

# “Ta, te, ti, toe, too”

## The Horrors of the Harsh Female Voice in 1950s Hollywood Comedies

 Ralph J. Poole

### Abstract

Hollywood comedies of the 1950s saw the decline of a specific kind of female comedian, as unruly comediennes in the screwball tradition transformed into silly sexy vixens or tamed into homely sexless housewives. There are, however, some comedies which self-reflectively negotiate this shift. In this article, I would like to suggest that the voice of the comedienne serves as a marker of distinction. My article accordingly explores two pivotal examples of such transformative processes: Judy Holliday as Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday* (1950) and Jean Hagen as Lina Lamont in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Both heroines feature what critics have called “the horrors of the harsh female voice.” Whereas Billie’s voice “survives” through schooling and refinement, Jean’s voice resists all training and remains shrill and rowdy, leading to the violent expulsion of her character altogether. With the transformation and eventual disappearance of these extraordinary female actresses and their roles, such voices remained silent for a long time, until loud and brassy comediennes of a new generation were allowed to reappear on the silver screen and to raise their harsh and distinctive voices once again.

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# “Ta, te, ti, toe, too”

## The Horrors of the Harsh Female Voice in 1950s Hollywood Comedies

Ralph J. Poole

Joel and Ethan Coen’s 2016 comedy *Hail Caesar!* centers on a “fixer” who keeps Hollywood stars’ scandals out of the press. The film, set in 1951, includes the character of DeeAnna Moran (Scarlett Johansson), a synchronized swimming actress. Moran unfortunately becomes pregnant out of wedlock, thus causing an ethical dilemma for the studio’s reputation. While still unaware of her predicament, we first see her as she performs in a mermaid costume, starring in a scene reminiscent of Esther Williams in Busby Berkeley’s extravagantly choreographed *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952). Accompanied by a live orchestra, DeeAnna poses, smiles, jumps, swims—and looks gorgeous. Her spectacular appearance elevates her above the water ballet’s chorus girls—but her grandeur disappears once she opens her mouth. Up to that moment, the scene features music only, and then suddenly, at the height of theatricality, DeeAnna blurts out, “Damn it!” The whole scene collapses, the take is spoiled, and while she is pried out of her fish costume (“fish-ass,” she calls it), she continues to unleash more phrases of disgust and fury, ultimately revealing that she feels highly uncomfortable in this tight-fitting, unwieldy costume because she is pregnant.<sup>1</sup>

What makes this scene so hilarious is the discrepancy between the silent image of a beautiful woman and the vulgar sound of her voice. Viewers of classic Hollywood movies have been trained to expect corresponding sounds and images, and the disruption of this expectation causes a break in their fantasmatic projection of what such a scene should convey: splendor and stylishness but, above all, poise and equilibrium. While we can already recognize this scene as a film shoot, drawing our attention to metafilmic features, we are nevertheless taken aback by DeeAnna’s loud Bronx accent and vulgar slang. This incongruence likely prompts laughter. Why is that? Why is a woman articulating her bodily discomfort off-putting and risible? Ultimately, why is this beautiful woman so utterly grotesque?

The scene just described brings to mind two 1950s films and their female char-

acters with similar voice problems. A pivotal sonic moment demonstrating the discrepancy of sight and sound and its gendered implications is the iconic finale of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)—tellingly set in 1927, the year the first talkies appeared. In the film's concluding moments, former silent film star Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen) is chased off the stage for being a fraud. Though a skillful actress without recorded sound, she becomes a liability when she has to speak because her shrill voice does not match her looks. In a new production of a musical film, Lina's voice is dubbed by Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds), and, since co-star Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) is romantically involved with Kathy, he wants to expose Lina to ruin her career.<sup>2</sup> He succeeds in his scheme during a public screening of the new film as a group of cheering men in the wings celebrate their triumph. During this scene, many viewers presumably laughed at Lina's—the bitchy fraud's—exposure and felt happy for the central romantic couple Kathy and Don to be united in the end.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to take a closer look at what goes on in this and other scenes in the film which reveal Lina as a beautiful but—purportedly—dumb blonde and ask why the film triggers the response of satisfaction with Lina's final humiliation instead of feelings of anger or pity for her and the way she is driven out. What is at stake here is not simply Lina's unsuitable voice but, rather, a certain type of comedienne that is considered outdated and thus objectionable. Just as her shrill voice needs to be silenced and dubbed, the character type that Lina embodies and, specifically, her offensive comicality must be replaced by the subdued cuteness of Kathy. I would like to compare Lina's failure to succeed in the new world of talkies with a closely related example of a similarly comic female figure with a harsh voice: Billie Dawn (Judy Holliday) in *Born Yesterday* (1950).<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Lina, Billie ultimately gains a proper level of refinement, but the happy conclusion comes at a significant cost that, as I will show, must be taken into consideration. The actresses' comic performances in both films certainly are climactic moments in their careers, and yet, they mark a turning point in Hollywood's treatment of unruly womanliness. As their harsh voices need to be trained, so, too, do their coarse personalities require significant taming or absolute elimination. It would be a long time before such loud, brassy comediennes would be allowed to reappear on the silver screen.

