

## “You’ll Get Your Big Trip”: Acousmatic Music, The Voice, and the Mirror Stage in *Enter the Void*

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*“Am I hearing voices in the voice? But is it not the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? Is not the entire space of the voice an infinite space?” – Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>*

**G**aspar Noé’s *Enter the Void* (2009) recounts the psychedelic experiences and afterlife of its protagonist Oscar from an unconventional first-person perspective.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the film, the audience will observe a DMT (dimethyltryptamine) trip in Oscar’s mind, experience his death and the tragic aftermath for his loved ones, and finally observe his re-birth—seeing and hearing through Oscar’s perceptions, and experiencing his hallucinations, dreams, and memories.<sup>3</sup> Even after his death, the audience assumes the viewpoint of his disembodied ghost. In order to convey its disjointed and subjective narrative, *Enter the Void* eschews continuity editing techniques such as shot/reverse-shot and match-on-action in favor of hidden edits, jump cuts, and extended visual effects transitions.<sup>4</sup> Though critical response to the film was largely divided, critics consistently lauded the film’s visual style, remarking upon its effective use of mise-en-scène and cinematography to accomplish its unique sensory perspective.

Often overlooked, however, is the role of sound in constructing the spatio-temporal displacements that help establish *Enter the Void*’s hallucinatory universe. The film’s use of sound is as unorthodox as its visual style, using an abstract electronic score that blurs the distinctions between score and sound effects, and a highly subjective treatment of the voice, rather than “realistic” Hollywood-style conventions. The sound element of mise-en-scène in traditional narrative film, “Hollywood’s sonic *vraisemblable*,” creates continuous, realistic off-screen spaces by the use of background sound effects and synchronized dialog. In her book examining the voice in cinema, *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman views these techniques that help to suture the spectator into the story as “the sound analogue of the shot/reverse shot formation.”<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the temporal and spatial disruptions created by *Enter the Void*’s unique sonic aesthetic introduce an ontological uncertainty that is necessary to convey the metaphorical spaces and imaginary events that comprise Oscar’s hallucinations and afterlife.

*Enter the Void's* synesthetic techniques do much more than simply give the film a "trippy" feel to accompany Oscar's DMT-induced hallucinations. Acousmatic music and abstract sound design engage the spectator on a pre-symbolic level that reflects the altered states experienced by the protagonist under the influence of psychedelic drugs. Rather than being determined by plot and character progression, the stylistic expression of *Void's* narrative resonates on the level of Oscar's unconscious. His familial narrative of rupture and loss reveals a fixation on an irrecoverable childhood paradise, and his subsequent attempts to escape his subjectivity through the use of psychedelics are reflected by a musical style that evokes the fantasy of a pre-subjective "sonorous envelope."<sup>6</sup> From a technical and semiotic perspective, the film's score engages what Michel Chion and Pierre Schaeffer have called "reduced listening," in order to create sonic experiences that exceed linguistic description. *Enter the Void's* use of the voice equally evokes a pre-subjective experience of listening through creative mixing and the application of spatio-temporal effects. The disembodiment of the voice alters perceptions of off-screen space and cinematic time, allowing the creation of flexible, discontinuous diegetic spaces and expressing the emotional states of the film's characters.

*Enter the Void's* narrative is complex and characterized by temporal discontinuity. Most of the film occurs after Oscar's death, with large portions of it appearing to take place as visions that his ghost experiences.<sup>7</sup> In spaces like the one we enter in Oscar's DMT trip, physical objects and time seem to disappear. In the erotic sensory overload of Hotel Love, past, present, and future become confused, and the characters we see inhabiting this space are merely illusory spectres appearing to Oscar's ghost. While the important events of the plot occur mostly in a section of the film that represents Oscar's memory, they are entirely out of chronological order. For the audience, the events of the plot must be assembled into a timeline like pieces of a puzzle. In order to analyze the film in detail, I find it necessary to include a brief synopsis.

*Enter the Void* begins on an apartment balcony in Tokyo where we are introduced to the protagonist Oscar (Nathaniel Brown) and his sister Linda (Paz De La Huerta). Oscar is an American expatriate living in Japan as a small-time drug dealer, selling ecstasy and acid in the nightclubs while his sister Linda works as an exotic dancer. His defining characteristics are his desire for his sister Linda and his compulsive use of psychedelic drugs. Later in the film, we learn that he and his sister were separated as children following the death of their parents in a car accident. Oscar has two close friends in Tokyo besides his sister. Alex (Cyril Roy) is a French painter of abstract art and a fellow psychedelic user who regales Oscar with tales of his past trips. Victor (Olly Alexander) is the twenty-something son of British expatriates; he supplies Oscar with the cash to fund his drug dealing and introduces him to his family. Subsequently, Victor's mother Suzy (Sara Stockbridge) begins an affair with Oscar and lends him the money to fly his sister Linda to Japan. When Victor later finds out that Oscar has slept with his mother, he asks Oscar to meet him at their local bar The Void and sets up a drug bust with the Tokyo authorities for revenge. When the police rush in to arrest him, Oscar runs to the bathroom and locks the door. Trying to buy time in order to flush his pills down the toilet, he yells out that he has a gun and is fatally shot through the door of the bathroom.

With the film's opening images, the first-person perspective is immediately established—the camera pans and tilts to follow Oscar's gaze, while sporadic black frames emulate the blinking of his eyes. The sound of Oscar's voice is instrumental in creating this perspective—it is warm, centered in the stereo field, and significantly louder than the voices of the other characters in the film. The equalization used on his voice gives it a viscerally nasal mid-range that convincingly mimics the unique resonant qualities one hears in one's own voice.<sup>8</sup> This is one of the first things we notice about *Enter the Void's* unique sonic aesthetic, that rather than using the voice to construct the off-screen space of Oscar's apartment, the film uses his voice to construct a subjective interior space, the space of Oscar's mind.

In this scene's dialog, Linda expresses her concern that Alex's influence is turning Oscar into a junkie before she leaves for work. As soon as Oscar locks the door behind her, the effects on his voice change in order to imply that we are hearing his interior monologue. Slight echoes and delays create a swirling effect to differentiate his thoughts from his speech, subtly shifting us further into Oscar's interior, psychological space. Oscar goes directly to his stash, pulls out a bag of DMT, puts it in his pipe, and smokes it (fig. 1). As the hallucinogen begins to take hold, the sound effects deployed on Oscar's voice increase in intensity, further obscuring his words in a blur of indistinct echoes and reverb. The lights in the apartment begin shifting colors, and the lines of the walls bend and pulse. As Oscar leans back onto the bed, the camera pulls away from the first-person perspective, rising above the bed and looking down on his prostrate form, spinning slowly. The apartment suddenly disappears and is replaced with images of red, glowing webs, and vaguely cellular objects floating in black space (fig. 2). The sound that accompanies this scene is entirely abstract, combining electronic howling sounds with vaguely wind-like washes, ringing and rising sounds, and low wet gurglings—all the while faint, indistinguishable voices are whispering.

