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## **Lost in Non-Translation?**

### **Lost in Non-Translation? Analysing Film Voices From a Position of Linguistic Incompetence**

#### **Abstract:**

This article identifies a widespread ‘deaf-spot’ in English-language criticism of the foreign-language film, namely the lack of attention given to the foreign-language voice. It points to the key driver behind this omission: an anxiety about the ability of the critic to capture sound through writing that is exacerbated when that sound carries language beyond the critic’s comprehension. The article proposes a style of criticism that acknowledges the limitations caused by linguistic incompetence, but that also finds a ‘way in’ to the vocal soundtrack, through attention to certain non-semantic qualities of voice. This interpretative practice is tested through an analysis of the vocal soundtrack of *Happy Together* (Wong Kar-wai, 1997), which is followed by a critical reflection on the relevance of this reading strategy to wider debates about foreign spectatorship, world cinema and the role of subjectivity within film criticism.

**Keywords:** voice, film criticism, foreign-language film, film sound, world cinema

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In the case of the subtitled film, we hear the more or less alien sounds of another tongue. If the language neighbors our own, we may recognize a substantial portion of the words and phrases. If it is more distant, we may find ourselves adrift on an alien sea of undecipherable phonic substance. (Stam 1989: 68)

### **Critical Realities: The Casting of the Foreign-Language Film Voice as Intractably Unattainable**

In 1997, Wong Kar-wai received a Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival for *Happy Together* (*Chun gwong cha sit*), a movie that ‘thoroughly consolidated Wong’s international reputation’ (Stringer 2002: 400). His ascension to become ‘one of the key names in the West’s pantheon of Asian filmmakers’ (ibid: 395) has been facilitated, in part, by the large volume of English-language writing about him, in academic, journalistic and online contexts. This writing has privileged attention to Wong’s use of varied visual palettes, non-linear narrative structures and unusual musical choices. There has also been some commentary on Wong’s very distinctive technique of deploying multiple voiceover narrators in his films. Even in relation to this aspect of his authorial style, however, there has been a notable absence of attention to vocal performance.<sup>1</sup>

Given that this writing on Wong is focused on all manner of aesthetic details in the image and on the soundtrack, it seems especially significant that the aesthetics of the voice is not given consideration. I take the critical discourse on Wong Kar-wai to be representative of a wider tendency in English-language criticism of non-English language films: that is to say, its propensity to cast the foreign-language voice as a textual element that is uniquely ‘unattainable’. In ‘The Unattainable Text’, a landmark essay on the practice of writing about film, Raymond Bellour conjures up the image of movie critics carrying out their task ‘in fear

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and trembling' (Bellour 1975: 19), as they struggle to express moving images and sounds through the written word. Despite all sorts of developments in film criticism in the forty years that have elapsed since Bellour expressed this sentiment, the foreign-language voice remains an aspect of the film experience that critics are reluctant to explore: Robert Stam's notion of such voices as 'undecipherable phonic substance' (Stam 1989: 68) is represented through the lack of attention there has been in film criticism to the textual details of the foreign-language vocal soundtrack.

In the first instance, this article elaborates on the critical omission outlined above, which has resulted in a long-standing 'deaf-spot' in English-language film criticism. It then proposes a writing strategy, through a critique of the vocal soundtrack of *Happy Together*, that acknowledges the influence of linguistic incompetence, but also distinguishes, and explores the significance of, those non-semantic vocal elements that *are* legible to all who can hear them. Finally, the article reflects critically on the value of this interpretative practice in relation to wider debates about foreign spectatorship, world cinema and the role of subjectivity within film criticism.

By paying attention to non-semantic elements of the vocal soundtrack, I position myself within a mode of voice studies (some about film, some not) that has demonstrated 'a growing interest in theorizing the voice in its materiality and in its performative aspects since the early 2000s' (Novak 2015: 15), with writers such as Michel Chion (1999), Steven Connor (2000), Adriana Cavarero (2005), Mladen Dolar (2006), Martin Shingler (2006), Susan Smith (2007), Liz Greene (2009) and Davina Quinlivan (2012) producing distinctive work, that, nevertheless, shares a common interest in exploring the voice's bodily qualities.

These studies extend interest in the voice beyond its function as a carrier of language. This orientation lends them potential as guides for a critical practice that seeks to account for a spectating experience in which the language being spoken cannot be understood without the

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mediation of subtitles. In this scenario, non-linguistic aspects of the vocal soundtrack are accessible to the critic in a way that linguistic elements are not. My reading of *Happy Together* focuses particularly on instances of non-semantic vocality, breathing and crying amongst them, considering their role in supporting character development and performing the film's themes.

