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Cinema as Archeology

The *Acousmêtre* and the Multiple Layering of Temporality and Spatiality

Hye Jean Chung

Abstract

Michel Chion's concept of the "*acousmêtre*" is useful when exploring the spectator's cinematic experience in regard to the juxtaposition of sound and image, as the acousmatic presence troubles the false sense of unity that is created by the synchronization of sound and image by its invocation of off-screen space through sound. The *acousmêtre* neither prioritizes sound nor image but calls attention to the disjunction between them. Also, the *acousmêtre* leaves the source of the sound open to imagination and interpretation. Thus the presence of the *acousmêtre* destabilizes the seemingly unified, contained realm of the film by expanding the temporal and spatial boundaries of the diegesis. In this essay I explore how the power of this ghostly voice of the *acousmêtre* is manifested in cinema, and the significance of its power to the spectators in their relationship to the film, by asking questions regarding the function and effect of the disembodied voice and spectral presence of the *acousmêtre*, the scope of the *acousmêtre's* power, and what can be created from the disequilibrium that is provoked by this power. I explore possible answers by analyzing the use of the acousmatic voice in *Y Tu Mama Tambien* (dir. Alfonso Cuaron, 2001) and *Calendar* (dir. Atom Egoyan, 1993).

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Sound theorists have often noted the spectator's unease and disorientation at hearing a disembodied voice in film, arguing that classical narrative film uses the synchronization of sound and image to provide a false sense of unity. Rick Altman points out that this practice of synchronization can lead us to believe that the sound track is largely redundant when the image shows us the source of the sound. Altman observes that film spectators are "so disconcerted by a sourceless sound that we would rather attribute the sound to a dummy or a shadow than face the mystery of its sourcelessness."[1] By comparing the sound track to a ventriloquist, Altman successfully promotes a new model for conceptualizing the relationship between sound and image in the cinema. That is to say, "the dummy/image is actually created in order to disguise the source of the sound"[2] and not the opposite, as is commonly believed.

Although Altman's suggestion that the image, rather than the sound, is redundant is provocative by inverting the usual hierarchy of image over sound and complicating the temporal trajectory of film history that transitions from silent to sound cinema, I would consider the relationship between them as a more equivalent and simultaneous, albeit not always synchronized, union and suggest that neither sound nor image precedes the other in significance or order of creation. Within this context, I find Michel Chion's concept of the *acousmêtre* more useful to explore the spectator's cinematic experience in regard to the juxtaposition of sound and image. The acousmatic presence troubles the false myth of unity that is created by the synchronization of sound and image by its invocation of off-screen space through sound, thereby destabilizing the ideological assumption of unity within the film's diegesis. The *acousmêtre* neither prioritizes sound nor image, but calls attention to the disjunction between them, whereas the cinematic ventriloquist often succeeds in perpetuating the illusion of unity by matching the voice to a visible image. The *acousmêtre* leaves the source of the sound open to imagination and interpretation, instead of anchoring it to a dummy/image as in the case of the ventriloquist. By invoking spectral presences that are invisible but present, the *acousmêtre* expands the temporal and spatial boundaries of the diegesis and suggests alternative stories and invisible historical subjects that exist within the seemingly unified, contained realm of the film.

In this essay I examine the manifested power and significance of this ghostly voice of the *acousmêtre* in cinema. I begin by considering the function of the disembodied voice and spectral presence of the *acousmêtre*, the scope of the *acousmêtre's* power, and what is created from the disequilibrium provoked by this power. I explore possible answers by studying the use of the acousmatic voice in *Y tu mamá también* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) and *Calendar* (dir. Atom Egoyan, 1993). Both films were produced in North America but outside the hegemony of Hollywood; *Y tu mamá también* is Mexican and *Calendar* Canadian. An analysis of the films' similarities and differences illuminates the varying extent of power wielded by the *acousmêtre* in each narrative. In *Y tu mamá también*, the *acousmêtre* is steadfastly extra-diegetic, which imbues it with a great amount of narrative power, whereas

[1] Rick Altman, "Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980), 76.

[2] Ibid., 67.

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in *Calendar* the *acousmêtre* loses this power when it enters the diegesis as characters. Also, in contrast to the acousmatic voiceover in *Y tu mamá también*, the *acousmêtre* in *Calendar* is dependent upon various media for its very existence.

