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THE VOICE-OVER TECHNIQUE IN FOUR FILMS BY SARAH POLLEY

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Abstract - This article discusses the use of the voice-over technique in four films by the Canadian actress, director and screenwriter Sarah Polley: *Away from Her* (2006), *Take This Waltz* (2011), *Stories We Tell* (2012) and *Women Talking* (2022). In order to unpack its multifaceted and multifunctional meaning-making system, a multimodal stylistic lens and toolkit have been adopted. Results show that the cinematic strategy is used across the films by the Canadian director with different extent, in different forms, and with different functions, thus illustrating the artist's talent and creativity. The voice-over functions are mainly related to the enactment of processes of characterisation, narration, and screen adaptation. However, and most interestingly, the strategy is used to challenge the very modes and forms of these phenomena. In *Away from Her*, it questions the traditional characterisation of a patient affected by Alzheimer's disease as a passive and weak human being. In *Stories We Tell*, it subverts the narration process itself as univocal, linear, and stable, showing an ultimate metanarrative concern. In *Women Talking,* it negotiates the process of screen adaptation, by replacing the male narrator of the adapted text with a female homodiegetic retrospective voice-over narrator as survivor and witness. Even its (almost) absence in *Take This Waltz* can be perceived as meaningful, as it is related to the multimodal shaping of the trope of emptiness that Polley presents as her main aim in this film.

Keywords: voice-over; audiovisual discourse; multimodal stylistics; Sarah Polley.

Is that why you describe it, as a search for the vagaries of truth
and the unreliability of memory, rather than a search for a father?
S. Polley, *Stories We Tell* (2012)

1. Introduction

This article discusses the use of the voice-over technique in four films (i.e., *Away from Her, Take This Waltz, Stories We Tell, Women Talking*) by the Canadian actress, director and screenwriter Sarah Polley. It shows that the four films adopt the audiovisual strategy not only in different aesthetic forms and with different aesthetic functions, exemplifying the artist's talent and creativity, but also to question and challenge the epistemological significance of the filmic and narrative processes of characterisation, storytelling, and screen adaptations.

In the interdisciplinary scholarly debate it intersects, the voice-over strategy occupies a marginal area. In the field of cinema studies, it has been subject to critical oversight, akin to the broader system of speech it articulates and the sound track it composes (Kozloff 2000, p. 28). This surprising disregard may be related to the fact that, in documentaries or semi-documentaries, it is generally used to describe, confirm, explain what is being shown on the visual track (Chovanec 2020; Franco 2001; Lorenzo-Dus 2009). In literary adaptations, the technique has been often used as a simplistic way of transposing a story from page to screen (Hutcheon 2013, p. 54). Screenwriters, in turn, perceive it as a trivial way of rendering a character's interiority, as the screenwriting guru

Robert McKee in the film *Adaptation* by Spike Jonze (2002) denounces.

However, the voice-over has been and is being innovatively adopted by critically acclaimed directors, including Billy Wilder, Jane Campion, Terrence Malick, Ridley Scott, Charlie Kaufman, Spike Jonze (e.g., McHugh 2001; Laamanen 2012). It is then subtly linked to a variety of influential audiovisual genres, such as war films, film noirs, film adaptations, romantic comedies, and TV series (Kozloff 1988, p. 33). Moreover, the semiotic system significantly operates in cinematic units, such as epistolary scenes and sequences (Hollinger 1992; Walsh 2005), and activates relevant analeptic and proleptic filmic functions. On these grounds, this article argues that the voice-over can increase the level of textual complexity, perform a layered filmic narrative, inscribe cinematic tension, and challenge text fruition.

The perception of the voice-over as a simplistic technique that tends to replicate the visual track and/or the literary adapted text, seems to be due to the monodisciplinary viewpoint from where it is being generally observed, such as that of film studies, narrative studies, or adaptation studies. Similarly, the observation of the cinematic strategy from a monomodal perspective (i.e., as expressing a 'purely' aural system of communication) can lead to the interpretation of the voice-over as a simplifying device. In this paper it is argued that the integration of an interdisciplinary standpoint and a multimodal lens can enable analysts to appreciate the multifaceted and multifunctional dimension of the technique within the audiovisual ensemble of a film, documentary, or TV series.

This article is organised into seven sections. The present introduction is followed by a literature review. Section 3 outlines the voice-over technique, Section 4 focuses on the article's methodology, and Section 5 presents the four films by the Canadian director. While section 6 reports on the data collection and analysis, the last section summarises the findings and draws concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

To my knowledge, no studies exist on the voice-over in Sarah Polley's films and this article aims to fill this gap. Critical works on Polley's oeuvre mainly addressed her debut feature-length film, *Away from her*, as a literary adaptation (e.g., Keefer 2019; McGill 2008), sometimes with a focus on the filmic representation of dementia (Berthin-Scaillet 2010; Concilio 2018; Herrera 2013). Discussing Polley's second film, Leach (2013) problematised the definition of *Take This Waltz* as a romantic comedy and observed how the protagonist is depicted in-between her comfortable marriage and her passionate affair with a neighbour. Critical voices interested in the third film mainly focused on the audiovisual genre it performs. For instance, Waites (2015) positioned *Stories We Tell* in-between the documentary and the memoir, while Busch (2015) adopted a psychoanalytic perspective and observed that, in the same text, personal materials have been used for creative expression. The fourth film by the Canadian director, *Women Talking*, was interpreted from a political angle by Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Ménendez (2023), through the lens of the #MeToo movement. Differently, with a focus on Polley's universalising aim in the page-to-screen adaptation process, Janzen (2023) denounced that the real female victims of sexualised abuse ultimately remain invisible. Even though not specifically concerned with the voice-over, all these works will be significant for my analysis.

