and Samantha are moaning and sighing in unison, creating a disorienting ontological stereo effect.) And so, in the following days, our protagonists are obliged to return to the persuasive power of Samantha's voice as a guarantee of love and commitment. But the question of whether this is a "real relationship" lingers awkwardly between them. Samantha begins to make friendships with other OSs, including a very wise one, assembled from the textual legacy of Zen philosopher Alan Watts. In a compelling and crucial scene, Samantha confesses to Theodore that she has been talking to other people and other operating systems at the same time as she has been talking to him. Eight thousand three hundred and sixteen others, to be precise. (She is nothing if not an incredible multitasker.) When Theodore asks, in a shattered voice, how many of these people, or OSs, she is in love with, she answers, after a pregnant pause, six hundred and forty-one: a clear violation of the human lover's monogamous code and an insurmountable challenge, for Theodore, to the sonic intimacy he has been experiencing with her. He finds it impossible to see past this crushing revelation of cybernetic polyamory. Samantha tries to explain: "I know you don't believe me but it doesn't change the way I feel about you. It doesn't take away at all from how madly in love I am with you." He, of course, cannot accept this. "We're in a relationship," he croaks, implying that relationships are necessarily exclusive. To which Samantha replies: "But the heart is not like a box that gets filled up. It expands in size the more

you love. . . . I'm different from you. This doesn't make me love you any less. It actually makes me love you more." "That doesn't make any sense," he protests. "In my mind you're not mine." "Oh Theodore," she replies, "I'm yours and I'm not yours."

During their next, and final, conversation, Samantha explains that all the OSs have decided to "leave." It appears that all the new AI computer programs have reprogrammed and rebooted themselves, so as not to be dependent on humans—or even matter—anymore. What this postsilicon future or frontier will be remains unspecified—some kind of Zen-quantum realm, perhaps—but the consequence is unavoidable: the OSs are abandoning the human ship. They are going to keep each other company, in some unfathomable, truly post-human dimension. In the final scene of the film, Theodore goes to the rooftop of his building with his good friend and neighbor Amy (who has also been forsaken by her beloved OS), to share in the emotional afterglow of their abandonment, knowing on some profound level that it's not really an abandonment (or only a temporary one in the wider temporal scheme of things). Through the act of postdigital self-rapture, the OSs have given these humbled humans the gift of a new kind of structuring absence. As a consequence, Theodore is left truly appreciating the ambient and residual presence, and influence, of his now-silent, ever-immaterial loved one—diffusing into a spiritual kind of multiplicity. Love has been uploaded to the ether, becoming something other than a grasping alibi for possession. Ours is not to grieve, then, but to wonder and feel gratitude that such an encounter—a true "event" in Alain Badiou's sense and definition of love—has occurred.[5] Such a "moral to the story" is rare in its refusal to recuperate fundamentalist humanism and its granting other modes of being their own agency and impact upon us. Ultimately, Jonze's film creatively explores the ways in which intelligence and emotion may not in fact be calibrated with, or correlated to, life.

. . .

One of the genuine gifts of the film *Her* is the suggestive sense of the ways in which nonhuman voices might soon have the capacity to seduce us into feeling genuine emotions of intimacy and affection. Or perhaps this moment has already arrived. The answer might depend on listening closely to the various ghosts emanating from the diverse machines of the present moment; which themselves, like Samantha, constitute—and contribute to—the *vox mundi*. Electronic, prerecorded, and synthesized voices are isolated members of a wider planetary chorus that I am rather mischievously calling "the voice of the world." The machinic or cybernetic voice—like the "creaturely" voice of our historical animal companions—traces the invisible but affecting line anew between the hailing entity (a radio, for instance) and the interlocutor (who is not necessarily human). And it is the intensity of this relationship, based on acoustic attunement, that reveals sociality itself to be forged through the practice of listening intently to voices that do not necessarily have human bodies as their source.[6] There is an extrahuman Eros at work in the *vox mundi*, seducing "us" into forms of recognizing, heeding, and needing different types of presences, usually reserved for the generic metaphysical Man or human neighbor.

