

Letting go and finding voice: *AIR*

Jenny Chamarette



Voice, embodiment and affect in *AIR* (Anna Cady and Pauline Thomas, 2015) via CriticalCommons.org

Let go. Let go of it. This need to give an account of it, of the film, *AIR* (2015).¹ I am not giving an account. But how do I speak about myself around and inside and beyond a *film*? One that touches me, moves and inspires me to write in airy, aleatory ways? *What voice can I locate in the breath between this film and me?* This is my question. And the breath between this film and me is also the breath between you and me. If you read this aloud, you will breathe—and think—this space differently.

I have been asked to bring to bear my phenomenological and embodied approaches upon a film, in order to explore the thinking, writing, breathing space between them. How that breathing space might help to articulate or inspire affect, how it can become *moving*, before and after and between forms of language. With or without words. I can only do this relationally, not directly. I feel like Echo, endlessly repeating the sacred voice of art that I can only reflect.

If I try to give an account of *AIR*, particularly a gendered one, I fear I will lose the precarious balance between the film and me, the film and you. Affect, the inspiration of movement and emotion, is communicated through abstract images and vocalisations,

but particularly in the interchanges between these elements of *AIR*, and the way I come to write about them. By working laterally, between the film (that I cannot give an account of) and me (who I cannot account for) and you (who I do not know), I will no doubt enrage linear thinkers. The extraordinary lateral thinker, Kaja Silverman, wrote in the late 1980s that, in certain feminist film practices, “the female voice is shown to coexist with the female body only at the price of its own impoverishment and entrapment.”² By coexisting between the body and voice of my breath, and the body and voice of the film, I hope that this writing in 2016 can sustain something more enriching than impoverishment, more abandoned than entrapment.

Perplexed, I have been reading Judith Butler’s book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Trying to wrap my head around the tricky compulsion to speak of and about myself—my own position—in relation to this film, *AIR*.³ Knowing that when I do try to speak *about* myself, something *of* my self gets lost. Somewhere outside and inside the container of me.

Let *go. Breathe*. The instruction to breathe is a useful tactic of mindfulness, because the body knows how to breathe already. It needs no prompting, no intervention from a brain space that I am already conscious of. Breath is, of necessity, unconscious, biologically automated.

Except that, of course, everything intervenes in my breathing. Breathing requires air as an intermediary for the passage of one chemical into another. For the movement of stardust into the carbon atoms that make up my bones. The enclosing environment of air is necessary for my survival, but these aerated environments also shape my experience.

My mood, too, arbitrates the conditions of my breathing. Every affect I experience intercedes in the in-out breath. Anxiety and pain quicken my breathing. Meditation and sleep slow it. As Luce Irigaray puts it, air is “the mediation and medium of life.”⁴

I watch the film *AIR*, closed-mouthed. I do not have a cold today, and my sinuses are clear so I let air in through my nose hitting the back of my throat and rushing down my trachea into my lungs where... I can’t feel the air any more. No nerves to tell me what the sensation of air is, how it touches the bronchioles within my lungs. The poet Tami Haaland wrote of this film: “How can you know your body, aside from air?”⁵ A frisson runs from the nape of my neck down my spine when I think of that phrase. And still, air fills me. Then it leaves in a short burst that would be a rush of bubbles if I were underwater, as I often prefer to be.

A sigh.

The stuttering inhalations of a rawlings and Sachiko Murakami that I hear in front of me in *AIR* are not silent, not at all. Angela and Sachiko are poets working with vocal sound, and as I watch the opening moments of *AIR*, their voices begin to utter noises that rush through vocal range and pitch and volume. Their breath stutters, while astral dust motes drift in and out of illumination against a lightless background. And then, as a smoke curtain of light fades into being in the centre of the screen, these excitable, desirous pantings transform into a moment of harmony between two voices.

What urges me to make *my* breathing silent in any case? *Mouth breather* is an insult: there is a fury in that phrase that I do not understand. Something to do with there being a right and wrong way to breathe. Breathing should *not* come from the mouth. Breathing must emerge from somewhere else. The ribcage perhaps. The silent stomach or nasal cavities. A cultural imperative to regulate breath so that it is even, quiet, unchanging, unobtrusive, unobstructed by the passageways of flesh and mucus that make up a body. Breathing cannot be *noisy*, because if it is, it *intrudes*, it is *unintelligent*. I can't help but wonder whether the noisy intrusions of my breath, or my attempts to stifle them, also have something to do with trying to be an acceptable woman. A woman who does not make too much noise, particularly when speaking nothing.