Given the focus on these elements of *Happy Together's* soundtrack, Quinlivan's monograph *The Place of Breath in Cinema* is particularly influential on the approach I take and, in the final section, I relate my reading of the film to the critical framework she presents, in which breathing is considered with reference to the different bodies that constitute the cinematic experience: those of the diegetic fictional characters; the body of the film itself; and the body of the viewer. Quinlivan does not reflect on the extent to which her own linguistic competence influences the type of reading she attempts to make in a given instance. The contribution of this article lies in its self-awareness of the particular viewing conditions that inform the critical judgement of foreign-language films, and in its testing of the value of focusing on non-semantic vocality in this context: a context that may be specific, but that also covers a very large spectrum of writing on film.

Quinlivan's lack of self-reflection on the relationship between her linguistic knowledge and her soundtrack analysis by no means negates the value of her scholarship. However, it is typical of a critical discourse on film voices that generally leaves unspoken the issue of a critic's competence in understanding the language being analysed. When the language is familiar to the critic, the most common tendency is for this familiarity to be taken for granted, rather than explored as an aspect of the analysis in itself. Instead, attention may be given to the narrative/thematic significance of the words being spoken as well as to the performance details of their delivery. Alternatively, if the language is unfamiliar, speech is typically quoted in translation, without further comment, allowing critics to then consider the

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semantic value of the words as if they had been spoken in a language they understand. However, this reduction of the voice to translated words on a page means that the performance aspects of vocal delivery are typically neglected. This results in an unacknowledged difference between the way familiar-language and foreign-language film voices are analysed.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the impetus for this article comes from a recognition that I have operated according to this unacknowledged difference in my previous writing on film voices. Specifically, in the monograph *The Sense of Film Narration* I produced a reading of the voiceovers in *Happy Together* in which attention to details of vocal delivery was entirely absent, whereas such qualities were a central aspect of my commentary on the English-language examples discussed in the same chapter (Garwood, 2013: 99-138).

Such a differentiated approach suggests that critics, including myself, have not perceived a ‘for-me-ness’ in the foreign-language voice, a quality that Natasa Durovicova notes is fundamental to film translation practices (i.e. the more or less compromised attempts to orientate transnational film products to local exhibition contexts through practices such as dubbing and subtitling) (2010: 93). Instead, the foreign-language voice remains just that, foreign. However, the critical reticence to consider the performed elements of the foreign-language voice runs counter to the logic of that voice being preserved on the soundtrack for the foreign spectator to hear. As Mark Betz notes, the subtitling of foreign-language films has been advocated in preference to the perceived deficiencies of dubbing, which involves the erasure of ‘the vocal qualities, tones and rhythms’ of the original aural performance (2009: 50). The addition of subtitles presupposes a viewer who may not have the linguistic competence to understand the words being spoken but who still values the presence of the original vocal soundtrack.

What precise form should criticism of the foreign-language film voice take, if it is to overcome the reticence I have identified in ‘handling’ the voice and instead account for the

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vocal presence that subtitling practices seek to preserve? Dimitris Eleftheriotis' theoretical conception of the 'foreign spectator' is useful as a step towards this goal: it is sensitive to cultural and linguistic difference, but also views foreignness as a critically productive position, rather than an inhibiting one. Considering the way the foreign spectator deals with subtitles, Eleftheriotis contends:

In the experience of the subtitled film, linguistic unfamiliarity activates a process of close scrutiny of the foreign film for familiar signs and conventions that can be utilised to bridge gaps of understanding. (2010: 185)

Through this holistic form of viewing, a 'sphere of familiarity' (ibid) is discovered in which foreignness and linguistic incompetence no longer figure as the key drivers of the spectating experience.

Useful as this approach to cross-cultural criticism is, Eleftheriotis does not consider the foreign-language voice as a potentially familiar sign in itself. Instead, in the concrete example he offers, he emphasises the way the recognition of *visual* signs compensate for a viewer's linguistic incompetence.<sup>3</sup> Eleftheriotis identifies a reading practice in relation to only one of the defining features of the subtitled foreign-language film spectating experience, that is to say the processing of the subtitles themselves. He does not attend to the other distinguishing feature of the experience, that is to say the spectator's audition of the foreign-language voices whose semantic and non-semantic properties remain intact on the soundtrack. The attempt to find familiar elements within the foreign-language vocal soundtrack offers the possibility of entering into an area of the subtitled film experience that even Eleftheriotis' positive form of criticism fears to tread.

In summary, English-language writing about foreign-language film casts the vocal soundtrack as the most undecipherably 'foreign' element within a foreign spectating

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experience. This is most often evidenced through the total omission of reference to the performed voices in the film under discussion: in the translation of the film into written criticism, the vocal soundtrack simply disappears.

