MISMATCHED WOMEN: THE SIREN'S SONG THROUGH THE MACHINE

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The study of female voice and its implications and functions within a cinematic context has constituted a significant body of feminist film scholarship. The majority of these scholarly works, however, have approached the topic from a psychoanalytic perspective based on which the maternal voice plays a major role in the formation of a child's self-recognition. "Realizing that his voice cannot duplicate the perfect sounds coming from his mother, the infant is stricken with nostalgia, for an ideal past in which he was submerged in a sonorous bath" (3-4). This realization, besides nostalgia, brings about the feeling of castration mainly because the child does not possess the mother's voice and this lack results in the fetishization of the voice. The psychoanalytic approach, used in the majority of feminist film studies of the female voice, is not deployed in Jennifer Fleeger's book, *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song through the Machine*. The book instead intriguingly discusses the mismatch between female voice and her body in relation to the evolution of sound technology. In order to provide a gendered discourse within a technological setting, Fleeger examines various women singers whose voices and bodies are mismatched, and further connects her study to the socio-cultural ramifications that this kind of mismatch brings about in regard to challenging conventional perceptions perpetuating that exquisite female voices should come from beautiful and glamorous bodies. In doing so, the 6 chapters of the book investigate the concept of "mismatch" in relation to female voice and technology focusing on female singers within the primarily contexts of literature (Trilby and Christine), opera (Geraldine Farrar and Marion Talley), film (Deanna Durbin), animation (Disney Princesses), radio and television (Kate Smith), and internet (Susan Boyle). The book chronologically follows the emergence and articulation of these mismatched women from the advent of phonograph, to the arrival of film sound, musical playback, radio and television, animation technologies, and finally the internet.

The background within which Fleeger situates her argument of mismatched women points to two crucial factors for the emergence of these figures: the diminishing interest of opera houses and churches in castrati — boys castrated before puberty with a female-like singing voice/soprano — by the end of the eighteenth century and the advent of phonograph for listening to music in the nineteenth century. Castrato's figure challenges the match between the body and the voice and subverts the constructed gender binary. As Fleeger postulates, "We might well regard him as the cultural ancestor to the mismatched woman" (26). Phonograph, on the other hand, through its ability of preserving the transient human voice and detaching it from human body, brings anxieties and questions on the source of the voice, its aura, and its credibility. Further, as Fleeger argues, both castrati and mismatched women do not reproduce. However, while the inability of reproduction for castrati is the result of their castration, the childlessness of the mismatched women is due to the fact that their singing activities "either end before they might bear children or begin after that possibility has long passed" (2). This feature of mismatched woman, besides challenging the patriarchal notion of ideal womanhood through the figure of mother, rejects a psychoanalytic reading of her as her voice is not maternal. "Thus the mismatched woman is less threatening to a symbolic order predicted on the voice" from a psychoanalytic perspective (17).

The synchronous film sound provides a technological ground based on which the different careers of two Metropolitan Opera singers, Geraldine Farrar and Marion Talley, are examined in chapter 2. While it was the contrast between a mature operatic voice and the youth of the singers that created the mismatch for both women, the different time of their debut on the screen in relation to the emergence of synchronous film sound altered the way their cinematic images were presented and received. As Fleeger puts it, "Synchronous film sound came too late for Geraldine Farrar and too early for Marion Talley…" (18). When Farrar appeared in Cecil B. DeMille's *Carmen* in 1915, she was already a famous and successful opera singer. Therefore, her silent visual performance necessitated an excessive style of presentation to uphold her vocal skill, which showed itself in the lighting, setting, and acting of her films. Regardless of the attempts at making Farrar's silent visual image a reminiscent of her operatic grandeur, the rural and ethnic (mostly European) roles she played on the screen were in contrast to her upper-class operatic and off-screen persona. "The struggle for screen identity" ultimately brought Farrar's career to an end (58). Talley's opera career, on the other hand, concomitantly

occurred with her debut in short sound films. These films were aimed "to demonstrate the Vitaphone's ability to consistently and convincingly marry body and voice" (46). This push for matching of voice and body negatively affects Talley's career. In addition to her untrained voice, the Midwestern and modest background of Talley was in contrast with her operatic career on the Met stage in New York City, and while she often drew large numbers of audiences, she could not satisfy the critics' expectations. Talley's matching of body and voice on the screen proved unsuccessful (for both public and critics), as her limited body movements, unlike the stage, did not match the requirement of a dynamic vocal and cinematic performance on the screen. As the result of this mismatch, Talley's career waned by the end of the 1920s.

Like Farrar and Talley who through their mismatched features and performances merged operatic and cinematic stages, chapter 5 shows that Kate Smith also uses her mismatched voice and body to bridge theatrical, audio, and televisual platforms, at the same time subverting the conventional expectations of entertainment industry regarding female bodies. While her over-sized appearance prevented her from continuing to work on the theatrical stage, because of her voice, Ted Collins, a Columbia Phonograph Company's executive, found her a perfect match for the radio. As Fleeger explains, because of Smith's performances on the theatrical stages and films in the early 1930s, radio audiences were well aware of her appearance, "yet [on the air] her size may have made her intimate, knowledgeable, and disembodied voice less intimidating" (141). Later, Smith's body and voice came together on TV screen and despites the difficulties of maintaining their match, her songs and her radio background brought about a positive mediated image of her on the TV screen. As a mismatched woman, who remained single by choice, the maternal implications of Smith's mediated persona were channeled through her patriotism and the love and care for her nation. Further, Smith united her female (radio and TV) audiences around maternal and national issues voicing their emotions and feelings through her songs and her radio and television programs. Smith infused her mismatched voice with her body and a unique performative skill which made her an influential and popular figure. That's why Fleeger asserts that, "it was not in spite of her body that Kate Smith was famous, but because of it" (166).

Indeed, as it is the case for all the mismatched women discussed in the book, their significance is not only the result of the divergence from conventional norms defining women and the connection to the changing audio (and visual) technologies recording and

presenting them, but also the consequence of the centrality of their bodies to their voices. The mismatched women "prove that women's voices can be…represented by technology even while their bodies escape its grasp" (194). This gendered aspect of technology is at the center of *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song through the Machine*; an intellectually engaging book that highlights the mismatched female voice through its dynamic relation to female representation and technological transformation.