The links between the two films include Hagen's stylization of Lina's lower-class-sounding voice, modeled after Holliday's sonic characterization of Billie, as well as both heroines referencing the screwball comedy genre. While the comic female leads of earlier screwball comedies both exhibited witty dialogue and shaped the course of the romance, Billie's unruly sonic and physical agility has to be contained, whereas Lina's has to be eliminated altogether. From the standpoint of the early 1950s, both films shed a critical light on the diminishing power of female (comic) stardom since the silent era. It is the disturbing sound quality of the female voice

that exposes the increasing expectation of an imagined coherence of glamorous appearance and euphonious sound. By foregrounding the split of matching body and voice, both films simultaneously address and participate in the demise of a clamorous and unruly type of comedienne, which in turn underscores Hollywood's stranglehold on shaping and maintaining gendered rules of appearance and etiquette. Since the advent of sound film, Hollywood has demanded the subordination of the sonic, rejoicing in the lasting dominance of the visual. Both films address the vagaries of this hierarchy and disclose the underlying gendered politics of such an aesthetic competition in which sight is favored over sound and male versatility over female unruliness.

### **The Lina Effect: Silent Beauty—Speaking Comic**

Film critics have either treated Lina in a derogatory manner or ignored her altogether, even though she is a character that is crucial for the narrative, visual, and sonic logic of *Singin' in the Rain*. In a particularly cruel review, Douglas Brode, in his companion to *The Films of the Fifties* (1976), calls her “Linda [sic] Lamont (Jean Hagen), a moronic, ego-oriented but highly popular blonde bombshell.”<sup>5</sup> Here and in many other examples, she is characterized as greedy, vindictive, and, above all, stupid. The question, however, remains whether her characterization as an unintelligent blonde starlet is warranted, or, rather, whether her appearance and performance need to be reappraised. Certainly, there are no doubts as to her fitting the image of a star in terms of her looks. She is always dressed in chic costumes, specifically designed by Walter Plunkett to resemble those of Lilyan Tashman, who was considered “the epitome of chic” in the 1920s,<sup>6</sup> the decade in which *Singin' in the Rain* is set. In terms of extravagant style, no woman in the film comes close to Lina.

At the same time, the film suggests that Lina's glamour belongs to a long-lost era that has been replaced by a new favorite look, namely that of her competitor Kathy, who embodies cute femininity of the 1950s. The gender politics of (dis)connection that *Singin' in the Rain* clandestinely pursues manifests itself in these two opposing female characters: While the contemporary model (Kathy) is never as glamorous as the former one (Lina), Kathy's non-threatening prettiness and compliant personality is a better fit for the male hero. His strategic move from an inauthentic relationship with Lina—a publicity gimmick—to a genuine emotional connection with Kathy mirrors his versatility in leaving the high-drama histrionics of the silent film behind in favor of the natural authenticity that sound films seemingly appear to convey with their synchronicity of sound and image. From the very start, Don is a master of synchronization, grounding his star persona on the illusion created for the public that truth corresponds to what one sees *and* hears. John Belton has suggested that “sound achieves authenticity only as a consequence of its submission to tests imposed upon it by other senses—primarily by sight.”<sup>7</sup> After some struggles during

his transition from silent to sound film, Don excels at achieving the authenticity effect—artful synchronicity—that Belton describes. In contrast, Lina’s star persona fails to cover the increasing disconnect between her visual and sonic appearances.

The very first scene, the premiere of the “Biggest Picture of 1927” in Hollywood’s Chinese Theater, already shows the way in which Lina’s star image has been carefully constructed, merging her on-screen persona with her private life in a manner which Richard Dyer has described as the typical blending of “screen roles and obviously stage-managed public appearances.”<sup>8</sup> The scene is also highly metacinematic, as we can observe *in actu* the comic effect that Lina produces. As long as she remains a purely visual, passively silent image, all is well and the public adores her. A female member of the audience, who appears as a representative spectator watching Lina starring in her latest film, is so struck by Lina’s visual grandeur that she exclaims: “She’s so refined, I think I’ll kill myself.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout all this, Lina remains silent and lets others speak (for her). As soon as Lina starts to act up and speak out, however, the asynchronicity becomes obvious and the gap between image and reality produces a profound comic effect. For the first thirteen minutes of the film, the diegetic audience watches Hollywood celebrate itself and Gene Kelly (as Don Lockwood) tell a tall tale about his career. While this self-promotion is simultaneously undermined by the mismatching images only we—the audience of the film—see, both we and the diegetic audience remain in awe of silent Lina’s visually conveyed stardom. Then, backstage and out of the diegetic audience’s sight but distinctly visible to us, she bursts forth, raises her voice, and for the first time we hear her speak in a shrill, nasal voice with a strong vernacular intonation. The leap from beautiful face to unpleasant voice is meant to shock, and the effect certainly succeeds.

This is also the first scene of striking misogyny: This misogyny is channeled here, as throughout the film, via Lockwood’s somewhat queer, long-term performance partner Cosmo, who keeps pointing to Lina’s deficient femininity with remarks such as: “Lina, you looked pretty good for a girl.” Lina, on the other hand, counters in her distinctive, squeaky timbre: “What’s wrong with the way I talk? What’s the big idea? Am I dumb or something?”<sup>10</sup> The painful silence of the male group surrounding Lina confirms precisely that: everybody believes her to be a dumb blonde.