To demonstrate how this element may be preserved, at least partially, within critical accounts, I will now attempt a commentary on the foreign-language vocal soundtrack of *Happy Together*. Acknowledging the limitations that the linguistic incompetence of the critic imposes, I concentrate on those aspects of the vocal performance that can still be understood from the perspective of the foreign spectator: that is to say, non-semantic vocal sounds, such as breathing, laughing, grunting and crying, and also aspects of speech delivery that can be understood without linguistic competence, such as shouting. This involves the employment of a form of ‘reduced listening’ (Chion, 1994: 29-33), whereby particular types of sound are isolated for the purpose of analysis. However, as becomes apparent through my commentary, these sounds are ultimately only understood through their interaction with other expressive elements of the film. This sense of interaction is reflected upon further in the concluding section, in relation to Davina Quinlivan’s concept of the film body. Also in the conclusion, I reconsider the assumption that has led me to focus on non-semantic elements of the foreign-language vocal soundtrack in the first place: namely that such sounds constitute part of the ‘sphere of familiarity’ that may overcome the barrier of language.

### **Critical Experimentation: Tracing the Non-Semantic Vocal Soundtrack in *Happy Together***

The protagonist of *Happy Together* is Lai Yiu-Fai (Tony Leung), a Hong Kong resident who has travelled to Argentina with his same-sex partner Ho Po-Wing (Leslie Cheung). Whilst their stormy relationship is falling apart, Yiu-Fai strikes up a friendship with a Taiwanese workmate, Chang (Chen Chang). Apart from Yiu-Fai, Po-Wing and Chang are the only prominent recurring figures in the film and they each help to define the character of



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the protagonist. One way this occurs is through Po-Wing's and Chang's expressions of non-semantic vocality, each character exhibiting vocal traits that are both consistent in themselves as well as utterly distinct from each other. These constitute the parameters within which Yiu-Fai's more variable vocal performance can be assessed. At times, the aural relationship between Yiu-Fai and either Po-Wing or Chang is one of direct contrast, their voices laid side-by-side so their differing qualities can be experienced. On other occasions, Yiu-Fai approximates the vocal expression of Po-Wing or Chang, thereby intimating how he is drawn to an adoption of the type of behaviour each demonstrates. I will identify the non-semantic vocal qualities of Po-Wing and Chang in turn, before discussing how Yiu-Fai's voice relates to them.

Po-Wing is a volatile figure whose vocal utterances are heavily marked by non-semantic signs of an unrestrained physicality and an unpredictable mindset. In the film's opening scene, Yiu-Fai and Po-Wing have sex, viewed at first from a distanced camera position that then switches to an intimate hand-held close-up of their upper bodies, lasting over a minute. The intensity of the moment is accentuated on the soundtrack by heavy, excited breathing emanating from Po-Wing, whilst Yiu-Fai remains comparatively silent, his teeth clenched. This establishes one aspect of Po-Wing's vocality, that is to say, the occurrence of non-semantic utterances to signify pleasure. This is also represented in non-sexual contexts, for example through the elongated 'whoa' he makes as he throws himself onto a bed in Yiu-Fai's apartment, following his return after a short separation. At a racetrack, he shouts wildly and repeatedly as he urges home a horse on which he has placed a bet. He surprises Yiu-Fai in the street by sneaking behind him and shouting 'waay' in his ear. Finally, he exhales a laugh when Yiu-Fai questions him about sleeping with other men. All of these instances represent, through aural gesture, an energetic playfulness on Po-Wing's part.

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However, this side of his character is overshadowed by his propensity to be involved in violence, and this, too, is represented through non-semantic elements of voice. This aspect of Po-Wing's vocalicity is introduced in a scene that echoes the opening one, the couple tussling on a bed, but this time violently. Yiu-Fai has lost his temper, throwing Po-Wing onto the bed and momentarily putting his hands around his throat. After Yiu-Fai releases him, the camera remains on Po-Wing who gasps for air. This introduces a trope whereby Po-Wing's association with violence is represented through his laboured breathing. After their first separation, Po-Wing turns up beaten and bleeding on Yiu-Fai's doorstep, breathing heavily as he collapses into his arms. Later, angry that Yiu-Fai has hidden his passport, Po-Wing attacks him, grunting as he does so, the lack of control over his breathing exacerbated by Yiu-Fai's controlled repetition of an exhortation to hit him (as if to encourage Po-Wing to do something that will end the relationship for good).

Near its conclusion, some time after Yiu-Fai has broken up with his lover definitively, the film returns to Po-Wing unexpectedly, depicting his aimless existence post-break-up. This is an extended sequence featuring passages of non-diegetic music and scenes without music in which Po-Wing's body is uncharacteristically stilled and, consequently, silent. The montage culminates, however, with a medium close up of Po-Wing in floods of tears, his emotions suddenly pouring out. This is initially depicted accompanied solely by non-diegetic music, with the diegetic sound of crying appearing to be 'switched on' suddenly some seconds through the shot. This draws special attention to Po-Wing's breathless sobbing and underlines the association of uncontrolled breathing with pain, now apparent in an emotional register rather than a physically violent one.

Whilst Po-Wing's vocal utterances and audible breathing are associated with intense or sudden expressions of pleasure and, more dominantly, physical and emotional distress, Chang's are characterised by an unimposing serenity and an easy control. Chang's

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exceptional propensity to handle sound is indicated semantically, through the statements he makes (as represented to me through the subtitles), in voiceover and in dialogue with Liu-Fai, about his ability to ‘read’ sound.<sup>4</sup> His ease with sound is also represented non-semantically.