Figure 1  
Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
The unique first-person  
perspective.

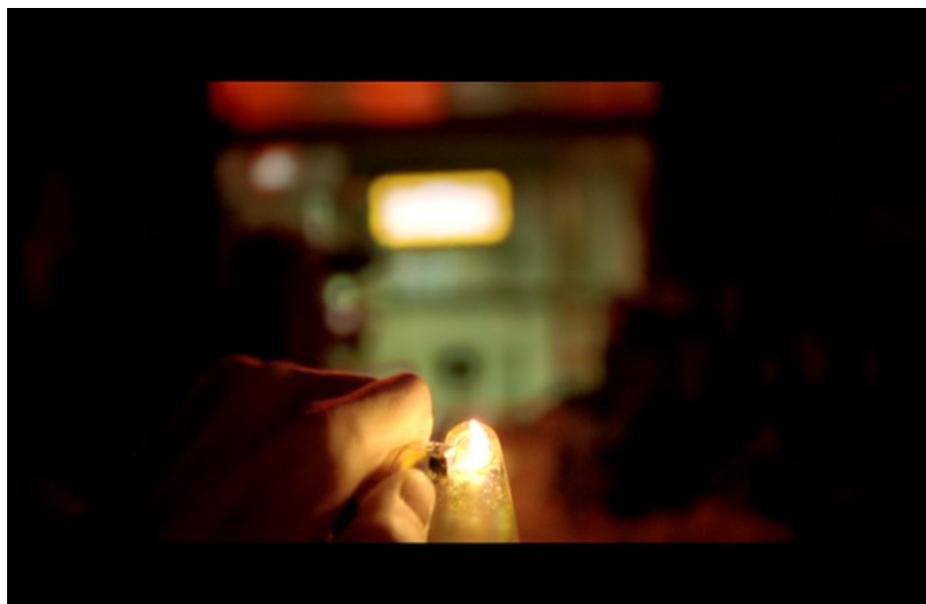
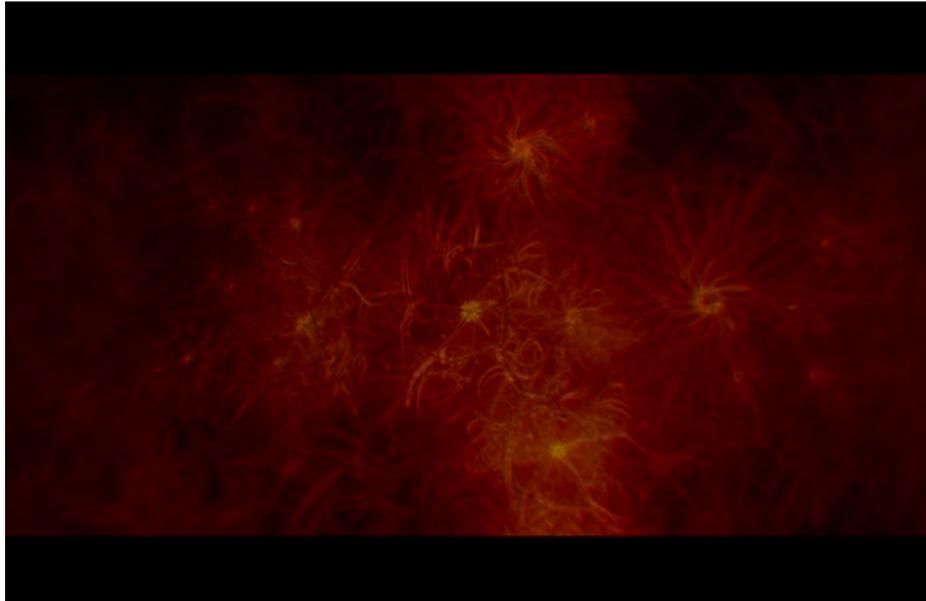


Figure 2  
 Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
 The psychedelic imagery of  
 the DMT trip.



Shortly after this opening trip sequence, Alex shows up at Oscar's apartment and they head to The Void together. On the way there, Alex tries to explain the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to Oscar, essentially describing the structure of the rest of the film to the audience and foreshadowing the events that Oscar will experience after he is shot a few minutes later:

Basically, when you die, your spirit leaves your body. Actually, at first you can see all your life, like, reflected in a magic mirror. And then you start floating like a ghost, and you can see anything that's happening around you. You can hear everything, but you can't communicate with the world of the living. And then you see these lights, all these different lights of all different colors. These lights are the doors that pull you into higher places of existence. But most people, they actually like this world so much that they don't want to be taken away. So that's when the whole thing turns into a bad trip. The only way out is to get reincarnated. Does it make any sense?<sup>9</sup>

The following scene in which we view Oscar's death through his own eyes is strikingly similar in its audio-visual design to the DMT trip sequence just a few minutes earlier. As Oscar lies on the floor bleeding, we hear the sound of his heartbeat slowing and stopping. Echo, delay, and reverb gradually reduce his thoughts of shock and protest to an incomprehensible whisper before finally extinguishing themselves in silence upon his death. The camera's perspective floats gradually up towards the ceiling light in the bathroom, then looks down on his dead body from outside (fig. 3).

This is the most dramatically unconventional perspective in the film—as it purports to observe events from the viewpoint of Oscar's disembodied ghost. This perspective uses continuous camera movement and a bird's eye angle to give the sense of floating above and around the other characters in the film. As a ghost, Oscar will fly rapidly through walls and over the streets of Tokyo, an effect accomplished by the heavy use of visual effects transitions.