Critical discussions of voice-over have been opened and influenced by Kozloff's seminal monographic study of 'invisible storytellers' in American fiction films (1988), including *How Green Was My Valley* by John Ford (1941) and *Barry Lyndon* by Stanley

Kubrick (1975). Chatman (1999) further developed the discussion on cinematic voice-over narration, by extending the analysis into more recent American texts and into foreign films that show innovative forms of integration between the visual and the audio tracks. Thus, foundation works on the voice-over tended to concentrate on its narrative function and to neglect its polysemy.

Subsequent scientific studies addressed the voice-over phenomenon in relation to specific audiovisual genres, including documentaries (Chovanec 2020; Franco 2001; Lorenzo-Dus 2009), war films (Walsh 2005), film noirs (Haacke 2019), literary adaptations (Costa 2019; Harrison 2020), romantic comedies (Kozloff 2012), and TV series (Edholm 2022; Hoth 2010). Some critical works focused on acclaimed directors, including Jane Campion (McHugh 2001) and Terrence Malick (Laamanen 2012), who have used the cinematic strategy in a systematic and relevant way in their works. Meanwhile, scholarly attention has been devoted to films that rely on pervasive and significant use of the technique, for example to express an ironic tone in *The Age of Innocence* by Martin Scorsese (Costa 2019), to enact an epistolary correspondence in *The Thin Red Line* by Terrence Malick (Walsh 2005), or to realise metafilmic functions in *Adaptation* by Spike Jonze (Francesconi 2022).

Remarkable but not extended attention has been devoted to the voice-over phenomenon from a gender perspective (Hollinger 1992; Hoth 2010; Pillai 2015), drawing on seminal and more general studies on filmic female voice (e.g., Doane 1980; Silverman 1988). Notably, Hollinger (1992) identified the emergence of the female voice-over in the 1940s in four specific audiovisual genres: the maternal melodrama, the love story, the medical discourse film, and the paranoid gothic film. Almost a decade later, McHugh (2001) specifically explored voice-over female narration in three films written and directed by Jane Campion: *Sweetie, The Piano,* and *Holy Smoke*. Giving attention to the TV series *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, Hoth (2010) examined the voice-over impact on the processes of 'gendering', namely on the construction of gender concepts, and on the emphasis on the female perspective.

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, filmic voice-over has been explored through the frames of film history and theory (Kozloff 1988, 2000), cognitive stylistics (Harrison 2020), multimodal analysis (Francesconi 2022; Piazza 2010), narratology (Costa 2019), or narrative rhetoric (Edholm 2022). Overall, specialised studies have generally adopted a monodisciplinary approach and a monomodal lens and predominantly addressed the narrative function. This article argues that an interdisciplinary and multimodal lens can enable analysts to appreciate the multifaceted and multifunctional dimension of the voice-over. In this vein, this work builds on and expands previous research on the voice-over in audiovisual artifacts, conducted through a multimodal lens and toolkit, that inscribe and interpret the technique within the irreducible audiovisual ensemble. The pilot study of this research line (Francesconi 2022) addressed the film *Adaptation* by Spike Jonze, released in 2002.

3. The Voice-Over

From a multimodal viewpoint, the voice-over is part of the filmic audio track, together with music and sound effects (Bordwell *et al*. 2020; van Leeuwen 1999). When it has been traditionally addressed for the language it articulates (Chion 1982, p. 13), voice should first be observed in its 'materiality' (van Leeuwen 1999), elsewhere defined as its 'body' (Chion 1982, p. 53), or 'grain' (Barthes 1977). This dimension of materiality is related to several voice-quality factors, including gender and age, but also to accent, and to how

voice is used, in terms of tension, roughness, breathiness, loudness, pitch range and vibrato (van Leeuwen 1999). If voice grain is innate, actors then train their voice to express a particular accent or modulate their voice to achieve a particular effect required by a specific scene (Kozloff 1988, p. 95). Meanwhile, voice is technologically processed at different stages of the audiovisual text production and post-production.

In a film, documentary or TV series, voice may be variously used as voice-in, voice-over, or voice-off (Doane 1980), depending on its relation to the *mise-en-scène*. Voice-in operates as speech produced by a character speaking, shouting, whispering, praying on screen (Bednarek 2018; Kozloff 2000), voice-over is delivered by an invisible source or by a visible non-speaking human source (Kozloff 1988), voice-off derives from a source that is not on screen but that may be captured by simply adjusting the camera's position (Kozloff 1988, p. 3).

These three cinematic terms are related to narrative concepts indicating the spatial and temporal relations the voice establishes with the story world. From a spatial perspective, the voice-over can be either 'diegetic,' namely generated within the narration, or 'non-diegetic', when it originates outside the story space (Bordwell *et al*. 2020, p. 285). A diegetic voice-over is used in the case of an interior monologue, when spectators are offered the thoughts and emotions of a non-speaking character (Alber 2017, p. 277). More specifically, this is referred to as an 'internal diegetic filmic sound', in opposition to external diegetic speech as social communication, conversation between two or more people physically adjacent or within hearing proximity to each other (Bordwell *et al*. 2020, p. 291). Differently, a 'non-diegetic' form is a narrator's voice-over in a documentary video, film or TV series episode, being superimposed at the post-production stage.