Although she seems to fit the stereotype of the dumb blonde, her reiteration of the rhetorical question “Am I dumb?” until the next-to-last scene calls for a different reading, not least since such a stereotype’s supposedly simple truth is deceptive:

To refer “correctly” to someone as a “dumb blonde,” and to understand what is meant by that, implies a great deal more than hair colour and intelligence. It refers immediately to her sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

In her passive artificiality and bodily stiffness, Lina is presented in stark contrast to Kathy, the cute and agile brunette who knows how to sing and dance in a seemingly natural fashion. Whereas Lina's character and behavior suggest a "chilly, vapid whiteness," which signifies "fakery, cunning, and gloom" according to film critic Judy Gers-  
tel,<sup>12</sup> Kathy is the incarnation of male fantasy, "soft and pliant and girlish,"<sup>13</sup> therefore signifying authenticity and emotionality. The film's plot seems to concur with this verdict when, in the end, Don claims, "I thought there was something cooking under those bleached curls," referring to Lina's secret scheme to have Kathy fired.<sup>14</sup>

Lina's artificial blondness correlates with her perceived cold, cunning, and fake personality. While her audience may adore Lina due to her appearance, no one working with her in the film industry actually likes her due to her character. In contrast, Kathy's cute looks and her amiable demeanor seem to be in sync. Her cuteness relates to the aesthetics and affectiveness of the child. "Like nineteenth-century sentimentalism, with which it is closely allied," writes Lori Merish, "cuteness is a highly conventionalized aesthetic, distinguishable both by its formal aesthetic features and the formalized emotional response it engenders." And because it is "generically associated with the child . . . , cuteness always to some extent aestheticizes powerlessness: often cute figures are placed in humiliating circumstances" and seem to beg for rescue.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, Kathy's cuteness is precisely the sort "that mobilizes proprietary desire, a peculiarly 'feminine' proprietary desire that equates to a moral sentiment: the desire to care for, cherish, and protect."<sup>16</sup> This cuteness, an aesthetic that emerged as a cultural expression in the late nineteenth century, was often linked to dolls and (anthropomorphized, cartoonish) animals, but also to mythic creatures, such as trolls and performers in "freak shows."<sup>17</sup> The popularity of cuteness climaxed with the fame of child actress Shirley Temple in the 1930s and saw a revival in the 1950s with characters such as Kathy and actresses such as Debbie Reynolds. While having "matured" to adult womanhood, Kathy nevertheless remains in a state of girlish cuteness that elicits Don's masculine protectiveness. Kathy—as seemingly natural and authentic as her brunette hair—"represents everything that Lina Lamont is not. She is male-identified, completely dependent emotionally on men's action and moods."<sup>18</sup> The contrast between the two women culminates in the discrepancy between their respective voices: Kathy's soft, melodic voice is starkly contrasted with Lina's harsh shrillness.

But connoisseurs of the film know that such seemingly simple truisms are far from the truth. Unraveling the complex sonic structure inherent in the making of the film reveals that Debbie Reynolds was herself dubbed by Betty Noyes, the woman who sang most of the songs we "hear" Kathy performing. As for some spoken passages of the character Kathy, it actually was Jean Hagen speaking, who had a conventionally pleasant voice and who dubbed Debbie's speaking voice.<sup>19</sup> On top of



these deceptions, it also bears mentioning that Jean Hagen was a natural brunette, another ironic stab at the dumb blonde stereotype seen in her film debut as comic femme fatale in George Cukor's screwball comedy *Adam's Rib* (1949). Bleaching her hair and changing her voice was essential in creating the artificial Lina-effect. This effect was so successful that it garnered Jean Hagen an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress, the film's sole nomination besides Best Original Music Score. And yet, just like her film character Lina Lamont, the actress Jean Hagen had no chance of surviving 1950s' cinematic gender politics.

### Teaching Screeching Dumb Blondes

*Singin' in the Rain*, the musical about the transitional period from silent to sound cinema, appears strikingly mute when it comes to speaking about the era in which it was produced. Many critics agree that the magic of this film relies precisely on its "fundamentally nostalgic, industry-positive view."<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, Lina's expulsion marks the removal of a model of female comedy in a twofold manner that belies the film's seeming ahistoricity: Lina as a visually glamorous but aurally vulgar star of silent cinema has no place in the new sound film,<sup>21</sup> much as Jean Hagen, the actress, has a precarious status in 1950s cinema. The casting of Jean Hagen is illuminating in this respect, as the screenwriter couple Betty Comden and Adolph Green envisioned Judy Holliday for the role of Lina but subsequently sought a lesser-known actress than Holliday (Lina's was a supporting role, after all), and they found Jean Hagen.<sup>22</sup> But Hagen was, in fact, well-established in the business. Hagen and Holliday both had acted together in *Adam's Rib* and Hagen had performed the character of Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday* on stage—the role that earned Holliday an Oscar in George Cukor's 1950 film adaptation. Comden and Green deliberately modeled the character of Lina after Holliday's performance in *Born Yesterday*, requiring a similar comic talent to match such a figure.