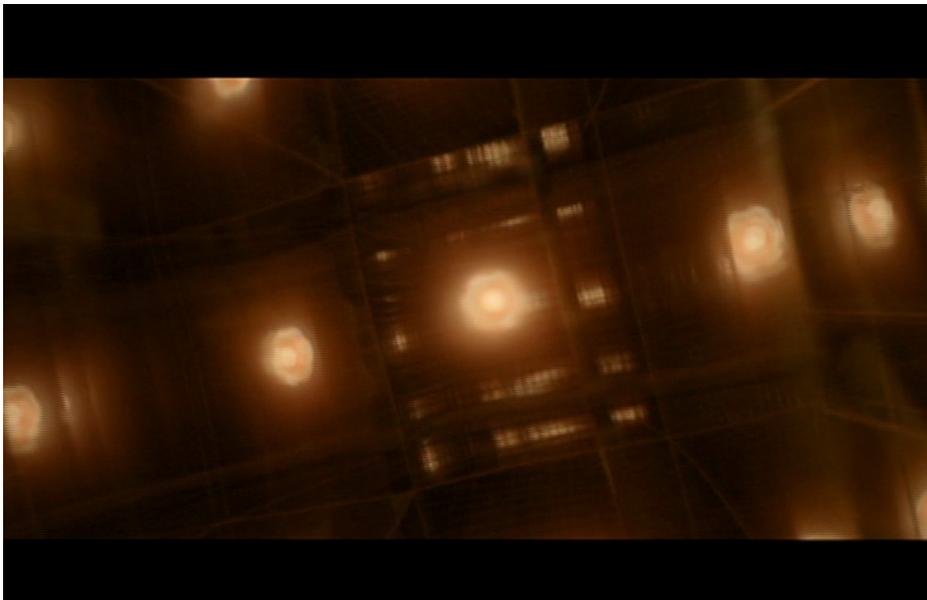
From this ethereal viewpoint, Oscar will observe the aftermath of his death for his loved ones: he floats out of The Void and into the streets of Tokyo where he sees Victor dragged away screaming by the police, and Alex forced to hide on the streets for fear of arrest—then he observes his sister's grief on receiving the news of his death. Frequently, Oscar will be drawn to a light source or some kind of opening—a lamp, a flame, ashes, a drainpipe—and *enter it*.

These rooms seem to *bend* when Oscar leaves them; as he heads towards a light, the visual space becomes an abstraction focused entirely on geometry and formal elements even as the room around him distorts (fig. 4). The experimental nature of the soundtrack, vague electronic humming and drones rather than realistic ambiances, works with the image to create this bizarre, immaterial space. At these times, the film becomes an abstract audio-visual spectacle, combining bright psychedelic imagery with the abstract soundscape before Oscar suddenly emerges in a different location—as if lights function for him as magical portals between the locations of his loved ones.

Figure 3  
Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
Oscar's ghost looks down  
on his body following his  
death.



Figure 4  
Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
The bathroom in which  
Oscar dies becomes a  
geometrical abstraction as  
he rises towards the light.



It is impossible to categorize the sound in these scenes as either score or sound-effect or even as diegetic or non-diegetic. In the trip scene, it seems reasonable to assume that Oscar hears these sounds as auditory hallucinations, but in no way do they sound as if they are occurring in the diegetic space of his apartment. For the majority of *Enter the Void's* score (for lack of a better term) there is no discernible melody, harmony, or rhythm and there are no recognizable instrumental sources. Even when there appears to be a diegetic source for the music (as when Oscar's ghost floats into the strip-club where Linda works), the score becomes barely a spectral abstraction of dance music. A distant-sounding kick-drum provides the most basic rhythmic pulse, yet the harsh electronic drones continue over top of it, inextricably twisting together the psychologically-motivated underscore with diegetic music. This electronic soundtrack can only be poorly described with onomatopoeic words and guesses at the technical means used to create them —*whooshes, rattling, hisses, and wet sounds*, on which we can hear reverb and echo. For many of these sound layers, it is difficult even to discern if their origin is organic (sample-based) or synthesized.

This very resistance to description is one of the fundamental generic features of acousmatic music that *Enter the Void* employs to create its subjective effects. Falling under the umbrella of electro-acoustic music, acousmatic music is a genre of experimental electronic music that emerged as one of the intellectual successors to Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*.<sup>10</sup> This music works with the timbres and textures of sounds rather than with the formal language of music. Acousmatic composer François Bayle, (Schaeffer's successor at France's *Groupe de Recherches Musicales*), described this compositional process metaphorically, contrasting it with traditional music:

The chain of intentionality is much clearer in traditional music. The instruments are always the same ones, and the compositional strategies are codified...But in acousmatic music, many of the links in the chain are deliberately left out...The instrumental sources and the technical means are often partially hidden.<sup>11</sup>

Some care must be taken to distinguish acousmatic *music* from the listening situation that Michel Chion calls acousmatic. The word is commonly attributed to derive from the story of the disciples of Pythagoras, called "acousmatiques," who listened to their teacher speak from behind a curtain in order to prevent themselves from being distracted by his image. For Chion, an acousmatic sound is simply a sound that we hear without seeing its source.<sup>12</sup> But Chion also warned that the acousmatic situation could intensify listener curiosity about the sources of sounds.<sup>13</sup> Acousmatic music tries to avoid this listening for sources, as Joanna Demers notes in her summary of post-Schaefferian aesthetics, "when listening to recordings of non-electronic music, the full impact of the acousmatic situation is blunted by our tendency to imagine the instruments and even gestures that trigger musical sounds...in recorded form, the acousmatic situation in electronic music is truly acousmatic when there are unrecognizable sounds at play."<sup>14</sup>

For Bayle and the practitioners of acousmatic music, the question of removing a sound from its source is not a question of separating the sound from the image of its cause, but of removing the elements of that sound that signify causality—creating *unrecognizable* sounds. Whether this involves editing, re-pitching, reversing direction, or completely synthesizing new sounds, the result is the alteration of the sound in a manner that prevents the source from being easily identified. Just as Pythagoras hid behind his mythical curtain to speak to his *akousmatikos*, so the technical process of creating an acousmatic sound is an act of *hiding*; hiding the source of the sound, hiding the *signifier* to create an experience of sound solely for its textural and timbral qualities.

This appreciation of the inherent qualities of sound is an experience that Pierre Schaeffer dubbed “reduced listening” (*l’écoute réduite*<sup>15</sup>).<sup>16</sup> For Schaeffer, this process required conscious effort and repetition; he created special “locked groove” vinyl records in order to repeat sounds endlessly for this express purpose.<sup>17</sup> Chion, also one of Schaeffer’s students, adopted the concept of reduced listening when he theorized three different modes of listening in *Audio-Vision*. Prior to reduced listening, he defines causal listening, in which sounds are listened to in order to decipher a cause (a physical event or source), and semantic listening, which listens to languages or codes. These modes that Chion identifies are remarkably consistent with those that Roland Barthes defines (but does not name) in his essay “Listening.” Barthes appeals to nature and anthropology to define his first two modes in terms of their purposes for survival and communication: “the first listening might be called an *alert*. The second is a deciphering, what the ear tries to intercept are certain signs.” The third mode he calls an “entirely modern” way of listening, one that does not attempt to listen to signs or codes.<sup>18</sup>