From a temporal viewpoint, the internal diegetic voice-over of the interior monologue is simultaneous to the depicted scene, whereas the non-diegetic voice-over of an omniscient narrator speaking from a later time than that of the story, offering a subsequent, retrospective narration, is non-simultaneous (Bordwell *et al*. 2020, p. 296; Branigan 1984, p. 76). In the latter case, a voice-over retrospective narrator can be homodiegetic if s/he speaks from an internal position and expresses a subjective perspective, reporting events analeptically (Bordwell *et al*. 2020, p. 297). An example of non-simultaneous narration is offered in *The Virgin Suicides* by Sofia Coppola (1999), narrated by a group of teenage boys including Giovanni Ribisi, who used to be in love with the Lisbon girls, the film's protagonists. The collective and shared narration is thus framed as a memory of past events.

Within the audiovisual narrative, the voice-over may belong to a character, a focaliser or a narrator, or to an integration or plurality of these narrative stances (Kawin 1984, p. 42; Smoodin 1983). These different voice-over speakers may take on different roles, and their role and relevance may mutate within the film narrative. Film-makers exploit alternative and unexpected voice-over solutions, working on hybrid, shifting, elusive narrative stances, like the voice-over narration of someone who is dead adopted by Billy Wilder in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Unsurprisingly, such brilliant device has inspired subsequent audiovisual products. Among these, the TV series *Desperate Housewives* opens, in its first episode, with the female character Mary Alice Young who commits suicide, only to take on the role as an omniscient voice-over narrator across the season (Hoth 2010, p. 93).

Hence, the voice-over's polymorphic and fluid nature illustrated so far reflects its multifunctionality (Kozloff 1988, p. 52ff). As previously mentioned, a voice-over may perform the function of storytelling (e.g., *The Great Gatsby* by Baz Luhrmann, 2013) or express an interior monologue and offer the real-time thoughts of a diegetic character (e.g., *Being John Malkovich* by Spike Jonze, 1999). It may elsewhere project a memory, a

dream, or a hallucination, like in *Fight Club* by David Fincher (1996). One of the most relevant voice-over functions is then the activation of a flashback (e.g., *Forrest Gump* by Robert Zemeckis, 1994). Within an epistolary scene or sequence, the strategy may accompany the silent writing or reading of a postcard, an email, or a letter, like in *A Letter to Three Wives* by Joseph Mankiewicz (1949). Similarly, it may be related to the writing or reading of a diary (e.g., *Taxi Driver* by Martin Scorsese, 1976) or of a book (e.g., *Adaptation* by Spike Jonze, 2002). Some voice-overs can be also related to the mediation of a device, such as phones, answering machines (e.g., *Bridget Jones* by Sharon Maguire, 2001), radios (e.g., *A Complete Unknown* by James Mangold, 2024), or airport speakers (e.g., *The Graduate* by Mike Nichols, 1967). To sum up, the following Table illustrates a preliminary and open multimodal and multifunctional stylistic framework for voice-over analysis:

<table>
<tr><td>Who?</td><td>Narrator(s)
Focaliser(s)
Character(s)</td><td>With what?</td><td>Audio track: music
Visual track: mise-en-scène
Editing techniques</td></tr>
<tr><td>Where?</td><td>Heterodiegetic
Homodiegetic</td><td rowspan="4">Why?</td><td rowspan="4">Storytelling (celebration, confession, testimony)
Correspondence (letter, postcard, email)
Device-mediated communication
Interior monologue
Memory, dream, hallucination
Flashback</td></tr>
<tr><td>When?</td><td>Simultaneous
Subsequent</td></tr>
<tr><td>What?</td><td>Speech content</td></tr>
<tr><td>How?</td><td>Voice quality</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1
Framework for voice-over analysis.

Following this section devoted to the voice-over technique, the next section outlines the methodology that has been adopted in order to account for this formal and functional complexity.

4. Methodology

In order to examine the voice-over as an audiovisual strategy, this article adopts the methodological toolkit of multimodal stylistic analysis. Developed over the last two decades after McIntyre's seminal analysis of the soliloquy scene from Ian McKellen's film version of Shakespeare's *Richard III* (2008), this analytical framework integrates tools from stylistics and multimodality to unpack the different semiotic resources interacting within a multimodal ensemble, intended as a meaning-making system. Examples of semiotic resources (or modes) analysed by McIntyre in *Richard III* are lighting and costume.

The reason why a multimodal stylistic analysis is appropriate is, more generally, related to the audiovisual dimension of the filmic artefact (as deriving from the integration of visual and audio tracks) and, more specifically, related to the necessary multimodal lens for the identification, analysis and interpretation of the voice-over. If the voice-over is clearly an aural semiotic system that has to be perceived through the sensory system of hearing, the visual form of perception is necessary for its identification and decodification. First, the observation of the visual track is crucial for distinguishing between the voice-in and the voice-over, i.e., to check if the speaker is visible or not, and, in case of a visible actor, if she or he is moving her or his lips to talk, cry, shout, whisper, or pray. Second, watching the visual track is fundamental to decoding the voice-over functions, that is, distinguishing filmic processes of narrating, reading, writing, telephoning, thinking,

dreaming or remembering.