It could be ventured that Chang’s vocal control is registered through the rise-and-fall delivery of his voiceovers, which, to my ear, sound more open and breathy than those spoken by Liu-Fai, which have a more monotone quality. This is a risky statement to make from a position of linguistic incompetence, particularly given that Liu-Fai and Chang are speaking different languages (Cantonese and Mandarin respectively). However, Chang’s assured vocality and control of his breathing is expressed outside of the delivery of words, adding weight to the suggestion that this quality might also be apparent in his speech patterns. Indeed, this claim accords with a key contention of Adriana Cavarero, who describes ‘the relationship between voice and speech as one of uniqueness that, although it resounds first of all in the voice that is not speech, also continues to resound in the speech to which the human voice is constitutively destined’ (2005: 13).

Chang’s breath control is intimated visually through the way he marshals the passage of smoke from a cigarette, in a very posed shot seemingly designed to showcase the elegance with which Chang smokes. Chang is in the restaurant kitchen where both he and Liu-Fai work. Liu-Fai is sitting at the back of the shot, head down as he reads a newspaper, whilst Chang stands in profile nearer the camera. The camera is actually positioned outside the room, peering in through a round window which lends the shot an iris framing. Chang moves a cigarette to his lips, draws on it and then exhales a perfect cone of smoke downwards, followed by a plume of smoke issuing from his nostrils. The mise-en-scene is organised to allow the composure of this action to be appreciated aesthetically by the viewer. As soon as the gesture is completed, Chang invites Liu-Fai out for a drink, whereupon there is an immediate cut to later on in the night, by which time they have arrived at Liu-Fai’s

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apartment. Liu-Fai is now front of frame, also viewed through a window, with Chang now at the back of the shot. However, in Liu-Fai's case, his actions demonstrate bodily dysfunction rather than control, as he retches loudly, clearly having had too much to drink.

The immediate juxtaposition of these scenes emphasises Chang's unstrained oral control, which contrasts both with Liu-Fai's lack of composure at this point as well as with the extreme nature of Po-Wing's vocalicity generally. Whilst Chang's smoking represents a silent visualisation of his breath control, the comparison with Po-Wing is extended in moments of non-semantic utterance involving Chang. These utterances are characterised by a naturalness which contrasts with the volatile quality of Po-Wing's vocal gestures. In the first of three football playing scenes, all marked by noisy bursts of shouting, Chang is left on his own after Liu-Fai loses his temper with another player and causes the game to stop. As he watches Liu-Fai walk away, Chang draws in breath audibly through his nose, in order to inhale extra air to compensate for the effort he has been expending during the game. This is an aural gesture that is a natural consequence of energy spent over time. As the scene ends, the camera withdraws from Chang who is seen, hands on hips, breathing quite heavily, but inaudibly. Here, the film mimics the auditory perspective of a spectator on the scene who hears Chang inhaling air through his nose, because the camera is close to him, but can only *see* him breathing heavily once the camera withdraws to a distance.

This naturalistic representation of Chang's more laboured breathing contrasts to the characterisation of Po-Wing's non-semantic utterances as sudden or intense outbursts (even his crying, which is presented *in media res* to the viewer, is given the aural quality of an outburst, through the decision to absent the sound of the sobbing from the start of the scene, only then to suddenly bring it onto the soundtrack). Another example of Chang's comparatively unforced style of non-semantic utterance occurs when he laughs at a joke Liu-Fai makes as they say their goodbyes (Chang is about to go off travelling). This is enacted in

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two phases, with the first passage dominated by the sound of Chang taking in breath, before he lets out a more fully-formed chuckle. The process of inhaling and exhaling breath is linked to the eventual production of a more recognisable laugh. This demonstrates a continuity between his aural gestures, one leading naturally to the other. In Po-Wing's case, by contrast, the non-semantic utterances are presented as isolated occurrences: either fully-formed as sonic bursts (the 'whoa' as he jumps on the bed and 'waay' as he surprises Liu-Fai on the street) or emerging as uncontrolled peaks of excitation (whether associated with sexual pleasure or violent assault).

Whilst Chang's laugh might, on its own, appear inconsequential, it occurs within a visual and aural patterning that encourages attention to be paid towards it. The moment of Chang laughing is preceded by the sight and sound of Liu-Fai once again retching, again framed through the window of his apartment, with Chang in the background. This means that, as with the earlier smoking/retching moment it mirrors, Chang's composed breathing offers an immediate contrast to Liu-Fai's dysfunctional oral/aural gesture.