For Barthes, psychoanalytic listening is related to this third kind of listening. Barthes quotes Freud’s practical advice for psychoanalysis, “All conscious exertion is to be withheld from the capacity for attention and one’s ‘unconscious memory’ is to be given full play; or to express it in terms of technique pure and simple: one has simply to listen and not to trouble to keep in mind anything in particular.”<sup>19</sup> This difficulty that Freud notes in ignoring the individual details of the analysand’s speech is much like the difficulty that Chion notes in practicing reduced listening. For Lacan, psychoanalysis aims at “reducing signifiers to their non-meaning (lack of meaning) so as to find the determinants of the whole of the subject’s behavior.”<sup>20</sup> Psychoanalytic listening thus seeks to access the unconscious by way of the voice—*reducing* the signifiers of speech in order to hear what the unconscious has to speak. The aim of reduced listening is analogous, seeking to access essential characteristics of sounds in themselves; and the acousmatic composer’s process of hiding indices and codes, leaving out links in the “chain of intentionality” as Bayle puts it, is another way of “reducing signifiers” that equally seeks to access an otherwise hidden realm of sonic experience.

The successful practice of reduced listening allows an experience of sound without interaction with the symbolic order; naturally such an experience resists description in language. Chion writes, "Present everyday language as well as specialized musical terminology are totally inadequate to describe the sonic traits that are revealed when we practice reduced listening."<sup>21</sup> Barthes also described experiencing a similar phenomenon when listening to John Cage's music:

In the third place [the third kind of listening], what is listened to here and there...is not the advent of a signified, object of a recognition or of a deciphering, but the very dispersion, the shimmering of signifiers, ceaselessly restored to a listening which ceaselessly produces new ones from them without ever arresting their meaning: this phenomenon of shimmering is called signifying [signifiante], as distinct from signification: "listening" to a piece of classical music, the listener is called upon to "decipher" this piece, i.e., to recognize (by his culture, his application, his sensibility) its construction, quite as coded (predetermined) as that of a palace at a certain period; but "listening" to a composition ... by John Cage, it is each sound one after the next that I listen to, not in its syntagmatic extension, but in its raw and as though vertical signifying: by deconstructing itself, listening is externalized, it compels the subject to renounce his "inwardness."<sup>22</sup>

The phenomenon of "shimmering" that Barthes describes here is a function of this music's resistance to description. The methods used to create acousmatic music do not employ the "language" of music, intentionally refusing the deciphering that both Barthes and Bayle find at work in classical music. Yet signifying invariably takes place, even if the sounds that we hear in acousmatic music only evoke loose and constantly shifting references. Working in synesthetic combination with the psychedelic and abstract visuals of *Enter the Void*, acousmatic music prevents any concrete mental linking (what Chion calls "synchresis") between individual sounds and on-screen actions. The film creates vague and transient associations between image and sound. This constantly shifting *signifiante*, as Barthes calls it, hints at a cinematic experience of the *real*. "The real is essentially that which resists symbolization and thus resists the dialectization characteristic of the symbolic order, in which one thing can be substituted for another," writes Bruce Fink in *The Lacanian Subject*.<sup>23</sup> The acousmatic score of *Enter the Void* bombards us with a constant stream of barely describable phenomenal sound textures, preventing causal and semantic listening. Like Oscar's disembodied ghost, unable to communicate with the world of the living, in listening to *Enter the Void* we encounter our own inadequacy of language to address the real.

The phenomenal experience of sound that acousmatic music attempts to create evokes a pre-linguistic listening experience, the primordial "sonorous envelope" of the mother's voice.<sup>24</sup> The maternal voice is one of the lost objects, the *objets (a)*,<sup>25</sup> of the mirror stage in Lacanian theory, the period of development in which a child first realizes a unifying image of self, and enters the symbolic order by learning her first language. According to Lacan, the function of the mirror stage is quite simply to develop a relationship between an organism and its environment.<sup>26</sup> In the mirror stage, the infant gains her first understanding of space and time as her mother names

surrounding spaces and objects in her function as the initial teacher of language. The apprehension of space, time, and language are all part of the process by which the child comes to gain an idea of self. Simultaneous with the apprehension of the self as separate from the mother is the loss of an idyllic state of mother-child unity that preceded it. For this reason Lacan calls the identity that is gained in the mirror stage “alienating.” The apprehension of self is dependent on the creation of an irreversible distance from the other.<sup>27</sup> The *objets (a)* contribute to this separation of self from other; they are all things that the child once “experienced as parts of itself—the breast, the feces, the mother’s voice, a loved blanket.”<sup>28</sup>

As Kaja Silverman points out in *The Acoustic Mirror*, the idea of the mother’s voice as a “sonorous envelope” or a “blanket of sound” is based on a retro-active fantasy of an experience of listening prior to this drama of the mirror stage: “The child hears, but is not yet able to understand, and emits sounds, but is not yet able to make them meaningful.”<sup>29</sup> Acousmatic music seeks to replicate this pre-subjective experience of listening by both of the above criteria. We hear without understanding because acousmatic methods remove the sonic traces of cause and forgo the musical language that would allow deciphering. And like the infant before the entry into language, we are rendered with a discursive incapacity by virtue of our inability to properly describe the abstract sounds that we hear. But the experience of the mother’s voice as a lost object is *fundamentally irrecoverable*, it is a moment “which can be imagined, but never actually experienced.”<sup>30</sup>

This musical pre-occupation with evoking an irrecoverable unity reflects Oscar’s own pre-occupation with the mirror stage. The “magic mirror” section of the film reveals Oscar’s past to the audience in much the same way that an analysand reveals herself to an analyst—as a series of fragmented events tied together by a perceived narrative thread and recounted from a subjective organizing perspective. In this section of the film, we observe the events of Oscar’s childhood and the days leading up to his death. For this perspective the camera remains firmly fixed behind Oscar’s head and shoulders. The editing here is characterized by jump cuts and montages, emphasizing the discontinuous nature of Oscar’s unconscious. This slightly removed and external viewpoint reflects the temporal distance from these events and the sense of otherness associated with memory.

When we are first transported into this past we see a rapid montage of Oscar and his family together in a variety of idyllic scenes—at the playground, holding hands on the street, having a picnic at the beach—these cuts are actually moving progressively backwards in time, from after the death of Oscar’s parents to before the birth of his sister. There is a singular shot of Oscar playing alone with his mother in a pool, one of the fleeting moments that represent his lost happiness. Later, after the birth of his sister, the child Oscar expresses this desire to occupy the center of her affection, asking her, “Do you love Daddy more than me?” Immediately afterwards we see Oscar furtively observe his parents having sex through their bedroom door. This denial of maternal attention is experienced by Oscar as one of the childhood ruptures that causes her to become his “lost Thing.”<sup>31</sup> Additionally, throughout these memories, Oscar’s father appears only as an image beside his mother who never speaks. This notable absence of the paternal voice from Oscar’s memories is another indicator of his preoccupation with the maternal voice and his fixation on the lost paradise of his childhood.