Anne Carson reminds me how unholy, how *unintelligible* the sound of women is thought to be.⁶ In ancient Greece, sound uttered from a female body, bubbling up through a female throat, was considered inferior, undesirable, unspeakable, abject, sexual. Female sound, for Aristotle and Aristophanes, Sophocles and Hippocrates, was too far from language, too alien to rational discussion, for it to be appropriately contained and translated. Female sound, in the classical tradition—and alarmingly still—needs to be silenced, channelled or sexualised in order to be neutralised. The mythical monstrous woman, Baubo, who lifts her skirts to expose her genitals and screams obscenities, “engenders a creature in whom sex is cancelled out by sound and sound is cancelled out by sex.”⁷

I cannot see how the sound poetry of *AIR* could or should be neutralised. Watching the film with the sound off is like watching another film entirely. In front of *AIR*, what I hear is a form of translation: an embodied interpretation. At the heart of this film is a collaboration between two filmmakers who made the visual images, Anna Cady and Pauline Thomas, and two poets, Angela and Sachiko, who made the sounds. The fact that these participants are all women seems both inconsequential—in that gender was not the primary concern of the film or its collaborations—and absolutely vital. The fact that suffering and pain underwrite this film as much as joy and self-expression do: this is part of the lifeblood of the film. The knowledge that Angela and Sachiko were asked

to produce an interpretation *from the body* of *AIR*'s image-track allows me to bring my own breathing body to my writing, to understand what voice is given in the breath between me and the film.

I know these things because I was part of the process that brought this film into being: writing, curating and responding to *AIR* as its shape evolved. But this kind of writing leads me back to giving an account, and I need to let go of that.

Everything is change in the sounds I hear as I watch *AIR*, just as everything is change in what I see. First spectral notes, then cloth or clouds or round tendril pillars of opaque sensation. The sounds I hear do not *describe* what is seen. Nor do they accompany the images. They *dance*. They *play*. They *choke*. As tendril pillars become an image of a window, as a silhouetted hand presses against a blind, these dancing female voices cavort between the rhythms of the smoke trails. A sudden vocal crescendo when the blind is raised reveals livid traces of green. The voices do not say "green." They do not speak any words at all. I think "green." I think winter mud-choked grass and skeletal defoliated branch stalks. I think: gardens, and gardeners. Working the soil.

Virginia Woolf, lost in one of her oneiric reflections on death, only returns her attention to a moth battering the windowpane by her writing desk when sound ceases.⁸ When a different order of sound descends, she pauses her writing to observe the hiatus. The labourers in the fields outside her room have halted over lunchtime. When productive, monotonous, labouring sound is arrested, another kind of attention seeps in. Attention to the minute, the unnoticed, the dying. Woolf's essay on that creaturely, transient death powerfully influenced Pauline and Anna's film experiments with air but, when I read it, I see it differently. I think of the place of labour in that essay, and where it is withheld.

Breath becomes *work* when it takes conscious force to produce. Laboured breath is always a sign of some great exertion: effort to master pain, to live, to recuperate equilibrium. What about the effort of uttering the unutterable? And what is unutterable in this film? Rivulets of images, projected onto smoke trails, follow unknown paths. The voices follow those paths too, and their guttural gasps, susurrations, and wide-mouthed exhalations sound like half-formed syllables and phonemes that refuse to become words, and which instead flow back into wheezes and croaks. Images rise and fall in a moment, on the cusp of intelligibility: an opening of a window blind falls back into pale transparent streams. It takes work to refuse to become language, to stay beneath meaning, to bring about a voice between body, breath and image. A dew-laden spider web surfaces like velvet cloth and disintegrates into the blackness. I hold my own breath as I hear a wide chest-resonant *ah* of surprise or delight. Whispers in

the space between teeth and tongue, like will-o-the-wisp sibilants. Breath is drawn out to the very last mote of light on a dewdrop on gossamer, before collapsing into momentary silence.

Yes, this dance of vocalised breath is effortful work. But the effort takes on a different direction. Creativity is a form of labour too. It does not come out of nothing, even if, like *AIR*, it takes on breathy, ephemeral forms. I am working very hard to write this piece, this experiment in thought. The knot of labour that ties itself in my lower back when I have sat at a desk for too long reminds me of the toll of a sedentary life, and the moment-by-moment effort of body and mind to outline thoughts on a page.