Moreover, this scripting and casting of the character of Lina Lamont offers more than random similarities to that of Billie Dawn, the comic heroine of *Born Yesterday*. There is a structural analogy between the two female characters (and their actresses), starting with their physical comedy, largely relying on the dumb blonde stereotype and in this case its contiguous implication of vulgar femininity, the ensuing pedagogical program of refinement, and above all the performance of what critic Martin Roth has called the "horrors of the harsh female voice."<sup>23</sup> Besides Lina, he mentions Margaret Hamilton as the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and, of course, Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn) in *My Fair Lady* (1964), whose gutter accents make Professor Henry Higgins wrinkle his face in disgust. The beginning of *Born Yesterday* exemplifies this horror. Similar to *Singin' in the Rain*, the opening sequence shows a beautifully stylish but completely silent woman, guided through the scene by various

men until her first horrifying screech, “Whaaat?”<sup>24</sup> As with Lina, the comedy arises from the contrast of glamor and impropriety. Similar to Lina, Billie Dawn has a vulgar demeanor replete with crude jokes and inappropriate behavior. In contrast to Lina, however, Billie is an essentially warmhearted person. In the course of the film and with the help of the William Holden character, Paul, she undergoes a successful transformation in terms of her respectability and marriageability. As a result, Billie’s fate is markedly different from Lina’s ultimate demise. Billie, instead of being shamefully cast aside, evolves into a soft(er)-spoken, refined woman who reaps her success by ditching her ugly, criminal, and boorish fiancé, Harry, and marrying the learned, handsome, and charming Paul. Kathleen Rowe has described Judy Holliday in her role as Billie Dawn—besides Marilyn Monroe—as the model of the “unruly woman” of the 1950s, whose private life and artistic career cultivated a dumb blonde image that was at odds with the propagandized image of the domestic American woman of this era. Much of what Rowe says of Judy/Billie applies to Jean/Lina, as well:

Billie Dawn is an unruly heroine more out of the tradition of carnivalesque performance than romantic narrative. Her portrait of unruliness depends largely on the character’s working-class background, with its motifs of the impropriety and bad taste that so often cause women to make spectacles of themselves.... Holliday exaggerates Billie Dawn’s [class background] through the character’s body language, her voice, and her “dumbness.” . . . Billie’s voice is unruly in both tone and language.<sup>25</sup>

Whereas Lina fails in her refinement training, Billie is successfully reborn in *Pygmalion*-like fashion when Harry hires her teacher Paul to polish off Billie’s rough edges for the purpose of making her more presentable and thus beneficial for Harry’s crooked deals. The plan triply backfires due to Harry’s disbelief in Billie’s capability for true education. She later beats Harry in his own business and leaves him for another man. In contrast to Billie’s adoption of middle-class restraint, Harry remains the working-class, self-made man lacking manners and style, who—like Billie initially—continues to screech verbally. Whereas his behavior suits his character and looks, this is not the case with Billie, and accordingly the duo’s respective comicality is of a different nature. Making his millions literally selling junk, “King Junk” Harry is laughable due to his brutish, animalistic ignorance, but also because of the contrast to Paul’s scholarly, self-controlled type of masculinity. Billie, on the other hand, is amusing because she is both gorgeous and unruly. In a wonderfully comic scene, Harry sets her up to impress a congressman and his wife, but Billie completely fails at this by unabashedly showing how bored she is, switching on the radio and dancing and scatting to a jazz tune. In another scene, when Paul makes his first efforts at teaching her, she teasingly asks what is in store for him and bluntly offers her sexual services (“Are you one of these talkers, or would you be interested in a little action? . . . I got a yen for you right



off.”), much to Paul’s shock and discomfort but also to the audience’s comic gratification. And although she feeds into the dumb blonde stereotype herself by admitting to Paul, “I like being dumb,” her keen sense of humor and her ability to change are clear tokens of intelligence rather than stupidity.<sup>26</sup> In truth, as Rowe argues, Billie’s portrayal by Holliday “doesn’t play dumbness as a joke against women, . . . but as a defense against a world of limited options for a chorus girl, a means of getting what she wants.”<sup>27</sup> Ironically then, Billie’s self-assertive “dumbness,” aurally represented by her lower-class voice, functions as an initial means of securing her social success.

In contrast to Billie’s trainable voice, Lina’s voice remains stubbornly untamable and comical. While both Lina and Don suffer from the transition to sound films and are initially mocked, only Don effortlessly masters his vocal training. Lina’s voice, however, will not relinquish its cacophonous harshness despite the efforts of coach Phoebe Dinsmore, who relentlessly, but unsuccessfully, reminds Lina to use “round tones” for her exercising the phrase “ta, te, ti, toe, too.”<sup>28</sup> Dinsmore, “the snooty, incompetent diction coach” who “look[s] like the caricature of a professor excavated from the preceding century,”<sup>29</sup> represents an authoritarian bully, whose old-school voice training relies on anything but naturalness. Her ideal of a round and sonorous chest voice stems from a *bel canto* tradition with voice teachers such as Giulio Caccini and Manuel Garcia as models.<sup>30</sup> Arguably, such a vocal ideal hardly qualifies for the cinematic needs of a spoken voice. The juxtaposition of Dinsmore’s affected “round” articulation and Lina’s coarse flatness is comical, not least for showcasing the irrelevance of naturalness as a sonic category—Lina’s manner of speaking reflects her geographic and class background, after all, and is therefore more “natural” than Dinsmore’s dated, trained operatic voice. The scene’s comicality builds up to the following sequence, which James Card rightly calls one of the “most mirth-provoking scenes” of the film.<sup>31</sup> As the film team tries helplessly to employ the primitive sound technology, Lina’s unintentional or willful stubbornness reaches its peak when the microphone, hidden in a bush, cannot capture Lina’s voice because of the noise created by her exaggerated melodramatic head and body movements. She finally erupts and shouts shrilly, “Well, I cain’t make love to a bush!”<sup>32</sup> In an attempt to solve the problem, the microphone is then hidden in her décolletage, triggering two consequences: Instead of her voice, we hear Lina’s heartbeats. And when producer Simpson enters the studio, he trips over the cable coming out of Lina’s dress, causing her to fall backwards and ruin her pseudo-aristocratic outfit. Scenes like these indeed seem to confirm that, while Lina may look glamorous, she certainly cannot talk like a lady or act and sing like a musical star. This distinguishes her from Don and marks her as an untalented actress