The data for the analysis in section 6 consist of the multimodal transcription of the voice-over units in the four films. The manual transcription elaborates upon and integrates data from film scripts available online, subtitles and relevant visual data on the *mise-en-scène*. For space constraints and following Piazza (2010) and Harrison (2020), voice-over excerpts are generally quoted in the article to illustrate some points, while, for some part of the analysis, tables with multimodal data are presented. Limits of the transcription may be first related to the fact that all the multimodal resources adopted by the film cannot be annotated (the list of modes in a film is potentially endless). It is rather based on the selection and omission of some parameters by the analysist, according to specific interest and choices. For examples, modes such as size of frame, colour and perspective have been considered and included in the transcription. A further limit may be identified in the shift from an originally time-based filmic text to the space-based table of the annotation. Still, the transcription table provides clear, accessible and valid insights into the multimodal composition of the voice-over meaning-making system of the four films that the following sections will present.

5. Materials

This paper discusses the use of the voice-over technique in four films (i.e., *Away from Her, Take This Waltz, Stories We Tell,* and *Women Talking*) by the Canadian actress, director and screenwriter Sarah Polley. Born in 1979 in Toronto, Polley started working as an actress in several films and series at an early age. She became extremely popular in Canada for her role in the CBC/Disney TV series *Road to Avonlea* (1990-1996), based on the stories by Lucy Maud Montgomery (Cloarec 2020, p. 74). Still very young, the Canadian artist participated in Atom Egoyan's films *Exotica* (1994) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997). She has been and still is a political activist, engaged in favour of peace, women's rights, film independent productions, and supporting the Ontario Democratic Party (Cloarec 2020, p. 74).

Across her career, Sarah Polley directed four short films and four feature films. A critically acclaimed work is *Away from Her* (2006), Polley's feature debut as screenwriter and director (McGill 2008, p. 99). Interpreted by Julie Christie and Gordon Pinsent, *Away from Her* earned Oscar nominations for Polley's screenplay and Julie Christie's interpretation of Fiona. It adapted the short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" from the collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) by Nobel winner Alice Munro. The adaptation follows Fiona, a seventy-year-old woman who develops Alzheimer's disease. When her symptoms become evident, she is admitted to a nursing house, where she forms new friendships and falls in love with another resident, named Aubrey (Francesconi 2023).

Polley's second film, *Take This Waltz* (2011), is starred by Michele Williams (Margot), Seth Rogan (Lou) and Luke Kirby (Daniel). Apparently a simple "bitter-sweet romantic comedy about young hipsters" (Cloarec 2020, p. 1), it evokes the plot and tone of romantic films, depicting Margot, caught between her comfortable marriage and her passionate affair with a neighbour, Daniel. The film's title derives from a song Leonard Cohen included in his 1988 album *I'm Your Man*, used in the closing sequence with the camera moving around the couple at home, where "their relationships evolve from passionate love-making to listless TV watching" (Cloarec 2020, p. 4). Unlike standard romantic comedies, the film does not offer a happy ending and resists narrative closure.

A hybrid work that intersects the memoir and the documentary, Polley's *Stories We Tell*

earned numerous national and international awards. Relying on interviews of many family members and friends, the 'documemoir' revolves around the discovery that Michael Polley was not Sarah's biological father. Since Diane Polley had died from cancer when Sarah was just 11 years old, the director entwines multiple and competing perspectives to discover mother's behaviour and its impact on her family. This entangled journey of self-discovery is accomplished thanks to postmodern editing, embedded narratives, and the combination of Super 8 archival home-videos, photographs, reconstructed home-videos, as well as email correspondence presented through a voice-over (Busch 2015, p. 480; Cloarec 2020, p. 12).

A screen adaptation of Miriam Toews' novel *Women Talking* (2018), a film with the same title was directed and written by Polley (2022) and was released in Italy as *Il diritto di scegliere* on 8th March 2023. The critically acclaimed film received the 2023 Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. In *Women Talking*, women and girls of a Mennonite colony are drugged, raped and abused by the male members of their own community. Replacing the male narrator of the adapted novel with a retrospective female voice-over, the adaptation focuses on the abused women's two-day dialogue in which they consider the options of doing nothing, staying and fighting, or leaving.

Following this section devoted to the presentation of the four films by the Canadian director, the next section reports on the data collection and analysis of the voice-over forms and functions.

6. Results

6.1. Away from her

Away from Her adopts voice-over in a rare and intermittent way, specifically in relation to its protagonist Fiona. The most relevant occurrence is associated to the reading from a book on Alzheimer's, the mental disease name clearly visible on the cover. In a first unit, Fiona is on-screen, reading from her volume; her voice-in becomes a voice-over when the scene changes. The extended passage starts describing the role of the caregiver, who: "must preside over degeneration of someone he or she loves very much. He must do this for years with the news getting worse, not better" (00:14:04 – 00:14:30). The visual track illustrates the process of cognitive degeneration: the camera first moves to the kitchen, where Grant is holding the handle of a frying pan that Fiona had put away into the fridge. Spectators, then, see a second room where Grant is looking at Fiona through the window. His wife is skiing on the white covered landscape, alone.