Michel Chion asserts that the *acousmêtre*'s powers – ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence – derive from the fact that the acousmatic presence is a voice that is heard but "not-yet-seen," and therefore situated in a unique, paradoxical position: either "*at once inside and outside*" or "neither inside nor outside."[3] Chion writes that the *acousmêtre* "must, even if only slightly, have *one foot in the image*, in the space of the film; he must haunt the borderlands that are neither the interior of the filmic stage nor the proscenium," thereby bringing about "disequilibrium and tension."[4] This liminal status bestows the *acousmêtre* with the ability to transcend the temporal and spatial boundaries of the diegesis, thus breaking the illusion of unity and integrity usually upheld by the synchronization of sound and image. Since disembodied voices are often associated with ghosts, it is not a great leap of logic to connect the uncanny effect of the *acousmêtre* and the spectral qualities of the cinematic medium that projects an image of something that is not there. Both gesture toward an asynchronous relationship between the bodily source and the machinic mediation – whether in the form of recording or representation. Literary scholar Andrew Gibson associates this acousmatic presence with the ghostly figure, asserting that the acousmatic voice is a feature distinctive to cinema that best reflects its proper condition – spectrality.[5] This idea of a spectral presence well encapsulates the haunting quality of the acousmatic voice that hovers somewhere between presence and absence, among different planes of existence, as the ghost – being neither alive nor dead in the strictest sense – floats in the non-space, or simultaneously in multiple spaces, between the world of the living and that of the dead. Rather than the uncanny nature of the specter, however, I focus on its liminal state that enables the seemingly impossible co-existence of past and present in multiple spatiotemporal realms.

The *acousmêtre* plays a crucial role in film as it expands the scope of the cinematic narrative by performing an archaeological task that reveals the multiplicity of temporal and spatial layers, or "sheets" to use a Deleuzian term.[6] The *acousmêtre* foregrounds the disjunction of sound and image in cinema, thereby opening a liminal space in the filmic text that evokes the simultaneous existence of other temporal and spatial planes.[7] This expansion of time and space is especially significant in the narrative structure of the two films, *Y tu mamá también* and *Calendar*, as it reinforces the story that focuses on the central characters embarking on a journey that affects them profoundly on both physical and psychological levels. Due to the presence of the acousmatic voice, the journey across space also becomes one that traverses through time. The co-existence of multiple temporalities and spatialities enabled by the acousmatic voice suggests the spectral presence of alternative stories and

[3] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 23-4.

[4] Ibid., 24.

[5] Andrew Gibson, "'And the Wind Wheezing Through That Organ Once in a While': Voice, Narrative, Film," *New Literary History* 32:3 (Summer 2001), 652.

[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 99.

[7] Music and noise can also be acousmatic in both mainstream and experimental films, as in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) or Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967) and *Band of Outsiders* (1964).

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subaltern bodies. This multiplicity is significant in each film, as it defies and destabilizes the idea of a unified narrative – whether of individual bodies or a national body – by presenting the co-existence of plural historical agents and [multi]national identities: namely, Mexican and Spanish in *Y tu mamá también* and Canadian and Armenian in *Calendar*.

Laura Marks describes cinema as an "act of archaeology" that combines "elements from different strata," thereby producing results that are "contradictory and partial."[8] The idea of film comprising different strata, or layers, allows the spectator to glimpse alternatives to the visual and sound "images" that are presented within the text. Marks specifically discusses "intercultural" cinema that exist in the interstitial space between cultures, but her ideas can be applied to a broader range of films that contain interstitial elements. Marks invokes Deleuze, who was in turn inspired by Foucault, who writes, "If we want to grasp an event we must not show it, we must not pass along the event, but plunge into it, go through all the geological layers that are its internal history."[9] Deleuze further expounds on the notion of temporal layers when he talks about the "the coexistence of all the sheets of past" in his discussion on the time-image.[10] He explores the multiplicity of temporal and spatial sheets in the cinematic time-image, writing that "there is a present of the future, a present of the present and a present of the past, all implicated in the event, rolled up in the event, and thus simultaneous and inexplicable."[11] In other words, we can observe "a simultaneity of presents in different worlds" in certain films.[12]