whose movements are a series of poses for the camera, suitable for the silent films she is accustomed to, but hopelessly inadequate for the birth of the sound film, and especially inadequate for the musical that ultimately will be the solution to the problem facing Lockwood and Lamont's new film, *The Dueling Cavalier*.<sup>33</sup>

The scene, however, may be said to—perhaps involuntarily—serve a threefold purpose. It shows that the new medium of talkies aims for a different style of “realist” acting, whereas silent film derived its acting style from theater and, above all, the melodramatic stage. Once again, Lina, an accomplished expert in the exaggerated melodramatic style, fails to adapt to the call for “naturalness.” While this scene highlights Jean Hagen's comic acting skills, her character Lina is not granted a chance to transition from silent melodrama to sound comedy, a genre in which she may have succeeded, as opposed to the musical, for which she is ill-suited. Even though “Lina Lamont's drive can be funny in humiliation but never in triumph,”<sup>34</sup> I wonder whether Jean Hagen could not have had a longer career as screwball comedienne, had this genre not fallen out of favor in the 1950s.

There is a third reason why this scene is crucial for an understanding not only of gender, but also of the more clandestine matters of class, both of which are linked to the film's sonic politics. From the very beginning, Lina's public silence is contrasted with Don's verbal bravado. Even during the silent era, the Hollywood star system had already allowed its protégés to transcend certain limits and handicaps, of which class background was key. As long as stars could look as glamorous as Lina and Don, the façade could be upheld. However, Lina's crude voice betrayed her equally crude social origins. Indeed, as Alan Nadel succinctly points out, “Speech can disguise one's past by giving the appearance of dignity to behavior that lacked it,” but “Lina's raw speech threatens to expose the fragile artifice upon which everyone's job depends.” If Lina speaks—especially about the shared professional and romantic history of Don and herself—she may ruin their façade, thus posing a threat to their carefully disguised backgrounds as well as to “cinema's capacity to hide indignity in general, . . . the veneer of stardom, the magic of the magic lantern itself.”<sup>35</sup> Certainly, mixing the voice problem with the dumb blonde cliché made for a highly comic package. It also seems to suggest that the conversion to sound was a particularly gendered issue and that women caused more problems than men.

### **Transitioning: The Difficult Speaking Woman**

Paradoxically, in silent film, the female voice had a high standing, precisely because it could not be heard but only seen, i.e., how she *physically* speaks. Indeed, her “absent voice re-emerges in gestures and the contortions of the face—it is spread over the

body of the actor.”<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, her manner of speaking, especially in melodrama, was essential for her characterization, placing “a high premium on women’s speech as a means of achieving psychologically rounded characters.”<sup>37</sup> Lina’s successful career is built on such melodramatic acting, and studio head Simpson (Millard Mitchell) is proven fatally wrong in his assessment that it only takes a little training to adapt to the new technology: “You do what you always do. You just add talking to it,” he says.<sup>38</sup> The first effort in converting the new Lina-and-Don film into a talkie without otherwise changing the style of the film turns out to be ludicrous and is rejected by viewers at the first showing: “Lamont’s and Lockwood’s *Dueling Cavalier* uses the new technology crudely, if hilariously, simply adding hokey, impromptu dialogue and overamplified sound effects to the pantomime acting style carried over from silent film.”<sup>39</sup> The negative response to this failed adaptation attempt results in the transformation of a talkie melodrama to the fully-fledged musical *Dancing Cavalier*, giving credence to Steven Cohan’s claim that *Singin’ in the Rain* not only recounts the transition to sound “with its fatal impact on silent films” but also “the musical’s emergence as the prime Hollywood genre of the modern sound era.”<sup>40</sup>

Before the advent of transitioning from silent to sound film, other technologies such as the telephone had already established an acoustic standard for the female voice: It had to be soft and melodious. Such a female voice was meant to soothe the easily irritable male disposition.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the technology itself was tricky. Particularly the Warner Bros. Vitaphone sound-on-disc process, one of two competing technologies and the one referred to in *Singin’ in the Rain* “was a technology unfavorable to female silent stars trying to make the transition to talkies because it recorded and reproduced men’s voices with greater accuracy.”<sup>42</sup> This notion of a gendered quality of the voice also entails the spatial attribution of the female voice. Where, when, how, and for how long a woman’s voice was to be heard in sound media relied on “a preexisting ideology that economically and politically predefined how the female voice was to be represented—or whether it would be heard at all.”<sup>43</sup> Especially the introduction of sound film led to the notion that there is a “problem” with women’s speech and that the “difficult” speaking woman must therefore be contained and put into her proper—largely silenced—place. This conception of what a female voice had to accomplish implied what it should not be: loud and obstinate. Accordingly, the dilemma of containing such resistant voices was continually evident “for when women are disturbingly silent in Hollywood films, the texts force them to speak. Yet when they open their mouths, what often comes out is resistance—which must be suppressed.”<sup>44</sup> Amy Lawrence asserts that “when there is a crisis in the representation of women, it often manifests itself as a crisis in the representation of women’s voices.” *Singin’ in the Rain*, as a film about the transitional moment from silent to sound film, perfectly exemplifies the claim that such crises are often “expressed