After Fiona is admitted to the nursing house, a similarly constructed unit displays Grant reading from the same volume a passage focused on the neuronal behaviour of Alzheimer's:

> Tens of millions of synapses dissolve away, because the structures and sub-structures of the brain are so highly specialized that precise location of the neuronal loss determines what specific abilities will become impaired. It is like a series of circuit breakers in a large house flipping off one by one (00:41:54 – 00:42:53).

Meanwhile, the camera shows Grant first cooking and then skiing alone. While the reading voice-over focuses on the weakening of synapses (Berthin-Scaillet 2010, p. 167), in a symbolically dense image, the cottage Christmas lights progressively turn off. Notably, Grant reads the volume only after his wife does, being inspired and motivated by the woman's awareness and agency.

Such use of the voice-over to express the overt approach to the disease is of interest also from the adaptation process point of view. In the short story, Fiona and Grant do not read any book on Alzheimer's: no explicit reference is made to the neurodegenerative condition and only a vague form of senile dementia is evoked (Berthin-Scaillet 2010, p. 159; Herrera 2013, p. 111; Keefer 2019, p. 32). If the voice-over across the adaptation process is generally disregarded as a way of transposing literary passages from page to screen (Hutcheon 2013, p. 54), the use of the reading voice-over in this film signals the distance from the adapted text, in terms of the specific/general reference to the mental disease the narrative revolves upon.

Discontinuity in the process of adaptation is confirmed in a later voice-over scene added by Polley in her script (00:08:30-00:10:08). At home, Fiona wants to offer more wine to a couple of family friends during a dinner party. While the camera zooms on her face, she asks: "Would anyone like some more…?" and stops, unable to find the word she is looking for. The aphasia scene continues with an introspective unit showing Fiona's awareness of her deteriorating condition, her low-tone voice-over confessing:

> Half the time I wander around looking for something which I know is pertinent. But then, I can't remember what I'm looking for … once the idea is lost, everything is lost and I have to wander around trying to figure out what it was that was so important earlier (00:09:58 – 00:10:23).

Meanwhile, the visual track continues the previously discussed scene with the specialised volume and shows Fiona stopping in the middle of an extent of snow, her cottage blurred behind her. Operating on a symbolic level, the action of wandering around and the blurred cottage evoke the woman's confused mind. On-scene again, Fiona adds: "I think I may be beginning to disappear", leaving her guests upset (Francesconi 2023).

Verbal track	Visual track
Half the time I wander around looking for something which I know is pertinent. But then, I can't remember what I'm looking for … once the idea is lost, everything is lost and I have to wander around trying to figure out what it was that was so important.	Fiona has stopped cross-skiing in the middle of an extent of snow, her cottage blurred behind her. She turns and gazing around, in vain: a close-up reveals her disoriented expression.

Table 2
The aware voice-over.

If the previous unit shows Fiona's awareness of her deteriorating health condition, a later voice-over passage reveals her directness and sharpness (Herrera 2013, p. 112). On the car with Grant, she reminds her husband of his past extra-marital affairs: "All those sandals, Grant, all those bare female toes. What could you do but be a part of the time you were a part of? All those pretty girls didn't seem like anyone was willing to be left out" (00:31:47-00:32:03). Showing bare female toes and pretty girls faces, the visual track corroborates Fiona's speech, as well as the good condition of her long-term memory (Herrera 2013, p. 112). This flashback visual unit, in slow motion, is evocative of an old celluloid and connects the present of voice-over narration and the past of the depicted events.

Although not pervasive across the cinematic narrative, the voice-over in *Away from Her* is yet functional to the characterisation of Fiona as a clever, sharp, direct woman, who faces challenges and problems with maturity and awareness. From a multimodal perspective, the consonance between the visual and verbal tracks, far from simplistic

replication, expresses the explicit reference the woman and the film make of the mental disease Fiona is affected of, Fiona's awareness of her illness, and the good condition of her long-term memory. Elsewhere, the visual track may hold a metaphoric relation to the aural one and symbolically represent the progressively disoriented mind. The voice-over strategy is, ultimately, crucial in outlining the tension between the adapted story and the adaptation. While showing a profound understanding and admiration of Munro's text, Polley's work represents a distinct art form not only in medium and modality, but also in the approach to the disease (Francesconi 2023).

6.2. Take This Waltz

Unlike other films by Polley, *Take This Waltz* does not assign a prominent position to the voice-over. The aural technique is indeed almost absent, with the exception of a short scene at the airport where we hear an announcement: "Welcome to Montreal. Connecting passengers please check the boards for any updates to your departure times" (00:06:44 - 00:07:18). Apparently meaningless, this solution seems to align with the director' wish to create a film centred on the concept of emptiness, on the void in life (Cloarec 2020, p. 3). The protagonist Margot conducts a suspended existence, where serialised actions are governed by an airport speaker. Deprived of her voice (-over) as agentive power, her life is silenced and alienated.

6.3. Stories We Tell

In *Stories We Tell* (2012), Sarah Polley interviews many family members and friends to discover that Michael Polley was not her biological father. Across the scenes, the Canadian director collects and entwines multiple, fragmentary, conflicting versions of the same story. What seems a personal journey, ultimately, becomes an exploration of the process of storytelling itself. Sarah's own voice-over explains her project in a scene about an email she sends to her biological father Harry: "I'm interested in the way we tell stories about our lives. About the fact that the truth about the past is often ephemeral and difficult to pin down" (01:27:10-01:27:17).