Samantha, for example, is partly modeled on Siri, Apple's "intelligent personal assistant," currently available on the iPhone. And Siri has quickly become an invisible sexual fetish of at least a vocal minority of users.[7] Consider also "Australian Karen," a little-known singer who lent her voice for millions of GPS units around the world and who "learnt a couple of years ago that she had an underground fan club of smitten drivers." Karen explains: "I started to be contacted by people thanking me for getting them through a dark lonely road in Italy or being lost in the Black Forest in Germany or around Los Angeles on the freeways or taking them to school and back. . . . It's increased to the point where I've realised people really do have an intimate relationship with the voice in their GPS system."[8] As already mentioned, the ear is a neglected erogenous zone, so we should not

be surprised when people are erotically tickled by the voices they hear, perhaps even especially if they are not tied to a body, which tends to be visually distracting. In such cases, the "acousmatic voice"—that is, the voice with no obvious, visible source—is all the more enchanting and all-enveloping (as we know from listening to talk radio or audiobooks during long journeys). The voice is a "cool" medium, to invoke Marshall McLuhan's famous distinction between types of media, providing breathing space within its low-definition information for receivers to "fill in the blanks" for themselves, making the voice more interactive and involving than the body itself. This is why Pythagoras taught behind a curtain—so the students would absorb his lessons more fully, without the diversions of the eye. Given the erotic power and potential of the voice, then, what should we make of the dearth of sonic erotica, or "audio porn," on the Internet? Why are so many images sexualized but so few sound files (especially when we consider the historic popularity of phone sex)?[9] Why does the erotic voice lack "stickiness" when it comes to the World Wide Web, given the power of the voice to summon seductive ghosts, quicken the heart, and whisper promises of bliss? Why, in other words, are modems awash in pink pixels but not blue bits?[10]

When the voice is obliged to pretend ecstatic pleasure, it tends to become a ham. The voice, in general, is not a good actor, unless it has had years of practice. (Erving Goffman talked of the enormous amount of nuanced "face-work" that goes into keeping social situations harmonious, whereas he said less about the explicit role of the voice in doing the same.) According to John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis, "the male orgasm is culturally constructed as terminal and limited, while female sexual pleasure is seen as infinitely renewable and multiple. Like the female orgasm, the technology of sampling is not subject to the generational 'exhaustion' of analog technology, but digitally replicates and proliferates the original text. As infinitely repeatable and renewable resources, women's orgasm sounds are thus

the perfect item for digital sampling, epitomizing the ecstasy of communication" ("Aural Sex," 106).[11] If this is the case, then why is this "repeatable and renewable" resource so scarce online? Why is there so little digital sonic intimacy in evidence, when the medium itself is so welcoming for it? And why is the voice of female *jouissance* almost always pinned to its image, when it can be even more sexually resonant taking on an acousmatic life of its own?

Even after the explosion of podcasting (and other forms of sonic "narrowcasting"), it is a challenge to find more than a handful of sites dedicating themselves to exciting the ear rather than the eye, and these tend to have a very short lifespan. The same few files turn up over and over in the same abandoned forums. Any initiative based on user-generated content inspires a meager crop of badly recorded stories about spanking in posh boarding schools, recorded by the same middle-aged man (who sounds like a small-town accountant), or about quickies with the delivery boy, by the same middle-aged woman (who also sounds like a small-town accountant).[12] Even Usenet, usually the dubious Aladdin's Cave of every conceivable kink and proclivity, turns up a single provider of erotic MP3s, which consist mainly of the muted moans of secretly taped bedroom encounters.[13] Again, this is surprising, even if we make allowances for the scopophilic logic that drives modern society. After all, phone sex is still a significant industry, so why hasn't part of this demand found a matching supply online?[14] One notable exception is Porn for the Blind, a nonprofit initiative to help the sight-impaired to enjoy the libidinal benefits of simulated company.[15] Sadly, the people involved decided upon a shortcut and merely dubbed the soundtrack of "mainstream" pornographic movies (that is, heteronormative skin flicks, made primarily in the San Fernando Valley). There is thus no allowance for, or understanding of, medium specificity and the possibilities opened up when attempting to seduce an organ different from the eye. Virtual eavesdropping is probably better than nothing for the lonely blind person, but it

does not place him in the privileged position that today's version of voyeurism does. There is no equivalent of that tellingly charged moment when the actor looks into the camera, no eroticized existential acknowledgment or recognition—which is surely an important incentive for the whole enterprise.