Indeed, the key purpose of making the non-semantic qualities of Chang's vocality and Po-Wing's so different from one another is to establish extremes of aural behaviour within which Liu-Fai's vocality is heard to vacillate. Liu-Fai's characterisation is always a concern, even when it is Po-Wing or Chang being heard. Specifically, Liu-Fai's non-semantic vocal gestures fluctuate according to the dynamics of his relationship with Po-Wing and through a process of enlightenment he begins after befriending Chang.

The fluctuation is partly a symptom of the presentation of Liu-Fai as something of a blank canvas in terms of his vocality. He is first presented to the viewer through a mute image, by the photo page of his passport. Even the first shot depicting his living, breathing body has him posed so that his upper arm hides his mouth. His mouth is also covered, and his voice unheard, at the pivotal moment when Chang, on a final night out with Liu-Fai, asks him

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to record himself on his cassette recorder, so that he has something to remember him by on his travels. The camera captures the process of recording from a distance, Liu-Fai's mouth covered by the cassette player. It is clear from his deportment that he starts to cry as he tries to talk, but the oral signs of doing so are obscured and the soundtrack is dominated by the diegetic music playing in the bar.

This corresponds to a number of moments where environmental noise drowns out the sound of Liu-Fai completely or where Liu-Fai is shown to be unable to compete with the noise around him (for example, he struggles to make himself heard on the phone due to clamorous voices beside him, a couple argue loudly in Spanish while he makes dinner silently in his building's communal kitchen, and he engages noiselessly in a sexual encounter in a porn cinema, accompanied by a soundtrack of amplified heavy breathing from the performers onscreen). Even when the film subdues diegetic sound to make space for Liu-Fai's frequent voiceovers, it does so to allow the viewer to hear a voice that, I have ventured, delivers its words in a relatively monotone style, when compared to Chang's narration.

The lack of 'personality' demonstrated through Liu-Fai's vocalicity is underscored by its contrast to the more boldly-defined aural qualities associated with Po-Wing and Chang. In relation to the former, the factual tone and even delivery of Liu-Fai's opening voiceover gives way to the opening sex scene, in which, as I have discussed, all the heavy breathing is done by Po-Wing; Liu-Fai stands silently as Po-Wing screams excitedly at the horse racing; and the sound of Po-Wing sobbing uncontrollably is tempered immediately by a measured voiceover from Liu-Fai.

Whilst this comparison demonstrates that Liu-Fai does not possess the volatility of voice associated with Po-Wing, nor does he exhibit the serene, natural control possessed by Chang. This is not only registered through the repeated scenario of Liu-Fai retching whilst Chang demonstrates control over his breathing, but also through a moment that mirrors the

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crying/voiceover comparison involving Po-Wing and Liu-Fai. This time it is Chang's voiceover that is heard, reporting that, on his travels, he listens to the message Liu-Fai has recorded for him, only to discover it is composed solely of his sobbing. The withholding of the sound of Liu-Fai crying retains a distance in his aural representation from the visceral quality of Po-Wing's vocality. However, the narrative fact that Liu-Fai's crying overcomes his ability to speak also disassociates Liu-Fai from the qualities of oral and aural control exhibited by Chang. Furthermore, the stylistically pointed withholding of the sound of crying from the viewer, at the point of recording and playback, represents a different way of handling non-semantic sound than that associated with Chang, whose vocal emanations are depicted naturalistically.

There are also scenes in which Liu-Fai momentarily approximates the vocality connected with Po-Wing and Chang, without mimicking them completely. For example, during and after an argument with Po-Wing about how many men he has slept with, Liu-Fai spits and becomes relatively breathless, the sound of his laboured breathing closing the scene, and working as a sign of agitation similar to the heavy breathing of Po-Wing, albeit in lower-key form.

The second and third football playing scenes allow Liu-Fai to occupy positions associated with breathing previously associated with Chang. In the second scene, it is Liu-Fai, rather than Chang, who is left standing at its close, the camera capturing him in mid-close up looking out of breath, as Chang was, and the soundtrack conveying the sounds of his breathing body accordingly. At the end of the third football scene, a jazzy non-diegetic score accompanies a stylized slow motion shot, burnished by lens flare, showing Liu-Fai blowing cigarette smoke out of his mouth with the same poise Chang had demonstrated earlier.

These moments of approximation do not represent Liu-Fai's absorption into the non-semantic sound world of the other characters. Rather, through different types of vocality and

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orality, they contribute to an understanding that, at this particular moment, Liu-Fai is more drawn, temperamentally, to one or other of the dispositions between which he fluctuates throughout the narrative: the desire for intimacy that holds him to a claustrophobic and destructive relationship with Po-Wing; and the possibility of autonomy and feeling comfortable in one's own skin that he sees embodied in the actions of his friend, Chang. Non-semantic vocal expression contributes to the definition of these dramatic coordinates, helping to embody Liu-Fai's passage between them.