Using the notion of archaeology to think about temporality and spatiality in film is particularly germane, as a darkened theater is an indeterminate, cavernous environment where the specificities of time and space seemingly cease to exist. It seems natural that the film projected on the screen would further corroborate the illusion of temporal and spatial transcendence. One possible drawback to the use of archaeology as metaphor for cinema, however, is that it implies that the different strata are stacked separately, instead of coexisting on a single plane. Hence the notion of spectrality is particularly useful, as the ghost is not only an entity that defies the idea of time as a unidirectional linear flow, but also one that can occupy different realms of time, space and existence. Ghosts are more powerful than Deleuze's radioactive fossils[13] by refusing to be buried in geographical layers. Rather than lie docilely until they are found, they assert their presence to stimulate memories or provoke action. Their uncanny and inexplicable presence demands notice, prompting one to move beyond a melancholic nostalgia for, or mourning of, the past. Their presence already acknowledges that the past is irrevocable or irrecoverable but still holds a lingering hope for reparation or redemption.

This idea of multiple sheets of time and space is enabled in cinema through the acousmatic voice, whose spectral presence and subversive power is based upon the

[8] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 28.

[9] Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 254-55.

[10] Ibid., 99.

[11] Ibid., 100.

[12] Ibid., 103.

[13] Ibid., 113.

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asynchronization of image and sound.[14] Deleuze himself hints at the subversive power of the acousmatic voice when he observes that the difference between what we see and what we hear imposes an interstice between what he calls the "sound image" and the "visual image," which can be both temporal and spatial.[15] Marks also notes the disjunction between image and sound by borrowing the term "incompossible" images, also used by Deleuze, to describe "visual and sound images that butt into each other but cannot be reconciled in a single discourse."[16] Through the deconstructive method that uses the disjunction between visual and sound images to accentuate gaps and absences, the myth of unity is revealed and destabilized when sound and image do not correspond, but rather contradict each other. Here this contradiction is not necessarily negative, but rather a productive force. This allows for the imagination and recognition of *other* spaces, thus lessening the authority of what is represented in the frame of the film and underscoring its limited scope of visibility.

Describing the mysterious, ungraspable, and spectral nature of sound in cinema, film theorist Mary Ann Doane writes:

> Sound is the bearer of a meaning which is communicable and valid but unanalysable [sic]. Its realm is that of mystery – but mystery sanctioned by an ideology which acknowledges that all knowledge is not subsumed by the ideology of the visible, allows a leakage, an excess which is contained and constrained by that other pole of the opposition which splits knowledge and emotion, intuition, feeling.[17]

Notwithstanding the stress on synchronizing sound and image in classical narrative film to sustain the ideological and psychological need for the illusion of unity, instances of leakage and excess abound in films where sound deviates and expands from the realm of the visible, in particular in the case of voice-over narration, acousmatic or otherwise. Often deployed to communicate an internal monologue, it is also used to signify a temporal disjunction when it accompanies a flashback. Notable examples include *Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944), which is narrated by a fatally wounded man; *Sunset Blvd* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1950), narrated by a dead man; and *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, 1999), narrated by a dying man. The flashback images in these films are synchronized with the sound, as they visualize the words uttered by the unseen narrator. The presence of the narrator who describes past events from the vantage point of the present, however, continuously keeps the spectator aware of the temporal, and often spatial, disjunction between what is seen and heard. This disjunction is usually accentuated through the visual differentiation between the narrator's appearance in the past and in the present – for instance, the narrator's still, lifeless body floating in the pool in *Sunset Blvd* and his live, animated body in the flashback sequences.

[14] More frequently multiple layers of time are manifested purely visually. Examples include *Run Lola Run* (dir. Tom Tykwer, 1998), where a rapid succession of images reveals glimpses into the future; *Wild Strawberries* (dir. Ingmar Bergman, 1957), where past and present merge in the protagonist's flashback dreams; and Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), which is set in the near future, but references recognizable images of the immediate present, such as photographs and news clips of the Iraqi War and Abu Ghraib. See David Bordwell, "Film Futures," *Substance* 31:1 (2002), 88-104.

[15] Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 180-1.

[16] Marks, *The Skin of the Film* , 30.

[17] Mary Ann Doane, "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing," *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis et al. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 49.

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The mystery Doane mentions is intensified in the case of the acousmatic presence, as it inherently implies a speaking human subject as the source of the noise but withholds the corporeality of the subject, thus refusing to anchor the sound to a material body. In *Y tu mamá también*, the voice-over narrator is an example of "the commentator-*acousmêtre*," or "he who never shows himself but who has no personal stake in the image."[18] The presence of this narrator is never explained to the spectator; we never see him, nor fully understand who he is or what kind of connection he has to the characters. This mysterious being raises all sorts of questions: what is his relation to the narrative; how does he acquire all of this information; how does his voice establish its authority; what effect does his narration have; how does it interact with the onscreen images; and finally, why should we trust his narration? This pervasive presence possesses at least three of the four powers of the *acousmêtre* – ubiquity, panopticism, and omniscience.[19] Again, this power is conferred upon the *acousmêtre* through his spectral and liminal status in the film.