through a representative (and *represented*) crisis in the sound technology,” leading to the consequences that, for one thing, “woman’s natural ability to speak is interrupted, made difficult, or conditioned to a suffocating degree *by sound technology itself*” and, further, that new technologies such as dubbing are foregrounded and marshalled to “silence women and restore the primacy of patriarchy and the image.”<sup>245</sup>

Kaja Silverman also chooses *Singin’ in the Rain* as an apt example to show that, in classic Hollywood cinema, female voices are constantly suppressed by male or institutional control. None of the women in the film achieve the “perfect unity” that the new technology of synchronization proclaims. The process of postdubbing radically splits image from sound: While Kathy’s voice remains unattached to her image (we only hear her in the new musical production but do not see her), Lina’s screen image has no sound (we see her but cannot hear her voice): “Not only must Lina rely upon Kathy for her singing and speaking voice, but at a climactic moment in the diegesis, the voice of Cosmo . . . is superimposed over her moving lips.”<sup>246</sup> In the final scene involving Lina’s public shaming, we first see Lina silently move her lips to the words sung by Kathy, who is hidden behind Lina by a curtain. After lifting the curtain—unbeknownst to Lina but visible to the audience—Cosmo steps out and replaces Kathy, who is also exposed and runs from the stage, so that the viewer now sees Lina lip-synching to a male singing voice. The incongruity of the female image with the female voice is blatantly exposed. Here, as in other instances throughout *Singin’ in the Rain*, the violation of the “perfect unity” of body and voice is marked as comical.

In so doing, *Singin’ in the Rain* cleverly exposes the studio era’s creed of “acoustic realism” as a “myth of ‘objective’ sound reproduction,” which ultimately “points toward a deep-rooted desire to naturalize (and thus obscure) ideology.”<sup>247</sup> This ideology is inherently gendered and relates to the Hollywood star system’s creation of a star’s fantasmatic body, which calls for a voice to be anchored in a matching body. This causes a technological predicament, since audiences need to be assured “that post-synchronization as a technique does not necessarily entail substituting an alien voice for a ‘real’ voice, that the industry does not condone a mismatching of voices and bodies. Thus, the voice serves as a support for the spectator’s recognition and his/her identification of, as well as with, the star.”<sup>248</sup> The comic backstage scenes in *Singin’ in the Rain* reveal that sound recording needed to be perfected to ensure the illusion of harmony, and therefore any disturbing noise had to be reduced and eventually eliminated. The inappropriate (heartbeat) and unpleasant (voice) noises emanating from Lina’s body, however, could not be erased, thus causing the rupture of a pleasurable, fantasmatic experience for the spectator that relies on the unification of visual and aural stimuli to create film’s illusionary realism. In general, these backstage moments foreground technology as a cinematic illusion, as Jane Feuer asserts, and, in extreme instances such as here, the “demystification appears total; the tech-

nology appears to take over the screen, in the process obscuring the performance itself.<sup>49</sup> As a result in this particular instance, the technological problems that the studio encounters through Lina's "predicament" endanger the "sonorous envelope" that Mary Ann Doane describes as an essential condition "provided by the theatrical space together with techniques employed in the construction of the soundtrack . . . to sustain the narcissistic pleasure derived from the image of a certain unity, cohesion and, hence, an identity grounded by the spectator's fantasmatic relation to his/her own body."<sup>50</sup> And just as any disturbing noise must be avoided, any potential fragmentation and difference needs to be eschewed.

Lina's final image of a female body with a male voice breaks this framework of the sonorous envelope. As uncomfortable as we may feel due to such a rupture, our reaction is most likely laughter triggered by the multiple incongruities—including that of sexual difference—of the situation. *Singin' in the Rain* in general and the film's finale in particular shed a crucial light on the fact that "the selling of sound technology was geared toward exploiting perceived gender roles."<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, I believe the film is well aware of what it is trying to make us believe, and although the harshness of the satirical take on outdated film aesthetics is softened by the "true" narrative that happily concludes the film with Don announcing Kathy as "the girl whose voice you heard tonight," the "specter of sexual heterogeneity," as Silverman calls it, has been raised if only to "be exorcised, and the female voice 'remarried' to the female body."<sup>52</sup> Although Kathy is granted public display of her vocal and physical "unity"—and rightfully falls into Don's supporting arms, the film's paternalistic, heteronormative logic seems to suggest—Lina as well as Cosmo are left behind, forgotten in the crowd's cheering of Kathy's and Don's kiss. Accordingly, the romantic couple is not formed by combining the best possible match of man and woman (as implied by the standards of the diegetic world) but, as Patricia Mellencamp asserts, "by eliminating the male buddy, Cosmo Brown, from the initial triangle" of Don, Lina, and Cosmo.<sup>53</sup> An earlier screenplay envisioned Lina and Cosmo as a surprise couple in the end.<sup>54</sup> This would have been a truly incongruous, yet highly comic, pairing underlining the anarchic potential of both marginal characters.