## **Critical Reflection: How 'Close' Can a Close Reading of the Foreign-Language Film Voice Be?**

My analysis of *Happy Together* represents the working towards a position where each character's vocalicity can be differentiated materially, and the difference can be understood as significant, even though the languages being spoken remain foreign, the words' semantic meanings only attainable through the translation of the subtitles. The point being made is not that concentration on this particular aspect of the film's means of expression will automatically yield a radical re-reading of the film as a whole (though that could be the result, depending on the example). Rather, by attempting to attend to *every* non-semantic vocal utterance of the key characters in *Happy Together*, I am putting forward the case that: (a) these elements are as expressive of characterisation and theme as more commonly cited aspects such as dialogue and mise-en-scene; and, crucially, (b) that, in the foreign-language film spectating experience, non-semantic vocalicity actually takes on more expressive weight, as the linguistic aspects of voice are only legible indirectly through the subtitles.

The philosophy behind these assertions is likewise twofold, namely: (a) that the *monomodal* form of writing about film is likely to achieve more sensitivity if it is attuned to the particular elements that constitute the *multimodal* experience offered by film in a given situation; and (b) that 'being attuned' in this particular context involves acknowledging,



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rather than disavowing, the limited nature of the critic's access to one of the film's multimodal properties (the linguistic features of the foreign-language voice).

At several points in my commentary on the film, I have concentrated on the significance of breathing. By seizing on breath as a potentially familiar aspect of vocalicity possessing qualities that can be apprehended universally, my thinking aligns with that expressed by Davina Quinlivan in *The Place of Breath in Cinema* (2012), who, after Luce Irigaray, insists on the absolutely foundational nature of breathing. The scope of my analysis, however, is apparently narrower than Quinlivan's. She identifies four areas of concern:

the representation of bodies within the filmic diegesis, the film's body which I accord with the formal attributes of film, the significance of gender to the 'bodies' I theorise, and the positioning of the viewer's body in the film experience that the locus of breathing suggests. (2012: 33)

My reading of *Happy Together* seemingly takes into account only the first of these concerns, that is to say the diegetic, breathing body of the films' characters. However, I have argued that it is particularly appropriate to foreground this area of analysis in the case of the foreign-language film. The single factor that distinguishes a subtitled version of a film from a dubbed one is the retention of the vocalicity originally associated with the characters, whether this is in a semantic or non-semantic register. Whilst subtitles can only offer a translation of the original semantic sound, the non-semantic elements can be experienced in unfiltered form.

It may well be the case that particular styles of vocal soundtrack foreground non-semantic sound more prominently than others, making them particularly amenable to the kind of analysis I have attempted. *Happy Together*, for example, draws attention towards the bodily qualities of the film's voices through its juxtaposition of raw direct sound (which retains elements of non-semantic vocalicity that would often be 'cleaned up') and long passages where diegetic sound is entirely effaced through music (inducing a self-

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consciousness in the viewer about the sounds that have been lost).<sup>5</sup> However, regardless of the vocal soundtrack's production style, I would still argue that the condition of not understanding the linguistic aspects of the foreign-language voice lends its non-semantic qualities a particular *potential* as an alternative source of enlightenment: the non-semantic sound produced by the characters becomes a familiar element to be scrutinised.

Whilst the 'isolation' of non-semantic vocal sounds as particularly prominent ones within this condition of listening is important, it should also be noted that the analysis I have undertaken in relation to *Happy Together* does engage with a wider sense of the 'film's body', as Quinlivan conceives it. At various points, I attend to the different kind of 'breathing' the film's body does as it depicts characters' acts of breathing. For example, the long passage of non-diegetic music and diegetic silence that precedes the sound of Po-Wing crying can be seen as a sustained 'holding of diegetic breath' on the part of the film's soundtrack, which accentuates the sense that it is undertaking an involuntary exhalation when Po-Wing's sobbing cuts in: this, in turn, exacerbates the association of Po-Wing with a vocalicity that is relatively uncontrolled. By contrast, the camera that withdraws from Chang as he draws breath after the football game mimics human sentience (that is to say, acts like a body), by only 'hearing' Chang when it is close to him. At the end of the third football scene, the movement from a cacophony of sound associated with frenetic action, to slow motion and a floating non-diegetic jazz score when Liu-Fai draws on a cigarette, represents a progression from the film 'gasping for air' in the football scene, to taking a restorative and meditative deep breath as it shows Liu-Fai smoking: this suggests that this is a moment of poise that has to be worked for by Liu-Fai (like a deep breathing routine), again reinforcing the contrast with the more naturalistically achieved composure of Chang. These details reveal an intimate connection between the expression of non-semantic vocalicity and other aspects of film form,

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both visual and aural, and these forms of interconnection represent another means through which the film voice can be drawn into a zone of familiarity for the foreign-language viewer.