At certain intervals, this unseen and unknown narrator interjects—in a dry, detached, and knowing manner reminiscent of voice-of-God narrations in documentary films – to provide tangential knowledge not offered by the onscreen images or by the diegetic conversations, such as background information on the characters or their unspoken thoughts at a given moment in time. Here the sound and the image in the film form a complementary, rather than redundant, relationship. This additional knowledge not only deepens the spectator's understanding of the characters beyond the personas constructed by their words and actions, but it also broadens the scope of our experience beyond the events that transpire onscreen – both temporally and spatially. The temporal layers are multiplied in the film through the acousmatic narrator, for instance, when he reveals private acts and painful memories of the main characters Tenoch (Diego Luna) and Julio (Gael Garcia Bernal) from the past, or when he informs us at the end that the two friends will never meet again. In one scene, the acousmatic voice-over narrates the thoughts of the woman protagonist Luisa (Maribel Verdú), whose body is infected by cancer, on death: "Luisa thought that even in their absence, persons continued to be present, and she wondered how long she would remain alive in the memory of others when she no longer existed." In another scene, the narrator describes the future of a fisherman's family: "At the end of the year, Chuy and his family will have to leave their home to make way for the construction of an exclusive hotel to be built on the nature preserve of San Bernabe…. Chuy will attempt to give boat tours but a collective of Acapulco boatmen, supported by the local Tourism Board, will block him. Two years later, he'll end up as a janitor at the hotel. He will never fish again." During these interstitial scenes, the past and the future are overlapped onto the present, thus amplifying the poignancy of the onscreen images. The interjection of the acousmatic voice thus dissolves the demarcation between past, present, and future. The film implies that different temporalities always coexist on parallel planes or layers, instead of progressing in one direction in a chronological trajectory.

Likewise, the spatial realm is diversified by the allusion to characters that are not present at that point in the film, such as when the acousmatic voice says that Tenoch is thinking of his nanny back in Mexico City as he passes her hometown during his trip. At this moment, the spectator is made aware of three places at once – the car in which Tenoch is sitting, his nanny's birthplace seen outside the car in the distance, and his house in Mexico City where his nanny currently resides. Furthermore, the layers of time and space are closely

[18] Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 21.

[19] We see no marked evidence of omnipotence in this film.

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intermingled when the narrator describes in detail an accident that occurred on a certain spot on the road several years before. Here the voice of the *acousmêtre* not only invokes the past, but also transports the spectator to the past; his vivid description of white feathers, broken cages, bleeding chickens, and two dead bodies lying on the road visualize this scene, creating overlapping images of visible calm and spectral chaos. This movement across time and space is closely associated with the physical and psychological journey taken by the characters. The voice-over narration expands the temporality and spatiality beyond the diegetic space visually presented in the film, as the acousmatic narrator talks about events that happened in the past or will occur in the future and alludes to places not shown onscreen.

There is no looming threat of deacousmatization in this film, as the spectator knows that the narrator will not suddenly materialize in the diegetic space.[20] As an acousmatic presence his voice haunts the non-space of the film. Although the narrator does not appear visually, his voice actively interacts with the diegesis. His non-diegetic narration abruptly interrupts the diegetic conversations of the characters; following a brief moment of silence, he interjects his own voice and speaks over the dialogue, thereby expanding the story from the aural and visual information provided within the frame of the film.