The metanarrative film opens with a voice-over unit, with Michael quoting a passage from Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (Polley wrote the script and served as executive producer for the CBC/Netflix adaptation of Atwood's novel; cf. Cloarec 2020, p. 5), while fragments of home video footage show Diane's family-life scenes:

> When you're in the middle of a story, it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood, like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard are powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you're telling it to yourself or to someone else (00:00:25-00:01:13).

This quote casts light on the tension between the living of an experience and the telling of a story. It is actually the act of telling that makes a story a story, that turns the "confusion" into a shaped narrative. The "confusion" is represented through a series of metaphors (e.g., "whirlwind") suggesting lack of order and cohesion in the narrative material, but also evoking sensorial and cognitive impairment in the powerless narrating stance. A diachronic gap between the two stages is needed: the telling process can happen "only afterwards", only when one is no longer "aboard". The gap also implies physical distance from the initial condition of being "in the middle of a story". Once the *hic et nunc* of the whirlwind is overcome, the story can be told, the film can be written and directed.

Across the cinematic scenes, respondents speak in front of a camera and answer Sarah's questions via voice-off. Interview fragments embed archival home videos and reconstructed scenes about the past that illustrate and document what is being mentioned. Meanwhile, a further film-making level reveals the behind-the-scenes of interviews and recording, thus shaping the reflexive dimension of the documemoir. The layered film also features a significant and polyphonic voice-over, with Harry and Michael reading some emails they exchange with Sarah. However, the voice-over predominantly belongs to Michael Polley who both reads his emails and serves as a narrator, his voice being recorded in a studio while reading the script.

The voice-over becomes pervasive in the last 30 minutes of the film, when Michael narrates being told by Sarah that he was not her biological father. The camera captures the two of them sitting one in front of the other, sharing this destabilising story and assuring each other that it would not change their relationship. A series of close-ups focuses on their faces and mouths. Then we see the man alone while writing down his story, providing Sarah with the background information for what she had discovered. The camera indulges on his hand in the process of giving shape to his own version of the events. It then adopts a back, lateral perspective to show his hand holding his head:

> I mean, I enjoy writing but I can't get started 'cause I never have any ideas about what I want to write about. And since this came up, it started me off, realizing how many fascinating stories there are to be told in one's own life, without... I meant to try to look for what's an interesting story outside (01:14:21-01:14:40).

With a broader perspective, Michael stresses his emotional connection to storytelling ("enjoy"), to the challenges he is facing in storytelling, in the tension between the idea behind storytelling and the multiple stories that can be generated.

Verbal track	Visual track
I mean, I enjoy writing but I can't get started 'cause I never have any ideas about what I want to write about. And since this came up, it started me off, realizing how many fascinating stories there are to be told in one's own life, without... I meant to try to look for what's an interesting story outside	Alone, Michael is writing down his story. We see a detail of his hand in the process of writing. A back, lateral perspective shows his hand holding his head, suggesting the cognitive engagement and the complexity of the task he is accomplishing.

Table 3
The metanarrative voice-over.

Then we shift to the voice-in and see his recording his text, sitting down in front of a microphone, through a frontal angle. After some seconds, a new, extended voice-over unit starts, with the visual track showing a man swimming in a swimming pool.

> Gradually, I began to build up a picture of the whole thing. And so much of Diane's past and of my own actions appeared in a different light. The revelations had awoken an obsession in me to tell the whole story to anyone who would listen. My growing enthusiasm for the narrative itself, as well as the constant reevaluation of my own past, drove me around my room for two days. And then, on Saturday, I was finally able to send an email to Sarah with this summary of my thoughts (01:14:44-01:15.19).

The camera shows Michael in front of a computer, while writing an email to Sarah. The email text to Sarah originates from this interrogation of and elaboration on this fact, profoundly influenced by his emotional involvement ("obsession", "enthusiasm"). Meanwhile, the verb 'to build' implies that Michael is aware of the fact that he is

fabricating his 'own' story. The same awareness is visible in Sarah's email, where she relies on the verb 'to form' with reference to her mother:

> Have I totally lost my mind trying to reconstruct the past from other people's words, trying to form her? Is this the tsunami she unleashed when she went? And all of us, still flailing in her wake, trying to put her together in the wreckage, and her, slipping away from us, over and over again, just as we begin to see her face? (01:32:36-01:32:58)

Towards the film conclusion, Sarah's words evoke the metaphors used by her father at the beginning, in his quote of Atwood's *Alias Grace*. Diane's premature death was a traumatic event (a "tzunami") and this film is ultimately an attempt to grasp the ungraspable maternal figure, who passed away when Sarah was only a child.

To sum up, the polyphonic voice-over in *Stories We Tell* reveals the plural, competing and often conflicting versions of her personal story. Moreover, it significantly features Harry and Michael while reading an email correspondence with Sarah. It predominantly belongs to Michael, the film narrator, his voice being recorded in a studio while reading the script. Michael's voice-over narrates his relationship with Diane, her staying in Montreal for a job, the couple's reaction to her pregnancy, providing the context to her discovery that he was not Sarah's biological father. From a multimodal viewpoint, the relation between the visual and the verbal tracks is twofold. It is first functional to the illustration of narrated events (i.e., the story being told), thus enacting the documentary function the film promises. Meanwhile, it shows the metanarrative role, by depicting the storytelling process she has enacted to reach her mother.