The reading strategy I have outlined through my analysis of *Happy Together* relies on bold assumptions about the comprehension of foreign-language film voices that may be in need of revision in particular instances. For example, I have assumed a binary position in terms of the critic's linguistic competence – she or he either understands the language or does not – that will not stand true in every case. In the only instance of sustained self-reflection I have found on this matter, Felicia Chan discusses the experience of watching a Cantonese film with poor English subtitles (and recourse to Chinese subtitles), in her position as a 'non-Cantonese-speaking, limited-Chinese-reading, English-speaking, ethnic Chinese Singaporean' (2007: 200). She describes the process as 'not unlike trying to translate three different languages at the same time ... and yet, the experience is not altogether about foreignness either' (ibid: 199). Chan describes her activity as 'a re-suturing of the component parts – the visuals, the spoken dialogue and the written subtitles – separated initially by the gaps in my fluency' (ibid: 200). This adds complexity to the notion of what it means to be a 'foreign spectator' but the solution Chan offers in order to make sense of the film is essentially the same as that proposed by Eleftheriotis. It follows, therefore, that my extension of Eleftheriotis' reading strategy to include attention to the material qualities of the vocal soundtrack would also make sense in a situation where the viewer's linguistic incompetence is not absolute.

I have also ventured that all the non-semantic utterances I have discussed – not solely restricted to breathing – possess qualities that transcend language barriers. There is certainly a danger that linguistic incompetence can lead to misidentifying semantic phrases as non-semantic ones or to ignoring the everyday connotations of non-semantic elements that would be obvious to a competent linguist. Erving Goffman alludes to the importance of context in

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understanding ‘uttering that is not talking’ (1981: 122) in everyday life, when he describes one form of such utterances, namely the ‘response cry’, in the following way:

These cries are conventionalized utterances which are specialized for an informative role, but in the linguistic and propositional sense they are not statements ... What comes to be made of a particular individual's show of ‘natural emotional expression’ on any occasion is a considerably awesome thing not dependent on the existence anywhere of natural emotional expressions. (1981:108)

Goffman stresses the conventionalised, specialised and constructed quality of this kind of utterance, and this challenges the idea that vocal sounds can be conceived of as linguistically transcendent simply because they do not appear as linguistic statements.

Whilst cognisant of the potential for all forms of vocality to be culturally and historically informed, in relation to film criticism I would argue that the film’s fictional world provides a powerful context in itself, which can aid the critic in assessing the plausibility of her or his interpretation of a particular utterance. That is to say, culturally misguided readings are likely to be mitigated if critics are thorough in their cross-referencing of instances of non-semantic vocality within a particular film, as I have attempted to be. Individual films draw on conventions of vocality formed in the ‘real world’, but equally they construct aural environments of their own in which particular sounds take on specific values. My analysis of *Happy Together* considers all the non-semantic utterances of the film’s three main characters, as I perceive them, and its claims to rigour lies in the attempt to find meaning in the relationship between all of these instances. In this manner, I am writing film criticism in the mode advocated by Andrew Klevan and Alex Clayton, providing an evidential aspect that authenticates its claims ‘by an appeal to features of the work which are capable of independent affirmation’ (2011: 3). To this extent, the analysis also follows Klevan and Clayton in that external information (for example, a knowledge of how a particular sound

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might be understood in a specific cultural context) ‘is not foundational nor does it legitimise the assessment’ (ibid: 5).

Klevan and Clayton advocate a type of intersubjective film criticism that is shareable (capable of independent affirmation) *and* also explicitly the product of individual experience. In my critical encounter with *Happy Together*, my linguistic incompetence shapes the kind of criticism I feel I can do in relation to the film’s foreign-language voices. For example, I have almost entirely avoided making claims about the significance of the character’s delivery of speech itself, and, when I have (e.g. comparing the ‘rise-and-fall’ style of Chang’s voiceovers with the ‘monotone’ nature of Liu-Fai’s), the risk of doing so has been acknowledged. To this extent, what I can make of the voices of *Happy Together* is subject to limitations that are not apparent in the criticism I may do of film voices speaking a language familiar to me. However, rather than accepting that linguistic incompetence acts as a complete barrier to the understanding of voice, rendering it unattainable, the critical approach I have proposed brings aspects of the foreign-language voice closer, bestowing upon it Durovicova’s sense of ‘form-ness’ (2010: 93), albeit incompletely. In this way, my apparently ‘narrow’ focus on characterisation actually incorporates a more expansive reflection on the spectator’s position within the film experience, aligning it with the fourth area of concern cited by Quinlivan.

Quinlivan’s monograph is representative of a phenomenological turn in the study of the film soundtrack, including the film voice, which mirrors the increasing focus on materiality in voice studies more generally. Given this is a relatively recent development, and that, within film studies, attention to the aural has always followed in the wake of the study of the visual, it could be argued that the lack of self-reflexivity in most writing about the foreign-language film voice is simply a result of disciplinary evolution: a body of work on the materiality of film sound has now begun to emerge and this encourages attention to be paid to niche areas within this field, such as the one I have explored in this article.