At times, this acousmatic narrator also sticks "*one foot in the image.*"[21] The presence of an extra-diegetic, ghostly entity materializes in moments when the camera dissociates its gaze from the characters and the events in the narrative, and wanders around to capture images that seem insignificant or gratuitous, indicating the existence of other realms besides the one prioritized in the film's diegesis. Paradoxically, this movement of the camera can be described as simultaneously embodied and disembodied. The self-conscious willfulness of the camera to detach itself from the main narrative suggests an *embodied* presence, while the floating, seemingly aimless nature of its gaze suggests a *disembodied* entity. This movement makes one wonder – whose gaze, and whose hand is guiding the camera? Together with the acousmatic voice, this disembodied presence provides a reflexive awareness of the mediated nature of the story, and a reminder of the multiple invisible Others that haunt the fringes of, or hover beyond, the frame. By doing so, it makes tangible invisible historical events and marginal subjects. This task becomes political if one considers the film a national allegory of contemporary Mexican society, as does María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, who sees the two Mexican teenage boys as representing class differences in post-NAFTA Mexico – Tenoch as the wealthy, elite political class and Julio as the aspiring working class – and the Spanish woman Luisa as "an ideal of imperial whiteness."[22] In this context, the invisible Others whose presence is alluded to by the *acousmêtre* are the subaltern, indigenous people – peasants, fishermen, etc. – who are left out, or written out, of the official discourse of the "new, neoliberal Mexico."[23]

[20] *Stranger than Fiction* (dir. Marc Forster, 2006) playfully depicts this power of the unseen narrator. In the film, the authorial figure materializes as a character that coexists in the same fictional realm of the film as the character she is writing about in her book. The author thus lacks the omnipotence of the *acousmêtre*; her "authority" is threatened to the degree that she is confronted by her own creation and ultimately influenced to change the ending of her novel.

[21] Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 24.

[22] María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "In the Shadow of NAFTA: *Y tu mamá también* Revisits the National Allegory of Mexican Sovereignty," *American Quarterly* 57:3 (September 2005), 761.

[23] Ibid., 762.

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In one scene, Tenoch and Julio are in a car discussing possible reasons for the congested traffic that surrounds them. After a brief pause, the camera moves out of the car to show the cityscape from a high angle, thereby revealing the cause to the audience: a corpse lying in the middle of the road. The *acousmêtre* explains that the dead man is a bricklayer named Marcelino Escutia, who was hit by a bus while crossing the street. Such visual and aural digressions of this ghostly entity acknowledge the presence of those whose stories are not directly told in the narrative – subaltern subjects who are less privileged socially and economically, such as Marcelino Escutia, Tenoch's nanny, or the village people whom Tenoch, Julio and Luisa pass or encounter during their road trip. These interstitial moments briefly put the main narrative trajectory on hold and present peripheral stories related to the main characters and to random people who have no apparent relation to, or effect on, the trio. As suggested in the traffic jam sequence, however, seemingly disparate incidents are connected within a larger structure of historical events, the knowledge of which is communicated to the spectator through the acousmatic voice of the narrator who can see the different sheets of time and space. This all-seeing, all-knowing voice induces a sense of a fate that all is predestined – already written and already known. Through the omniscient power of the *acousmêtre*, reminiscent of a God-like figure, the spectator comes to accept the authority of his words. After all, "the greatest *acousmêtre* is God,"[24] whose undeniable and immutable power is ensured by the fact that no human being can ever see his image. As such, it is crucial that the *acousmêtre* is never made human, that is to say visible, in the frame. He must remain outside the diegetic space so as to retain his authority as panoptic narrator who can see all the layers of incompossible images.

The acousmatic voiceover underscores the fact that this is a constructed tale told by a narrating presence. Rather than deepening the divide between spectators and characters, however, it substantiates the latter as authentic, albeit fictional, beings with pasts and futures that extend beyond the scope of what is presented in the film. By transcending the limitations of temporality and spatiality, the *acousmêtre* in *Y tu mamá también* enjoys both narrative and authorial power; he can zoom in to relate the stories of the characters and zoom out to tell the broader geopolitical history of Mexico as a nation.

In comparison, the acousmatic narrators in *Calendar* enjoy a very limited scope of power. Although their story is also one of national, or multi-national, identities, it is told on a more personal level. In *Calendar*, a photographer (played by the director Atom Egoyan) and his wife (played by his real-life wife Arsinee Khanjian), who are Armenian but raised elsewhere, travel around the Armenian countryside with the help of a local guide (Ashot Adamian) and take photographs of ancient churches to make a calendar. As in *Y tu mamá también*, *Calendar* also centers on a triangulated love story among the three main characters. Each character has a different level of connection with Armenian national identity and consciousness.[25] Of the three, the photographer is the most detached from Armenian culture and history, and the guide the most embedded. The woman, as bilingual translator, is situated somewhere between the two men and the two cultures they represent. After the trip, the photographer returns home, but his wife remains in Armenia with the guide.