In the scene in which Oscar sleeps with Victor's mother, we see him put his mouth on Suzy's breast. The film immediately cuts to a shot of his mother breast-feeding him, and then back to the shot of Oscar and Linda in the bathtub with their mother, and finally to a shot of him watching his mother breastfeed his sister Linda. This sequence concisely illustrates the cycle of object slippage and rupture that Oscar seems doomed to repeat, linking all three of his objects in a matter of seconds. Describing this cycle of metonymic slippage, Fink writes, "A kind of innocence is lost forever, and the actual breasts found thereafter are never quite it. *Objet (a)* is the leftover of that process of constituting an object, the scrap that evades the grasp of symbolization. It is a reminder that there is something else, something perhaps lost, something yet to be found."<sup>32</sup>

Acousmatic music attempts to *reduce* sounds beyond description to their phenomenal nature, to the status of an *objet (a)*, a "scrap that evades the grasp of symbolization." But the phenomenal experience of the mother's voice is ultimately as irrecoverable for the listening audience as her breast is for Oscar. The sonorous envelope is unachievable—the composer cannot prevent the signifier from appearing to the audience, even if that signifying is transient and "shimmering" as Barthes described. "Sound," writes Demers, "is a sign that indicates something beyond itself and as such can never exist as a pure abstraction."<sup>33</sup> The experimental electronic music of *Enter the Void* appears to be forever approaching a sonic experience of the real in Sisyphean fashion, but constant attempts to restore the irrecoverable are typical of Oscar's behavior.

While the constant presence of acousmatic music in *Enter the Void* displays a pre-occupation with recovering the sonorous envelope, the limited use of traditional music refers directly to Oscar's lost unity. The first thing we hear in Oscar's past is Linda's crying and then, what is presumably Oscar's childhood voice quietly singing "Rock-A-Bye-Baby." In the montage sequence that follows, Bach's "Air on a G-String" plays over these scenes of remembered childhood happiness; it appears again as Linda's "theme" later in the film when we observe the adult Oscar reunited with his sister in Tokyo. As rapidly as these idyllic childhood memories begin, they end—as the family is driving down a tunnel a fatal car crash kills Oscar's and Linda's parents and results in their subsequent separation into different foster homes. This is the primordial and traumatic rupture that will determine Oscar's future behavior—the crash is repeated twice over the course of the film in varying circumstances (fig. 5).

These two pieces are particularly notable for their extra-musical signification, their obvious participation in the symbolic order. *Enter the Void* uses this fact to great effect by strictly limiting the appearance of traditional music in the score to the sections of the film that occur in Oscar's memories. The morbid lyrical content of "Rock-A-Bye-Baby" is directly analogic to Oscar's familial narrative of loss, while the title "Air on a G-String" makes a more subtle pun on a minimalist garment commonly worn in Linda's future profession. The vivid lyrical imagery of breaking boughs resonates with his personal trauma—this song appears in the soundtrack played by a music-box immediately before we first see the car crash. The choice of the music box as the sole instrument also bears signification; it assumes connotations of naïveté, childhood and nostalgia.

Later in the film we hear “Air on a G-String” while Oscar and Linda are riding on a roller-coaster in Tokyo together—a happy memory that suddenly cuts to a repetition of the car crash as the ride enters a tunnel. This in turn is revealed as a recurring nightmare that Oscar experiences. Interestingly, this is exactly the kind of dream that Freud found so common in patients suffering from traumatic neuroses.<sup>34</sup> The content of this nightmare is further evidence of the object slippage that characterizes Oscar. The chronology of this dream is such that the memory of his infantile plenitude has been metonymically replaced by his current sibling relationship. The portions of the film that take place in Oscar’s memory thus reveal themselves to be viewed from a subjective perspective that is wholly inscribed within the symbolic order. The semiotic references here in the score and instrumentation refer directly back to the lost paradise of Oscar’s childhood, but more importantly they reveal that the signifier is directly associated with trauma and rupture for Oscar (fig. 6).

Figure 5  
Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
Oscar’s memories of a lost  
childhood paradise.



Figure 6  
Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
The car crash that kills  
Oscar’s parents.



When Oscar's memories have looped all the way back to the beginning of the film, "sAir on a G-String" plays once again, now identifying the brief moment of happiness with Linda at the beginning of the film with the lost paradise of Oscar's childhood. This is a fully retro-active identification, as we now experience this scene from the exterior flashback perspective, skipping the internal experience of the DMT trip altogether. Wherever a musical signifier is allowed to fully emerge in *Enter the Void*, it is in the specific context of retro-actively referencing a lost plenitude and simultaneously signifying the trauma of its loss. The film, having returned to its own beginning, now identifies that very beginning with a lost paradise. The song comes to an abrupt end just as Oscar receives the fateful phone call from Victor, and ominous acousmatic music returns with the disembodied voice that signifies the agency of Oscar's bodily death.

In keeping with this scheme in the music, the sound effects in *Enter the Void* that represent severance are all particularly visceral and traumatic: the crash of the car accident, the horrifying scraping sound of Linda's abortion, and the snip of the scissors cutting the umbilical cord in the film's final scene. The primordial trauma of the entry into language is forcefully stressed by these sound effects, each of which signifies a symbolic castration for Oscar.