### **(Dis)Appearing Acts: Hail the Loud Comedienne**

Whereas Lina's moment of utter public shaming at the end of *Singin' in the Rain* is highly memorable, one tends to forget her two key scenes immediately prior wherein she, for once, is center-stage and the camera remains focused on her instead of Don, who otherwise dominates. In the course of being ousted, she turns into a hard-nosed professional when negotiating her contract, organizing her publicity, and demanding that Kathy continue to be her voice double. To the director's comment, "You'd be taking her career away from her. People just don't do things like that," Lina counters,

“People? I ain’t people. I am a [she takes a newspaper and reads]: ‘A shimmering, glowing star in the cinema firmament.’ It says so . . . right here.” When the film screening of *Dancing Cavalier* turns out to be a success, she plausibly argues that her popularity is part of the expected revenues:

Listen to that applause out there. And wait till the money starts rolling in. You won’t give all that up because some little nobody don’t wanna be my voice. . . . You’re the big Mr. Producer, always running things, running me. But from now on, as far as I’m concerned, I’m running things. . . . A speech? Yeah, everybody’s always making speeches for me. Well, tonight, I’m gonna do my own talking. I’m gonna make the speech.<sup>55</sup>

This scene ironically links to silent film star Mary Pickford, who was known as a shrewd businesswoman and yet failed to transition to the sound era. Mellencamp argues that the connection between Lamont and Pickford “should give pause to the comedy of her dismissal and our response.”<sup>56</sup> One could say that Lina’s misguided decision to go on stage and make a public speech seals her fate and confirms the chauvinist master plan to oust her. In taking a stand against the producer, however, Jean Hagen has one last grand performance as a “dumb blonde,” albeit one with shrewd business sense. While Lina has been the butt of every joke during the entire narrative, in this scene she explodes, raises her screeching voice against the men who have been belittling her and thus “crosses the line of power at the studio as determined by gender.”<sup>57</sup> It is here that, for once, Lina’s high-pitched voice justly matches her high-strung personality, because from her own perspective—which arguably represents a disempowered female perspective fallen victim to the gendered inequality pervasive in show business—she counters the film industry’s sexist deceptions and takes hold of her own representation.

This understanding of Lina’s “dumbness” as both over the top acting and a debunking of chauvinist conventions recalls Billie’s sharp wit in the final scenes of *Born Yesterday*. Although the film ends with Billie’s successful education in the arms of mentor Paul, she has not lost all of her aural and visual shrillness by the time she jilts her corrupt lover. In reading Billie’s domesticated dimness as representing “an important shift in the representation of female unruliness” from earlier anarchic, eccentric performances by characters such as Mae West in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) or Katherine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), Rowe is rather unforgiving when it comes to the film’s ultimate logic that “by showing that women need instruction from men, the dumb blonde character-type also bolsters traditional gender roles.” Granted, her “liberation substitutes the character’s narrative empowerment with a performative loss,” as Rowe bemoans, in turn resulting in a decline in our comic pleasure. And, yes, one could argue that the final configuration locates “the once-unruly woman in her



proper place beneath the man,” but judging by her voice, which remains harsh in tone even though it is refined in words, Billie has enough resilience to keep Paul on edge even in wedlock.<sup>58</sup>

What is at stake, nevertheless, is the gradual disappearance of comic figures such as Billie and Lina. Accordingly, both films signal “a shift in interest from women to men [which] accelerated through the 1950s and 1960s [and] contributed to the disappearance of strong roles for women.”<sup>59</sup> Both actresses and their respective roles reside “in the great tradition of screwball comedy heroines.”<sup>60</sup> Especially in the case of Hagen/Lina, the “expulsion represents a reflection, as well, of the screwball genre and the level of female agency it implied.”<sup>61</sup> Films such as *Born Yesterday* and *Singin’ in the Rain* were based on and made fun of “the belief in the possibility of recreating a natural unity through dream, trick effects, or fantasy, and of finding the ‘right’ voice for the ‘right’ body.”<sup>62</sup> In *Singin’ in the Rain*, this effort fails; in *Born Yesterday*, it succeeds. In either case, the films manifestly present the impossible possibility of an incongruity and therefore strive for harmonizing image and voice. The loss is substantial; “taming” Billie or substituting Kathy for Lina indicates the paradigmatic shift toward an altered understanding of gender roles of the 1950s: “The woman for the new era will never command the same authority or have the same luster as the star she replaced.”<sup>63</sup> Kathy may be more properly “congruent” in this gender dynamic, but she will never be as glamorous as Lina. This belief in such necessary, albeit tamed, harmony started to relax only in post-classical Hollywood. Starting in the 1970s, we again find female comediennes with incongruent voices such as Bette Midler (in *The Rose* [1979]), Dolly Parton (in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* [1982]), Melanie Griffith (in *Working Girl* [1988]), Roseanne Barr (in *Roseanne* [ABC, 1988–1997; 2018]), Megan Mullally (in *Will & Grace* [NBC, 1998–2006; 2017–2020]), and Scarlett Johansson in *Hail Caesar!*. The fantasy of the “natural” voice emanating from a suitable body has dissolved and given way to the realization that “every voice is a construction and forms a particular composite with the body. Each actor can take on different voices according to the demands of the role.”<sup>64</sup>