6.4. Women Talking

Extended and pervasive, the voice-over in *Women Talking* belongs to Autje, a Mennonite young woman, who, in retrospect, narrates the reiterated sexual violence perpetrated against all women in her colony (Janzen 2023, p. 173). The first voice-over unit opens the cinematic narrative, when the narrator addresses Ona's baby: "This story ends before you were born" (00:00:52-00:00:55). Still unborn when the Mennonite women are pondering their options of doing nothing, staying and fighting, or leaving, Ona's newborn will be showed in the concluding film shot. Representing a positive message of hope for the future, the baby symbolises the main motivation guiding the women's decision-making process, unfolding in the hayloft during the exceptional absence of the men from the colony. After sharing, comparing, contrasting, opposing their viewpoints, they will decide to leave the colony in order to give a better future to their children, as Autje's voice-over will promise at the end of the film: "Your story will be different from ours" (01:33:54). Autje's effective role as voice-over narrator is then to link the story to the past […] and to project it onto the future (Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Ménendez 2023, p. 101).

Not only are temporal borders overcome by this voice-over narrative device: the tension between the narrating 'I' and the narratee 'you' is intertwined with the relation between personal pronouns 'I' and 'we' framing the film characters, namely the women being drugged and abused ("It went on for years. To all of us."). What the visual track shows in the opening shot as happening to the one single woman is generalised through the simultaneous adoption of the 'we' personal pronoun in the oral semiotic system. The visual track moves from a black screen to a vertical angle, to show a wounded young woman, Ona, lying in bed. The vertical angle capturing Ona expresses a vertical tenor and suggests the phallogocentric power perpetrating the violence upon the women and accusing the victims themselves of being responsible for the violence. While the camera focuses on her blood-covered thighs, the voice-over narrates:

> When we woke up feeling hands that were no longer there, the elders told us that it was the work of ghosts or Satan. Or that we were lying to get attention. Or that it was an act of wild female imagination. It went on for years. To all of us. It felt like weightlessness. It felt like drifting over what used to be real. It felt like a banishment, as though we had no invitation anymore to be a part of the real. I used to wonder who I would be if it hadn't happened to me. I used to miss the person I might have been. I don't anymore. Because it's doomsday and a call to prayer. It's both (00:01:23-00:02:47).

By the inter-semiotic strategy of visual-verbal tension (the visible single woman and the audible 'we' plural pronoun), Polley amplifies the extent and impact of the sexual violence narrative. This process is in line with the director's decision not to anchor the narrated events in the Bolivian colony, unlike the novel's author, and to "universalize" the sexualised experience (Janzen 2023, p. 171). The following Table illustrates the multimodal orchestration of systemic, generalised and reiterated violence perpetrated upon the women in the colony in the opening scenes (00:01:23-00:02:47).

Verbal track	Visual track
When we woke up feeling hands that were no longer there, the elders told us that it was the work of ghosts or Satan. Or that we were lying to get attention. Or that it was an act of wild female imagination.	A wounded young woman waking up on a bed, seen from a vertical angle. An older woman approaches, sits on the bed and embraces her. Cut to women praying in a room, seen from an oblique eye-angle.
It went on for years. To all of us. It felt like weightlessness. It felt like drifting over what used to be real. It felt like a banishment, as though we had no invitation anymore to be a part of the real. I used to wonder who I would be if it hadn't happened to me. I used to miss the person I might have been. I don't anymore. Because it's doomsday and a call to prayer. It's both.	White dissolve. Fragmented scenes of different young girls walking, running or playing in a green field. Limited, desaturated colour palette.

Table 4
The testimonial voice-over narrator.

Notably, the Canadian screenwriter assigns the role of narrator to a female survivor who, as a voice-over storyteller, frames her narrative as a form of witnessing. The female retrospective voice-over in *Women Talking* is indeed a homodiegetic one, as Autje tells a trauma story she has personally lived and she is witnessing as survivor. In the opening voice-over excerpt, she described the physical effects of the rapes ("we woke up feeling hands that were no longer there"), as well as psychological ones ("It felt like a banishment, as though we had no invitation anymore to be a part of the real. I used to wonder who I would be if it hadn't happened to me. I used to miss the person I might have been"). However, if the perpetrated violence deprived women of their past, the telling and sharing of their story enables to dream and shape a better future (Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Ménendez 2023, p. 98).

Accompanied by haunting music and no voice-over, a shot at the end of the first sequence (00:04:17) shows a writing taken from a preface in Toews' novel, superimposed on out-of-focus fields and trees (Janzen 2023, p. 179). The excerpt appropriates the accusation moved by the Mennonite male authorities, attributing the drugged sexual assaults to ghosts, demons, or hysteria: "What follows is an act of female imagination". The film systemically relies on female speech in order to subvert the content of this written statement that represents the phallogocentric power, and tell its counter-narrative. Female speech is used in the film in multiple forms and with multiple functions, as a way of achieving identity, voice, expression, and, as such, awareness:

> Where I come from, where your mother comes from, we didn't talk about our bodies. So when something like this happened there was no language for it. And without language for it, there was a gaping silence. And in that gaping silence was the real horror (00:11:34-00:13:15).