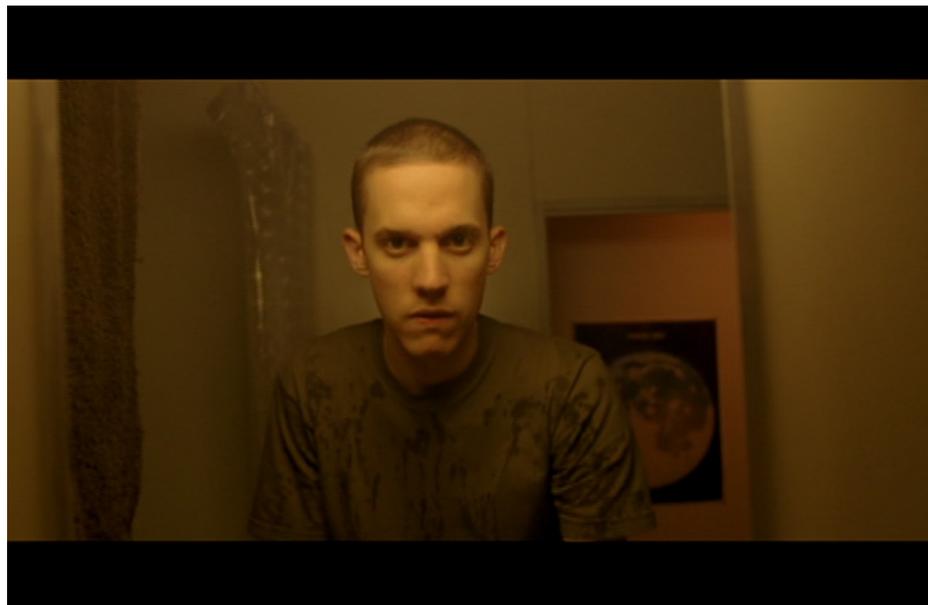
The repetition of Oscar's traumatic ruptures from his lost object becomes a constant theme in his life. The birth of his sister and the phallus of his father both deny him the attentions of his mother even before the car crash that claims his parents' lives. Soon afterwards, his grandparents are taken away to nursing homes, and his sister is torn away from him as they are taken to separate foster homes. After his parents' death, Oscar's sister Linda replaces his mother as his object by this metonymic slippage—she is forbidden because of the incest taboo, but she is nonetheless the object of his gaze and desire, Oscar watches her dance at the club she works at, he furtively smells her underwear when she is out, and even after his death his disembodied gaze observes her having sex. Reunited with his sister as an adult, he is still unable to recover the plenitude that he seeks—taking her to the club, he introduces her to Mario, the club owner who becomes her employer and lover, tearing Linda away from Oscar yet again. In the beginning of the film, Oscar's conversation with Alex reveals the implications of his desire for her and his resentment at her attention being given to other men. Alex says, "I can't believe she's dating that cunt." To which Oscar responds, "Yeah, if she ever gets pregnant, I'll kill the baby." Minutes later, Alex tells Oscar that he finds Linda beautiful and Oscar responds, "She's my sister," asserting a fraternal ownership over her. The inevitable results of Oscar's forbidden object choices are traumatic repetitions of his primordial rupture from his first object—this repetition of displeasurable experiences is theorized by Freud as the death drive.<sup>35</sup>

Though Oscar's psychedelic trips appear to be *pleasurable* experiences, his compulsive drug use is ruled by the death drive just as his choices of forbidden objects are (indeed there appears to be a cyclical relationship between the two). Immediately after the DMT trip at the beginning of the film, we observe Oscar enter the bathroom in order to collect himself before heading to The Void (fig. 7). Oscar's initial look in the mirror provides the audience's first unveiling image of the protagonist. It is a dramatic shot that suddenly reveals the otherness of the cinematic "self" whose perspective we inhabit.

This return from the psychedelic experience compresses the drama of the mirror stage into a defining traumatic moment of “come-down” in which a totalizing self-image, the capacity for language, and the perception of space and time return rapidly and suddenly (a period of minutes or hours, compared to the months or years of the mirror stage). Oscar’s thoughts at this moment are suddenly pre-occupied with his surroundings and startlingly self-aware of his prior lack of self-control and discursive potential during the trip. His fears reveal the shocking nature of this experience, “Is that the neighbors? Did I scream? Maybe I did?”

According to Guy Rosolato, “The re-awakening of the voice always pre-supposes a break, an irreversible distance from the lost object.”<sup>36</sup> The *come-down*, this dramatic and sudden re-entry into the symbolic order and subjectivity, marks a repetition of the ruptures of Oscar’s childhood; each time that one of his psychedelic experiences ends, he repeats the sudden wrenching away of his infantile plenitude. Oscar’s compulsion to repeatedly diminish his subjectivity through drug use reminds us of a rather more adult version of the pleasure that Freud observed in the little boy who ducked beneath the mirror to make his reflection disappear.<sup>37</sup>

Figure 7  
Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
Oscar looks in the mirror  
after his DMT trip.



The recovery of the lost object necessitates the death of Oscar’s own discursive voice. He cannot regain his pre-subjective plenitude while he still exists within the symbolic order.<sup>38</sup> As a result, he compulsively seeks increasingly more potent psychedelic experiences in his attempts to reach a state of complete self-loss. The constant presence of the whispering voices in the sound of the first trip scene reflects Oscar’s inability to entirely escape the symbolic—despite being immersed in a hallucinatory out-of-body experience, he continues to experience the voice of the other as separate. Oscar’s dialogue in the first section of the film displays the strength of his addiction. We hear him think, “I know I’m not a junkie,” but just a few minutes later he will ask Alex, “Do you think Bruno has anything stronger than DMT?” Alex’s sage answer foreshadows the events to come, “You’re gonna fry your brain ... you wait until you die, then you’ll get your big trip.”

In both the trip scene and the death scene, Oscar's voice becomes a stand-in for his ego. His discursive capacity and his sense of self are conveyed by the intelligibility of his voice—the further his voice is obscured, the more the loss of self is conveyed. *Reducing* the signifier from his voice parallels the reprieve from the symbolic order he achieves in his trip. When he dies, the coherence of his discourse is slowly and painfully dispersed over the course of several minutes—the content of his thoughts approaches nonsense in tandem with the effects applied on his voice. The void that Oscar enters in these parallel experiences of self-loss is the “lack” of the subject left by the traumatic severance from the lost object—the lack that he subsequently spends the rest of his life trying to “make good.” But both his forbidden object choices and the temporary reprieves from subjectivity offered by drugs are unable to restore his infantile plenitude. Actual bodily death becomes Oscar's ultimate and irreversible means of destroying his subjectivity. It is the only condition that satisfies the influence of his drive, so it is no coincidence that the bar where Oscar dies is named “The Void.”

We can consider this process of removing the signifier from the voice as a way of making the voice acousmatic. This *acousmatizing* of the voice has the reverse effect to that of synchresis.<sup>39</sup> Rather than joining sound and image together by synchronization, this effect separates sound from image by creating discontinuity between the two. Temporal manipulation of the voice by the application of delay or echo separates the sound of the voice from the movement of the mouth. Spatial manipulation of the voice through abstract applications of reverb creates a mismatch between what we hear in the soundtrack and the amount of reverberation that we expect for a given on-screen space. The application of these spatio-temporal effects to the voice causes a dramatic disembodiment that affects the way we perceive cinematic space and time.