Breathing is not always vocalising. Drawing air across the vibrations of vocal chords, using the body as a resonance chamber: these everyday undertakings are also formidable, magical acts of physics and biochemistry. Vocalised breath without words is noise, and yet who could say that these noises are meaningless or effortless? Or that they could be neutralised by my attempts to say what they mean?

The voices are *funny*: they play like children, dancing through pastel curlicue matrices sliding in and out of figuration and abstraction. I laughed when I first heard them: when I was little I spent hours sitting in the bathtub making just those kinds of screechy hollow alarm calls, until the water was cold and my fingers had become walnut-dimpled.

The voices ricochet and sputter over a pale sky and a pollarded tree silhouetted; over and between the faintest outlines of barbed wire. And then: nothing but smoke itself, twin curls dancing. And the sound brings that dance to bear on me. A sexual, alluring, repellent, visceral dance.

Sitting here, trying hard to remember to breathe beyond the breath I hear, it is easy for me to forget that inspiration and expiration carry themselves between the breath and the mind. Inspiration is to receive a call from above, from beyond, from elsewhere, and to allow it to enter in. Expiration lets out, excises, eliminates waste and sometimes life too. We all have expiry dates, even if we do not know them yet. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that “there really is an inspiration and expiration of Being.”⁹ This always seemed cryptic to me. We breathe in order to be anything at all in the world. Breath is the soul of us—it both enters and leaves us, and moves between us, even if I can never give an account of the “me” and the “you” that make up the “we.”

But how can these twin voices—the you and the me, the twin poets of sound, the twin makers of the image—how can these couplings inspire playfulness, humour and sexuality when they also prefigure effortful death, choking and the end of life?

I know that this particular sound poem by Angela and Sachiko was, for Pauline, hard to bear. Her creative integrity as an artist concerned with mortality, and her terminal illness, made the chokes and screeches intolerable. But for me, since there is breath still in my body and since my preoccupations are not solely to do with mortality, the sounds I hear are childlike, chaotic, joyful, playful, excessive, aggressively sexual. But not deathlike. I know that Anna now is struggling to continue with the work that she and Pauline produced so seamlessly, so umbilically, together. Since Pauline died in January 2016, her traces lie as intricately over the film as the smoke trails drape over mist-dampened constellations of the spider web, as ephemerally as the spiral plumes that pirouette into the ether dusk.

My new writerly conversant Anne Carson writes, “I wonder if there might not be another [...] kind of human self than one based on dissociation of inside and outside. Or indeed, another human essence than self.”¹⁰ I wonder what this human essence other than self could be. A vocalised breath between a me and a you. A me I cannot give an account of, and a you who I do not know. In *AIR*, there is a breath between the inside and outside, between translucent smoke and visceral voice, sexuality and death, joy and expiration, noise and meaning. It helps to let go of myself in this. It helps not to give an account. That is not what the breath between this film and me is for. Let go. *Breathe*.

Jenny Chamarette is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Queen Mary, University of London. She is the author of *Phenomenology and the Future of Film* (2012), and has published widely on embodiment, affect and the moving image. For some years she has been exploring creative alternatives to academic scholarship through art writing, curation and programming artist’s moving image work, including *AIR*. She is currently at work on her next book, *Cinemuseology: Museum Vitriines, Digital Screens and Cultural Politics*.

Notes

¹ *AIR*, Anna Cady and Pauline Thomas, 2015. The version uploaded to Critical Commons is 4 minutes long: other versions at varying lengths from four to forty minutes have been installed or screened at the Whitechapel Gallery, the Globe Road Poetry Festival, and St John on Bethnal Green in London, at Winchester Cathedral, Tremenheere Sculpture Garden in Cornwall, and The Manor at Hemingford Grey, Cambridgeshire. *AIR* is part of the Embodied Interpretations project, which Anna and I write about on our blog, www.talkthinkmake.wordpress.com

² Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 141.

³ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 65-82, 111-136.

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 14. I am indebted also to Davina Quinlivan's thinking on breath and Irigaray in *The Place of Breath in Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

⁵ Haaland's unpublished poem is included in some of the longer versions of *AIR*, as an embodied interpretation of the film's images.

⁶ Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions Books: 1995), 119-142.

⁷ *Ibid*, 136.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, "The Death of The Moth," in *The Death of The Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1941), 9-11.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 151-61.

¹⁰ Carson, "The Gender of Sound", 136-7.