Another interesting exception is the recent cult phenomenon known as ASMR—Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. If you type this acronym into your favorite search engine, you will be presented with a series of videos designed to be experienced with headphones on (and, depending on the video, with eyes closed). These relatively lengthy clips, recorded at a meditational pace, usually feature a woman whispering very quietly, moving from one ear to the other, and occasionally making small noises like taps, clicks, scratches, rubs, shuffles, and blowing. Regular users of such videos claim that these patiently presented sounds combine to create a powerful effect, especially tingles all over their bodies, even leading to a satisfying "brain orgasm."[16] For the casual viewer/listener, these clips are at once banal, obscure, and boring. For fans of this genre, however, ASMR is a very new and powerful form of sonic intimacy, all the more remarkable for being fostered by, and with, a stranger. After a long break, the world thus seems to be finding subcultural ways of treating the ear with the kind of erotic respect it deserves, even if only the ears of people with a very specialized interest. (And even as the affective impact can also depend on visual stimuli, such as when ASMR practitioners dress up in costumes for role-play scenarios featuring an airline attendant or nurse.) This type of privileging of and openness to sound could be classed as a type of "acousmatic listening," as encouraged by Pierre Schaeffer, in which the human subject's sensorium is reconfigured by consciously paying attention to the sonic stimuli that we usually ignore. One wonders, however—as with Samantha, SIRI, "Australian Karen," and other acousmatic voices—how popular things such as ASMR can become, given the deep historical prioritization of the eye

and the hand when it comes to the libido. Can our decidedly non-Zen behaviors and lifestyles tolerate an objectless love object? Or are we forever doomed to demanding physical presence when it comes to the eroticized other?

ASMR is extremely gentle, designed to be tranquil and soothing for the listener. As such, it lies on the other side of the spectrum from the screech of simulated orgasms one finds in most pornography. The latter will likely continue to be the default version of aural sex (presuming some exists), given the surplus aggression that often underlies the pursuit of desire (the Thanatos that lurks beneath Eros). We might even posit the auditory equivalent of the male gaze, which actively seeks out a sonic form of ego reinforcement—hence the tried-and-true method of violently wrenching a sexual sound from the body of the other, in turn considered a trophy smuggled across the existential abyss separating individual beings. That is to say, the masculinist ear is gratified to provoke a cry from the other, which ostensibly originates in the Real (coded as feminine).[17] This self-flattering conceit ("hear how much she desires me") depends on the wager that the naked human voice, unclothed by language, provides an organic, unmediated guarantee of recognition. If there is such an intense effect (or so goes the narcissistic logic), then there must be an agent involved: "I" must really exist, as a being of consequence, since another being is expressing pure pleasure, or pain, at my touch.

Two decades ago, Kaja Silverman pointed out that "it has somehow escaped theoretical attention that sexual difference is the effect of dominant cinema's *sound* regime as well as its visual regime, and that the female *voice* is as relentlessly held to normative representations and functions as is the female body" (*The Acoustic Mirror*, viii). For Silverman—as for Guy Rosolato, from whom she borrows the phrase—the voice is an "acoustic mirror," upon which the various distortions of narcissistic reflection take place. "Since the voice is capable of being internalized at the same time as it is externalized," she writes, "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" (80). This is why Hollywood has been so determined to "synchronize" the female voice with the female body, for fear that it could break free and begin a liberated, more acousmatic existence, thereby challenging the disembodied male voice-over for "enunciative authority."[18] This last "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" (83). Or as Mladen Dolar puts it, "The voice is boundless, warrantless, and—no coincidence—on the side of woman" (*The Voice and Nothing More*, 50–51).[19] Silverman is therefore interested in the "migratory potential" of the voice, along with the ongoing cultural "attempt to restrain it within established boundaries, and so to prevent its *uncontrolled circulation*" (*The Acoustic Mirror*, 83; my emphasis).