By contrast, Hollywood dialog editing and mixing techniques aim to minimize spatial variances and differences in noise levels in a scene in order to create the illusion of a consistent point of audition (the place that we hear from; the soundtrack does not always “hear” from where the camera is positioned). The consistency of the voice helps to smooth over the varying shot sizes and the constantly jumping viewpoint found in continuity editing. Combined with a dialogue track that generally remains centered in the stereo field and the application of reverb to match a perceived diegetic space, these techniques artificially construct a unified off-screen space around the consistency of the voice. *Enter the Void's* refusal to abide by the conventions of Hollywood dialog editing allows it to create unrealistic, abstract, permeable spaces, spaces that bend and pulse and allow the protagonist's passage through walls and lights.

This removal of the signifier from the voice leaves us with an experience of the voice as abstract, timbre and rhythm, un-localized and unintelligible. Acousmatizing the voice to the point of unintelligibility in this way mimics the fantasized experience of the maternal voice as a “sonorous envelope” that surrounds the infant before the entry into language. Our initial understanding of space and time is first developed in the mirror stage, when the voice of the mother calls out and names space and objects, and continually assures the child of her presence.

According to Barthes, “hearing seems essentially linked to evaluation of the spatio-temporal situation (to which humanity adds sight, animals smell). Based on hearing, listening (from an anthropological viewpoint) is the very sense of space and of time, by the perception of degrees of remoteness and of regular returns of phonic stimulus.”<sup>40</sup> Acousmatizing the voice interferes with these spatial and temporal markers, recalling an experience of the voice preceding any understanding of space and time.

The most dramatic examples of *Void*'s spatio-temporal manipulation of the voice are found in the DMT trip in the beginning of the film and in Oscar's death sequence. In the initial trip sequence, the manipulation of Oscar's voice allows us to leave the confines of his body and to enter the imaginary space of the DMT trip. In the death scene, this same process effects a transition to the disembodied perspective of Oscar's ghost. These techniques are particularly effective when *Enter the Void* deploys them on Oscar's voice because of his voice's intense physicality, because its uniquely embodied qualities heighten the contrast of its loss, highlighting the transition from the interior space of his mind to the exterior, out-of-body/disembodied spaces of the DMT trip and the afterlife.

Two further examples of this process in *Enter the Void* are particularly jarring—the first takes place immediately after Linda finds out about Oscar's death. As she collapses on the couch crying, her voice begins to dim and echo in the room. Though she appears *immediately present* in the room, her voice is given the effect of distance and unintelligibility. In this scene, acousmatizing Linda's voice stresses the pain of her loss, amplifying her mourning into an abstract non-diegetic space. Indeed, Oscar becomes *her* forbidden object after the death of their parents. Un-synchronizing her voice from her body reflects this separation of a former part of herself that his death signifies. This reversal of synchronization lends flexibility to the cinematic timeline as much as it affects the structuring of off-screen space. *Enter the Void* uses Linda's mourning voice as a means of time travel—her acousmatic cries become a bridging link between Oscar's ethereal present and the memories of his childhood. As Linda's voice and image disappear into a blur of light and sound, a second mourning voice without a source appears in the soundtrack. It is the voice of Linda as a child, in Oscar's past, crying after the death of their parents. Meanwhile, the camera plunges into the light in Linda's dressing room in the strip club, traveling through a tunnel of abstract flashing lights before entering the section of the film that recounts the events of Oscar's past.

Later in the film, the same device is used in the opposite direction. As Oscar's spirit floats high over the streets of Tokyo, he swoops down on Alex getting into a taxi with Linda. They are kissing in the backseat when Linda turns and cries, “watch out!” Once again, her voice becomes acousmatic and echoes over a time change—we see the same flash of headlights from the car accident while her voice echoes and then we hear a similar effect applied to the child Linda's voice as she screams in the aftermath of the accident (now in Oscar's past). Though she is still buckled into the backseat of the car, a long and spacious reverb is applied to her cries; the mismatch with the apparent size of the diegetic space (the car cabin) creates the abstract effect that dissociates her voice from her image. Additionally, the discontinuous editing and un-synchronized voices have introduced a factor of temporal and ontological uncertainty to the diegesis that will be

In *Enter the Void's* conclusion, acousmatic sound functions as a necessary element of the film's mise-en-scène in constructing the imaginary, psychedelic space of Hotel Love. We recognize this building from earlier in the film as a model from the miniature neon city belonging to Alex's roommate. Previously, Oscar had marveled at the glowing miniature, remarking, "Imagine if, like, the walls were all clear, and all your friends were inside, like, fucking." Of course, this is precisely what happens. After seeing Alex and Linda's taxi pull up in front of the hotel, Oscar's ghost passes through the wall of the building and into the erotic neon dollhouse that is Hotel Love. As the camera passes through walls and into the various rooms of the hotel, we see nearly every character that has appeared in the film up to this point engaged in some sort of sexual act, glowing yellow lights emanating from their genitals. The sound in this scene makes no attempt at verisimilitude—every moan in the hotel is acousmatized, either treated with overt applications of delay and reverb or sounding unnaturally close and loud. In the film's surface text of the Buddhist afterlife, this is the point at which Oscar sees lights representing "all these couples making love." According to Alex, the lights represent potential future lives for Oscar's spirit. Suddenly passing through the walls of the hotel, the camera emerges floating high in the air over an entirely neon CGI Tokyo, and from nowhere the voice of Linda whispers, "Come" in a perspective that sounds immediate and close, while warm strings emerge in the music for the first time in the film (fig. 8).

Floating back into the hotel, Alex and Linda are making love, their voices acousmatic and un-synchronized. The camera appears to pass through the back of Alex's head and into the first-person perspective we recognize from the beginning of the film, watching Linda's face. Suddenly, a cut transforms Linda into Oscar's mother, and the camera turns to reveal the child Oscar standing in the doorway, watching. Soon afterwards, there is a shot of a family all sitting together on a bed—mother, father, and infant hugging one another, their soft coos and chatter dull, echoing, and incomprehensible. This fantasy of an idyllic childhood paradise is fleeting, and we are unsure whether it occurs in past, present, or future.

Figure 8  
Gaspar Noé  
*Enter the Void* (2009)  
The imaginary, psychedelic  
space of Hotel Love.



