

Sssh!



Sssh! - a sound/vision/performance work for "Pseudo" a Brisbane Music Festival Fringe event, May, 1995.

This collaborative work was created during the *Eyephonics* workshops convened by *Metro Arts*, Brisbane. The production was the outcome of series of workshops including those facilitated by Internationally-recognised accoustic artists, the late Kathy Acker, and Joan La Barbara (US) and Barbara Campbell (Australia).

Our aim was to shift the emphasis from the visual to the aural, and to use performance, as a theatre of the body, to raise issues in terms of a question of sensibility and aesthetics, and emotional impact.

Sssh! explored the potential of digital technology and multi-media to disrupt the 'specular' regime of dominant cinema, in which women, as subjects, are simultaneously 'overseen' and 'overheard'.^[1] Sssh! emphasised the disembodiment tendencies of digital technologies. Using the trope of metonymy, body images were made monstrous through fragmentation, and body and voice separated and dispersed, temporally and spatially.

During the performance, three video projections (one to the back and each side above the performer who stared silently at the audience from the theatre stage, whilst seated in darkness, lit only by a suspended lightbulb (a code appropriated from 30s *film noir*) which she occasionally pushes so that it swings erratically. The video projections overhead and on the two wings of the stage provided sound overlays of 'head' voices of women engaged in ritualistic 'recitations' (such as the 'listing' of mundane items and nonsense rhymes) and intermittent closeups of mouth and hand gestures. The effect is one of disembodiment, which operates as a form of resistance to the double form of surveillance which occurs in orthodox fictional film, which, Silverman ^[2] argues, "acts to confine the female subject, who is always 'overseen' and 'overheard', while the male voice is occasionally permitted to transcend this imperative altogether."

Detail:



Notes:

[1] Silverman, Kaja "Dis-Embodying the Female Voice" in Doane, M.A., Mellencamp, P. & Williams L. (Eds) (1984) *Re-vision: essays in feminist film criticism* Los Angeles: Univ. Publications of America, p 131. Silverman's essay elaborates on how the synchronization of image and voice, an imperative within fictional film, acts to confine the female subject, (female subject is always 'overseen' and 'overheard' while the male voice is occasionally permitted to transcend this imperative altogether. She uses examples of mainstream cinema to show this, then uses instances of disembodiment from feminist films to show how a disruption of this synchronization offers a form of resistance to the double form of surveillance which occurs (in being overseen and overheard simultaneously).

[2] Williams, Linda "When the Woman Looks" in Doane, M.A., Mellencamp, P. & Williams L. (Eds) (1984) *Re-vision: essays in feminist film criticism* Los Angeles: Univ. Publications of America, p 83. Williams points out that the female protagonist often fails to look, to return the gaze of the male who desires her: "(i)n the classical narrative cinema to see is to desire. If the woman returns the look, she expresses desires of her own. This is seen to be dangerous. (If a woman looks, she is punished). The 'good girl' is often blind. In monster movies the monster stands in for the gaze of the woman. "The female look - a look given preeminent position in the horror film - shares the male fear of the monster's freakishness, but also recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference. The strange sympathy and affinity that often develops between the monster and the girl may thus be less an expression of sexual desire (King Kong, Beauty and the Beast) and more a flash of sympathetic identification. If the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa's head is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen, seeing herself seeing herself, Lacan's femininity. In other words, her look even here becomes a form of not seeing anything more than the castration she so exclusively represents for the male." Williams notes that Susan Lurie's ("Pornography and the Dread of Women") notion "that the real trauma for the young boy is not that the mother is castrated but that she isn't: she is obviously not mutilated the way he would be if his penis

were taken from him" is a useful one for feminism. She argues that the notion of the woman as a castrated version of a man is a comforting projective fantasy which is "intended to combat the child's imagined dread of what his mother's very real power could do to him ... aimed at convincing himself that women are what men would be if they had no penises - bereft of sexuality, helpless, incapable."

Williams proposes that the horror film may be a rare example of a genre that permits the expression of women's sexual potency and desire, and which associates this desire with the autonomous act of looking, but it does so in these more recent examples only to punish her for this very act, only to demonstrate how monstrous female desire can be.

Bibliography:

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