The photographer and his wife/translator both take on the role of "the already visualized *acousmêtre*" at various points in the film. In contrast to *Y tu mamá también*'s potent acousmatic narrator who never appears in the film's diegesis, here the acousmatic characters

[24] Chion, *Voice in Cinema,* 27.

[25] Atom Egoyan, "An Essay on *Calendar*," *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman et al. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 96.

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are constantly subjected to deacousmatization. Therefore they cannot wield as much power as the disembodied *acousmêtre*; they are neither omniscient nor omnipotent, and when they do enjoy the powers of ubiquity and panopticism it is only to a very limited extent. In the flashback scenes, the photographer becomes the acousmatic voice when he stands behind the camera and talks to his wife. Meanwhile, in the present, the wife becomes the acousmatic presence when her voice is heard on the answering machine, or in the video footage of their trip – her recorded voice thus transcends temporal and spatial distance. However, she has no power over her acousmatic voice; it is the photographer who plays, screens or stops the recording of her voice. We hear but never see the photographer in the past in Armenia, whereas we hear but never see his wife in the present in Canada. The two inhabit different, disconnected sheets of time and place, which further accentuates their alienation from each other, as they cannot cross the temporal and spatial distance that divides them. Inhibited by the thickness of temporal and spatial layers, they are able to occupy the same frame only by becoming an acousmatic presence. Only their voices – not their images – are allowed to commingle in the same time-space.

Their negotiation of national identity is expressed by different modes of communication: the photographer via his mastery of visual media, and the wife via her command of language. The alienation between the photographer and his wife is thus intensified by the fact that they communicate via disparate media that cannot be synchronized in the film. While language becomes a tool that allows the wife, fluent in both Armenian and English, to fluidly traverse the two national identities, it acts as a barrier for the husband. As translator, the wife becomes the liminal figure who mediates between husband and guide, and between Canada and Armenia. At first, most of what she says is a translation of her husband's or the guide's words. As the film progresses, however, it becomes evident that she increasingly paraphrases their words while translating, and expresses her own thoughts. She also converses more with the guide in Armenian than with her husband in English; the further she draws away from her husband, the closer she moves toward her Armenian heritage.

Meanwhile, the photographer lacks this linguistic power, which leads to his alienation. He cannot join in the conversations between his wife and the guide as he cannot speak or understand Armenian. He expresses his frustration by repeatedly asking, "What are you talking about?" Instead, his relationship to the national spaces of Armenia are recorded and relayed via the visual media of photography and video. The photographer mediates his experience of the trip to his ancestral land via his still and video cameras. He is unresponsive when the Armenian guide asks him why he does not get closer to the churches that he photographs. He is more interested in capturing the perfect image of the ancient buildings, fussing over the composition and lighting of his pictures, rather than learning their cultural significance as religious edifices and historical landmarks. As photographer and filmmaker, Egoyan thus expresses the power of visual images to generate and intensify a diasporic subject's national identification.[26]

As if to compensate for his lack of linguistic prowess, the photographer refuses to relinquish his manipulative power over recorded images. Throughout the film, he controls all the images in the past and the present, and as filmmaker, also over the whole film. During the trip, he chastises his wife for wasting the batteries of their video camera, and his image is never captured on her camera. It is always his wife who is caught in his viewfinder. In the present, we see the video footage of the Armenian trip through his point of view as he watches it on his television screen and sometimes fast-forwards through it. He thus wields

[26] Ibid., 93.

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power over his wife's image *and* her voice, as he can hear it whenever he replays her message on his machine, or watches the video footage. Her image is always several temporal layers removed from the present, as it is mediated through the photographer's video camera or the filmmaker's movie camera.[27] Furthermore, her voice is always mediated through the mechanical filter of the answering machine or the video camera.

The conflict between the photographer and his wife – in their personal relationship as a married couple and in their national identification with Armenia – is expressed by the constant temporal and spatial disjunctions between sound and image; throughout the film, multiple layers of asynchronized sound images and visual images separate the two. Sound images from the past cut into visual images of the present. Even when both the visuals and the voices are recordings from the past they do not coincide. Sounds from one point in time intrude other moments, for instance, when the voice of the wife leaving a message in the present is played over the video footage of Armenia taken in the past. In the video images, the past is overlapped with the present, as the manipulation of the images by the photographer reminds the audience that we are watching this footage with him in the present. In one scene the photographer fast-forwards through the footage, and in another he freezes the frame on his wife's image, thereby highlighting the asynchronization of the visual and the aural. This dissociation between image and sound disorients the spectator and causes confusion in our perception of temporal and spatial coordinates. This disorientation is intensified by the repetitive nature of the images and by the overlapping layers of visual images; the moving image of his wife and the Armenian guide roaming the landscape is captured as a still shot and later commodified as photographs in a calendar – to be looked at for a month, or a year, and then duly discarded.