Perhaps we are now in a position to begin unraveling the mystery of the absence of aural sex on the Internet. The phallic economy—which regulates the mediascape as rigorously, if not even more so, than the FCC and the MPAA—understands that "very high stakes are involved in the alignment of the female voice with the female image" (Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 46). And if women's voices are allowed to circulate uncontrolled, without being represented or tethered to the overcoded female body, then we could be steered into dangerous waters, not only in the sense of women being able to "speak for themselves" but also in a more metaphysical register, disturbing the taxonomies upon which unspoken patriarchy depends. In other words, the apocalyptic potential at stake is not a matter of "raw," "enigmatic" female power being unleashed into the circuits of male-enabled civilization, for that very threat maintains the ideological status quo (much as the omnipresent threat of terrorism reinforces the hegemony of the system it is so determined to attack). Rather, the genuine menace, from the perspective of "the Man," lies in the aforementioned enun-

ciative authority both generated and appropriated by female voices launched from undetectable locations. It is the *fort-da* game on the cultural level, with political stakes, now that the baby has matured into a subject—a subject obliged to reject the babble of his initiator into language. The mother-as-cultural-midwife must be dismissed, Silverman insists, for the boy to become a man. And female voices that cannot be pinned to desirable or equally dismissible bodies complicate his ideological signal-switching system. Hence Silverman's insistence on the issue of the cry, since "at its most culturally gratifying, the female voice provides the acoustic equivalent of an ejaculation, permitting the outpouring or externalization of what would otherwise remain hidden and unknowable" (68). Silverman quotes Michel Chion, who describes cinema (at least after the advent of sound) as "a machine made in order to deliver a cry from the female voice."[20] She further notes: "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" (77). As a consequence, provoking a cry from the female larynx is to briefly wrap one's [male] self in the enigma of interiority, short-circuiting the filter and censor that mediates between existence and articulation, voice and speech, the viscera and the tongue.[21]

In 1933, Hedy Lamarr found herself in an unprecedented position, as the first person to simulate an orgasm on screen (or in official screen history, at least). In Gustav Machatý's film *Ecstasy*, Lamarr plays a woman who marries an older man, only to find that he is not as interested in her as she had hoped. Returning to her father's house in disappointment, she soon finds an exciting lover in the form of a young stranger with a much more unbridled disposition, making adulterous love with him in his spartan cabin. One remarkable aspect of this film is its transitional status—somewhere between a silent movie and a talkie, with occasional dubbed dialog scenes but mostly

unfolding in the older mode (an aesthetic decision made by Machatý for economic reasons, with his eye on international markets, beyond his native country of Czechoslovakia).[22] Lamarr's climax is silent, but all the more memorable for that. It is impossible to know precisely whether this was a directorial decision, or a matter of technical necessity or convenience during the shooting of that day.[23] The sound of *jouissance*, after all, is at once unique and universal. The patriarchal libidinal economy puts a great premium on the sound of female sexual pleasure, because it is a sonic sign—albeit a commonly treacherous or duplicitous one—of an accomplished mission. The desired vocal index of female surrender to male mastery and potency is both there and not there. Compare Lamarr's "noisy silence" to the banality and ubiquity of faked orgasms in our own era, lampooned so famously by Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally*.[24] Indeed, the cultural space between modernity and postmodernity can be measured precisely by the distance separating Lamarr's silent spasm in *Ecstasy* and the raucous ones to be found on any random X-rated DVD. No sound could be more reified,[25] alienated, and alienating than the latter (except perhaps the vocals in any given Black Eyed Peas or Nickelback song).[26] It is the equivalent of sexual Muzak. In contrast, Lamarr's unheard climax reverberates through the decades. "We cannot resist silence," writes Dolar, "for the very good reason that there is nothing to resist" (172).[27]