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However, I believe the film critic's historical reticence in admitting to a linguistic limitation in his or her reading competence is symptomatic of a more deeply-rooted anxiety about the act of writing on film, especially in relation to sound. Bellour differentiates between images and sound, asserting that the latter cannot be 'described or evoked' and 'cannot really be experienced except by hearing it' (1975: 22). Whilst a generation of film sound scholars have, nevertheless, attempted to evoke sound effectively in their writing, it is still true that the film image has a propensity to be captured for contemplation by the critic in a way sound does not (for example, the film image can be stopped and still be visible for closer contemplation, whereas when sound is stopped it ceases to be heard). If sound is generally difficult to capture, in the research process and in the writing, then the task of analysing sounds speaking languages that are unfamiliar seems to only add to the challenge. In such a scenario, it is not surprising that most English-language commentary on the foreign-language film voice has effaced these problems and focused instead on a textual element that can be more easily captured: namely the semantic expression of speech that is converted into the English language through the subtitles.

Despite these challenges, a self-aware approach to analysing the foreign-language film voice is necessary, given the large amount of writing there has been on films accessed through subtitled prints and the widely accepted desirability of internationalising film studies, in research and in teaching. In advocating the study of world cinema, Dudley Andrew suggests that it should 'be ready to travel more than to oversee, should put students inside unfamiliar conditions of viewing rather than bringing the unfamiliar handily to them' (Andrew 2004: 9). As an example of how this productive form of displacement might work in relation to a consideration of language specifically, Andrew offers the following:

Just look at *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, Taiwan, 2000). Better still, look at it from the perspective of Mainland Chinese audiences who had the pleasure

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or annoyance of rectifying three distinct acting styles and accents; for those of us ignorant of Chinese, the film's linguistic friction is obliterated in the film's true language, "subtitled English." (ibid: 15)

This passage offers a stark choice of reading positions for viewers unversed in Chinese languages: either venture inside an unfamiliar condition of viewing to appreciate the perspective of Mainland Chinese audiences; or accept that the understanding of the film through subtitles makes meaningful engagement with its play of languages impossible. The suggestion that the potential for any such engagement is, in fact, 'obliterated' through subtitled English resonates with Robert Stam's image of foreign-language film viewers being adrift on an alien sea, with only the subtitles in their home language to cling to (Stam 1989: 68).

In this article, I have sought to counter the discourse of 'helplessness' that underlies this type of rhetoric, in order to encourage a productive and pragmatic way of engaging with the foreign-language film voice. This has involved synthesising reading practices suggested by Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Davina Quinlivan, the former advocating a positive form of foreign spectatorship (without attending to matters of the voice), the latter focusing attention on the non-semantic elements of the vocal soundtrack (without considering issues of language competence). I have recognised the idiosyncrasies of the experience of the linguistically incompetent film critic, and accounted for them in the style of criticism, neither effacing them nor accepting them as insurmountable constraints. This allows a reading practice to be developed that 'responds to the work as it appears' (Klevan and Clayton: 5), and that consciously and creatively *makes use of* the critic's linguistic limitations.

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<sup>1</sup> Evidence of this lack of attention to vocal performance can be found in all the writing on Wong Kar-wai featured in the bibliography. It is also apparent in all of the English-language writing on *Happy Together* I have encountered (over 30 pieces), including reviews written to accompany cinema or DVD releases, more substantial review articles, Jeremy Tambling's monograph on the film and other academic writing (including my own, as I discuss).

<sup>2</sup> Examples of this difference can be found at both the meta-level (e.g. textbooks) and the micro-level (e.g. criticism on Wong Kar-wai movies) of writing about film. At the meta-level, the established English-language film analysis textbooks (listed in the bibliography) do not suggest that writing about the foreign-language film voice might require a particular analytical approach, even though they do give advice on how to analyse the film voice and feature examples from a range of non-English language cinemas: whenever they offer examples to do with details of vocal performance, they are always English-language ones. A particularly apposite example occurs in the third edition of *An Introduction to Film Studies*, which features an extended account of voiceover in *Happy Together* (304-8) that concentrates on the semantic value of the words, as understood through translation, and makes no reference to vocal performance.

<sup>3</sup> Eleftheriotis suggests that the polyglot nature of the soundtrack of Emir Kuristica's *Black Cat, White Cat (Crna macka, beli macor*, 1998) is registered in the film's cross-referencing between frame planes, even though the mixture of languages cannot be denoted adequately in the subtitles (2010: 189).

<sup>4</sup> In my monograph, *The Sense of Film Narration*, the analysis of the voice itself in *Happy Together* remains 'stuck' at the level of comprehension that can be accessed through the subtitles.

<sup>5</sup> More generally, non-semantic elements of the vocal soundtrack are likely to be more apparent in situations where the production/post-production of the film voice adheres heavily to an aesthetic of liveness (see, for example, Quinlivan's analysis of breathing in Lars von Trier's 'Golden Heart Trilogy' (123-167)), or, conversely where the vocal soundtrack is excessively post-produced (allowing for particular vocal sounds to be highlighted in a controlled manner).