By assigning political value to this audiovisual solution, Polley elaborates upon a consolidated dichotomy in feminist discourse, that opposed patriarchal writing and feminist speech, the latter to be perceived as providing visibility and agency to women (Chion 1982, p. 10).

In a similar vein may be read the replacement of the male narrator in the adapted text with the female voice-over narrator of the screen adaptation. In the novel by Toews, the story is told by August Epp, who is invited to write the minutes of the women's meetings. Toews assigns the narrating role to the boys' teacher, the only adult male character who takes part in the hayloft conversation (Janzen 2023, pp. 171, 172). In love with Ona, this positive character is supportive of and empathetic towards the women's condition. However, he operates in the novel as a highly intrusive narrator, devotes significant passages to his own past, has control over the story, adds sometimes patronising comments. Through her neutralisation of the all-controlling adult male narrative voice in favour of a young female one, Polley exerts her narrative activism (Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Ménendez 2023, p. 102; Janzen 2023, p. 173). In the film, women are not only given agency as speaking and deciding characters, but also as focalisers and as storytellers.

To sum up, this film celebrates the poetic and political value of women's speech. The film title foregrounds the social, cultural and political value of dialogue among women. Unfolding along the entire duration of the film, the voice-in enables women to talk, shout, whisper, pray, sing, by sharing, comparing, contrasting, opposing feelings, approaches, viewpoints, opinions. That of women talking is an irreducibly polyphonic, polymorphic and polysemic practice. Meanwhile, the female homodiegetic retrospective voice-over narrator is used across the film to assign agency, awareness, depth to the narrative and to perform a testimonial narration of the trauma story. From a multimodal perspective, the audio and visual tracks are related in order to amplify and generalise the extent and impact of the physical and psychological abuse.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, this article discussed the use of the voice-over technique in four films by the Canadian actress, director and screenwriter Sarah Polley: *Away from Her*, *Take This Waltz*, *Stories We Tell* and *Women Talking*. In order to unpack multifaceted and multifunctional meaning-making system of the voice-over, a multimodal stylistic lens and toolkit have been adopted. Results show that the aural technique is used across the films by the Canadian director with different extent, in different forms, and with different functions, ultimately celebrated in its polyphonic, polymorphic and polysemic dimension. Even its (almost) absence in *Take This Waltz* can be perceived as meaningful, as it is related to the multimodal shaping of the trope of emptiness that Polley presents as her main aim. The voice-over functions across the films are mainly related to the enactment of processes of characterisation, narration, and screen adaptation. However, and most interestingly, voice-over is used to question and challenge the very modes and forms of these phenomena.

If also present in *Stories We Tell* and *Women Talking*, the use of voice-over for

characterisation is prominent in *Away from Her*, where it is functional to the depiction of Fiona as a clever, sharp, direct woman. Specifically, the cinematic technique is significant in expressing the explicit reference the woman and the film make of the disease Fiona is affected of. As such, the voice-over, although not pervasive across this cinematic narrative, challenges traditional modes and forms of representing the patient suffering from Alzheimer's. Strong and firm, Fiona acquires information on her condition, actively participates in the decisions to be made, supports other residents in the nursing facility. Far from being represented as a passive victim of the neurodegenerative illness, she is given will and agency (Concilio 2018, pp. 104-105; Keefer 2019, p. 34).

The use of voice-over is central in *Stories We Tell*, where it gives voice to multiple and often mutually contradictory storytellers of Sarah's own story. It also frames email correspondence sequences between Harry, Michael and Sarah about the discovery that Michael was not her biological father. However, it predominantly belongs to Michael Polley who also serves as a narrator, his voice being recorded in a studio while reading the script. What seems a personal journey ultimately becomes an exploration of the process of storytelling itself, thus showing a main metanarrative concern. In this vein, the voice-over is thus used to challenge and subvert the organising and controlling attitude of monologic, univocal and simplistic narratives.

Also used in *Away from Her*, the use of voice-over for the page-to-screen adaptation process is significant in *Women Talking*. Awarded for best adapted screenplay, the film unfolds a retrospective homodiegetic narration of the sexual assaults perpetrated upon the women of the colony and attributed by the men to ghosts, demons, or hysteria. Extended and pervasive, Autje's voice-over in the adaptation replaces August's male voice in the adapted text, thus adding a testimonial component to the female survivor's narration. Women are not only given agency as speaking and deciding characters (as the English and Italian titles foreground), but also as focalisers and as storytellers. As a main technique in the screen adaptation process, the voice-over challenges the adaptation as page to screen textual transfer and configures a site of tension and contrast, of creative and political story(re)telling (Hutcheon 2013, p. xxi).

The limitations of the conclusions are clear and primarily related to the research design of the article. Firstly, the research has focused on the single semiotic resource of the voice-over, thereby excluding other frequently co-occurring modes like the voice-in and the voice-off. Secondly, exclusive attention has been given to Sarah Polley's four feature films, thus omitting her short production, which is also noteworthy. Thirdly, forms and functions of the voice-over in the works of a single artist have been examined. It would be illuminating to compare the use of the same techniques by different contemporary women film-makers. These three aforementioned lines of enquiry will be the scope of future research.

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