The lack of sonic verisimilitude and temporal continuity create *Hotel Love* as an imaginary, metaphorical space rather than a physical one. We no longer perceive that Oscar is observing events that are occurring in a diegetic “real world.” Rather, the acousmatic voices that inhabit *Hotel Love* metaphorically appear to Oscar’s ghost as “lights,” representing possible futures. Though we see their images on the screen, we understand that their physical bodies are elsewhere in the Tokyo of the diegesis. The inconsistent treatment of the voice helps create this dis-synchronization, this contradiction between the metaphorical space of the afterlife that Oscar perceives and the physical space of *Enter the Void*’s Tokyo. This ontological uncertainty continues to the very end of the film, where the final sequence displays birth from the perspective of the infant. As images begin to emerge from the bright light of the waiting room, the mother’s face remains out-of-focus and it is unclear whether this scene depicts a re-birth (Oscar reincarnated as Linda’s child) or is a memory of Oscar’s own birth.

Dominating all other sounds in this scene is a rapid, high-pitched heartbeat—the infant’s own. The mother’s breast fills the screen, engulfing our field of view in blackness and we hear a second heartbeat—it is the sound of the mother’s heart beating so clearly and distinctly that we can identify the sound of blood flowing through her arteries. We hear her low, pumping heartbeat blend briefly with the rapid one. For a moment, sound alone creates this fantasized space of unity—the image is black, a *void*. We do not hear heart-rate monitors or the chatter of doctors or nurses, none of the *usual* sounds of a hospital room. There is no movement of feet or wheels, nothing that gives the sense of a hallway or anything beyond. *Enter the Void*’s sound does not construct the physical space of the hospital by intention, in order to place us in this paradoxical sonic space of plenitude, in which we have no sense of interior or exterior, no understanding of space. The film’s entire sound aesthetic has looked backwards and forwards to this moment—we now realize that the pulsing, wet sounds in the opening DMT sequence specifically evoke the sound of the mother’s heartbeat here. After just a few fleeting seconds, the child is pulled away, and this sonorous envelope is opened by the horrifying “snip” of the scissors that cut the umbilical cord. The film ends with the piercing cries of this newborn being carried away from its mother, the voice of self found only in this traumatic separation from the other.<sup>41</sup>

In associating the psychedelic experience with the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the afterlife, *Enter the Void* seeks to represent spaces that are inherently closed off to human perception. The film evokes a pre-symbolic experience of space and time as a metaphor for these un-knowable experiences, these *voids*: death, the afterlife, and birth. Because of its unique first-person perspective, the unconscious fixations that determine the behavior of *Enter the Void*’s protagonist are paralleled in the film’s stylistic choices. *Enter the Void*’s concern with evoking metaphoric, pre-symbolic spaces parallels Oscar’s fixation on the mirror stage. Oscar’s gaze is inseparable from the view of the camera; just as the content of his memories is inseparable from the film’s editing. It is no surprise then that the musical expression of Oscar’s unconscious is defined by the attempt to recreate the sonorous envelope of the maternal voice—Oscar’s fixation on restoring the lost paradise of the mirror stage is the major determining factor of his behavior.

*Enter the Void's* stylistic choices in cinematography, editing, and sound do not simply *reflect* Oscar—they create him, they speak him in the same way that the mirror creates the “totalizing image” around which the concept of self is organized.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 272.

<sup>2</sup> *Enter the Void*, DVD, directed by Gaspar Noé (2009; Paris, France: IFC Films, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> DMT is a naturally occurring compound that acts as a powerful but short-acting hallucinogen when smoked. Effects can range from mild visual hallucinations to immersive out-of-body experiences. Researcher Alex Shulgin described the experiences of smoking a 100mg dose, “As I exhaled I became terribly afraid, my heart very rapid and strong, palms sweating. A terrible sense of dread and doom filled me -- I knew what was happening, I knew I couldn't stop it, but it was so devastating; I was being destroyed -- all that was familiar, all reference points, all identity -- all viciously shattered in a few seconds. I couldn't even mourn the loss -- there was no one left to do the mourning. Up, up, out, out, eyes closed, I am at the speed of light, expanding, expanding, expanding, faster and faster until I have become so large that I no longer exist -- my speed is so great that everything has come to a stop -- here I gaze upon the entire universe.” Alexander and Ann Shulgin, *TiHKAL: The Continuation* (Transform Press, 1997), 72.

<sup>4</sup> The film “hides” its edits to create the illusion of a continuous take. Presumably some of the intermittent black frames that represent the protagonists' blinking are examples of such edits, while others may be found when e.g., a wall or a doorway obscures the screen. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) is famous for this.

<sup>5</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>7</sup> I use the word “ghost” for both convenience and consistency. “Soul” and “spirit” might be equally applicable, but as an ethereal being who haunts his former loved ones and environment, the word “ghost” seemed to me the most appropriate for Oscar.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes describes this effect colorfully, “reaching us after traversing the masses and cavities of our own anatomy, it affords us a distorted image of ourselves, as if we were to glimpse our profile in a three-way mirror.” Roland Barthes, “Listening”, in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 255.

<sup>9</sup> *Enter The Void*.

<sup>10</sup> Joanna Demers, *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>11</sup> François Bayle, “Acousmatic Morphology: An Interview with François Bayle,” interview by Sandra Desantos trans. Curtis Roads, *Computer Music Journal* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), 17.

- <sup>12</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice In Cinema*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19.
- <sup>13</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York : Columbia University Press, 1994), 32.
- <sup>14</sup> Demers, *Listening Through the Noise*, 43.
- <sup>15</sup> Demers, *Listening Through the Noise*, 26.
- <sup>16</sup> The French noun *l'écoute* lacks a direct English translation. In Chion's *Audio-Vision* and Barthes' "Listening" it is translated variously as "mode of listening," "kind of listening," or simply "listening."
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 28
- <sup>18</sup> Barthes, "Listening," 245.
- <sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud as quoted in Barthes, "Listening", 253.
- <sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI*, quoted by Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 21.
- <sup>21</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 31.
- <sup>22</sup> Barthes, "Listening", 259. [emphasis original]
- <sup>23</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 92.
- <sup>24</sup> Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 72.
- <sup>25</sup> The small 'a' is for *petit autre*. Objects with a little otherness.
- <sup>26</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 97.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.
- <sup>28</sup> Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 7.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 73
- <sup>31</sup> Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reframed: A Guide For The Arts Student*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 33.
- <sup>32</sup> Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 94.
- <sup>33</sup> Demers, *Listening*, 45.
- <sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 598.
- <sup>35</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 604.

<sup>36</sup> Guy Rosaloto, "*La Voix: Entre Corps et Langage*," quoted by Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 599.

<sup>38</sup> Silverman, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Chion defines synchresis as "the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears" [simultaneously]. It is the perceptual process that allows us to experience sound effects as 'realistic.' *Audio-Vision*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Barthes, "Listening," 246.

<sup>41</sup> Denis Vasse, *L'Ombilic et La Voix*, quoted by Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 79.