As central motif, the calendar that hangs on the wall in the photographer's kitchen plays an important role by signaling the passage of time as each page is replaced every month. Instead of implying a unidirectional flow of time, however, this calendar becomes the entryway into the shared memories of the Armenian trip. Each flashback sequence is preceded by a shot of the calendar, the image of the still photograph becoming unfrozen in time by morphing into physical spaces that the characters occupy and traverse. In addition to the flashbacks, multiple temporalities and spaces constantly intermingle throughout the film. Different temporalities are expressed through various forms of media: the three types of cameras – still, video, and film – the VCR, and the answering machine. At times the spectator is invited to enter the past along with the characters, but often we simply see video footage from the past, which is visually differentiated from the clear, bright images of the present by their low resolution and bluish tint. The doubling of temporal sheets – the simultaneity of past and present – is further accentuated through the multiple layers of sound. In one sequence, the wife's voice from the past continues across the sound track as the image track shifts from the past to the present, and immediately we hear another woman's diegetic voice in the present talking on the phone in a foreign language in concert with the photographer's extra-diegetic voice reading a letter out loud.

The multiple temporalities and spatialities created by the disjuncture between image and sound indicate the geographical and psychological distance between the photographer and his wife. In contrast to *Y tu mamá también*, where the plurality of temporal and spatial strata functions as an empowering, inclusive narrative device, the overwhelming layers of mediation – still photographs, video footage, and film images – in *Calendar* immobilize the characters, thus implying that the distance between the two cannot be bridged. This is

[27] The distinction between the two is unclear, as they are ultimately the same person.

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accentuated by the rupture between sound and image that is produced by the incongruity of their acousmatic voices and disassociated images.

This is best exemplified in the last sequence of the film; the wife describes her strongest memory during their trip to Armenia, again relayed as a message left on her husband's answering machine – the moment when they drive through a huge flock of sheep, which the husband videotapes, while the Armenian guide holds her hand. In an echoing voice that underscores the spectral nature of the woman's disembodied presence, she plaintively asks her husband, "Did you know? Were you there? Are you there?" This sequence encapsulates the film's stylistic form of temporal and spatial disorientation, which mirrors the sense of alienation created by the conflicting modes of national identification in the narrative. The sense of temporal, spatial and emotional distance between the two characters is expressed through the clear disjunction between image and sound. While hearing the woman's acousmatic voice describe what happened in the car, we see the video footage, recorded by the photographer, of the flock of sheep outside. Her acousmatic voice signals her presence; it floats around the frame, failing to find a body onto which it can anchor itself. This creates a doubly destabilizing effect for the spectator, as the disjointed experience of hearing the woman's voice without seeing a body is amplified by the absent presence of the silent and invisible man. We do not know the man's temporal or spatial coordinates in relation to the images we see and the sounds we hear.

Through its unique ability to be simultaneously present and absent, the disembodied presence of the *acousmêtre* manages to occupy a "no-place," the "all-around," which is inaccessible to those who are anchored to an onscreen body.[28] This spectral voice invites the spectator to enter this mysterious realm that is neither inside nor outside the filmic text, and to experience the disintegration of temporal and spatial boundaries. By creating a liminal gap through the disjunction of image and sound, the acousmatic voice in cinema performs the archaeological task of multiplying sheets of time and space. What is the meaning, then, of these multiple layers of mediation? Who does this ultimately empower, if at all? The *acousmêtre* punctures the ideology of the visible through leakage and excess, which indicate the presence of subjects who exist beyond the confining frames of narrative and historical discourse as in *Y tu mamá también*. It can also express the sense of confusion and alienation caused by multiple time-spaces and asynchronicity as in *Calendar*. In any case, the acousmatic voice allows the spectators to see, sense, or glimpse these multiple layers of incompossible images. By doing so, it gestures toward the presence of spectral or subaltern subjects who dwell in the multiple time-spaces that are made invisible or irrelevant by dominant ideologies of limited perspectives, restrictive frameworks, unified narratives, and official histories.

[28] Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 44.

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