Alongside the loss of fantasy, another discourse has arisen in reconsidering such films as *Born Yesterday* and *Singin’ in the Rain* and their non-conforming brassy heroines. Gene Kelly remarked in a 1974 BBC interview that many have called *Singin’ in the Rain* “the first camp picture.”<sup>65</sup> Baz Luhrmann, known for his own camp musical extravaganzas such as *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), asserts that the very first scene of *Singin’ in the Rain* “sets up the rules . . . that we’re going to wink at you all the way through . . . You’re reminded, really clearly, that you’re watching a movie.”<sup>66</sup> Reading *Singin’ in the Rain* as a campy parody of itself allows for yet another twist in regarding Lina as the secret “real” star of the film.

Steven Cohan stresses that Debbie Reynolds's regional accent had such a "terrible western noise" that she had to be dubbed in those passages that were supposed to come across as cultured and refined.<sup>67</sup> These were primarily the scenes where she is seen dubbing Lina's uncultured speeches. Thus, an invisible, but audible composite was created for Reynolds to accommodate the visible mismatch of Lina's voice and image, which in reality were not mismatched, after all:

Only at the points when *Singin' in the Rain* exposes the manufacturing of a performance through Kathy's dubbing of Lina is the off-screen engineering of the voice deployed and cleverly acknowledged by the use of Hagen herself to double for Reynolds's speech. With Hagen involved, the circularity detaches the voice from its referent in a body, putting the performance almost literally in quotation marks: the dubbing appropriates Hagen's voice, recycles it in place of Reynolds when the latter is shown dubbing Hagen's character's dialogue, and refers back to Hagen for the joke.<sup>68</sup>

This self-referential dubbing is one of the most remarkable instances of "winking," referring to Lina, the "woman in quotation marks," as an incarnation of recycled Hollywood legends, from silent film stars who could not transition to sound films with brassy female leads such as Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Billie Holliday. As such, both films utilize the problem of the speaking woman to highlight the problem of the self-controlled woman. *Singin' in the Rain*, by displacing this correlation in a different historical setting, offers a scathing commentary on the disappearance of such women from film history, a fact many critics have long ignored.<sup>69</sup> It is above all Jean Hagen's camp performance as Lina Lamont that winks at the technological crisis of transitioning to talkies as being channeled through a problematized woman's voice.

The realization of this makes DeeAnna's performance in *Hail Caesar!* an even campier spectacle. The film was originally set in the 1920s, but its ultimate early 1950s setting marks another transitional moment in the film industry. The studio system was breaking down, television was on the rise, and actors were being blacklisted for alleged communist activities. In *Hail Caesar!*, Hollywood responds to all these dilemmas by creating escapist spectacles such as spates of water ballets with jetting geysers and half-naked nymphs. The ballet is titled "Jonah's Daughter" and scored with an arrangement of Jacques Offenbach's barcarolle "Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour" from his opera *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (1881). The Hoffmann duet can be said to celebrate the female singing voice. While this piece praises the beauty of night and love, DeeAnna spectacularly emerges from a mechanical whale's mouth as a glittering mermaid queen, highly elevated and diving back into the water with an impressive leap. She looks gorgeous until she rips off her crown, tosses it at the orchestra's conductor, and shouts, "Damn it!"<sup>70</sup> Without breaking the illusion in such a crude man-

ner, these spectacles usually deliver erotic messages to the audience, since they are “celebrations of the body and the voice, intensified by the interaction/duplication of visual and aural codes” and therefore “excessively pleasurable moments in musicals.”<sup>71</sup> The ballet spectacle—replete with excessive visuals, orchestral sounds, and beautiful unseen female singing voices enhancing the silent aquatic artist’s exquisiteness—disrupts this fantasy of unity from the start. Looking more closely, before DeeAnna’s rude outburst, we can discern her artificial, wincing grin and the effort she makes to uphold her glamorous posture. Teasing and winking at the audience’s longing for unifying identification and erotic fantasies is a blatant feature throughout this film as it was in subtler ways in *Born Yesterday* and *Singin’ in the Rain*. In each case the “horrors of the harsh female voice” are the ultimate playful means of shattering those pleasures of harmonious unity and to reinstate the spectacle of the boisterous comedienne as campy pleasure instead.

## Notes

- 1 *Hail Caesar!*, dir. Joel and Ethan Cohen (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2016).
- 2 *Singin’ in the Rain*, dir. Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen (Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1952).
- 3 For the remainder of this essay, I will use the first person plural to indicate an implied audience that is familiar with the conventions of classic Hollywood cinema.
- 4 *Born Yesterday*, dir. George Cukor (Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1950).
- 5 Douglas Brode, *The Films of the Fifties: Sunset Boulevard to On the Beach* (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), 71.
- 6 Walter Plunkett, quoted in Earl J. Hess and Pratibha A. Dabholkar, *Singin’ in the Rain: The Making of an American Masterpiece* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 81.
- 7 John Belton, “Technology and Aesthetics of Film Sound,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 378.
- 8 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.
- 9 *Singin’ in the Rain*.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 T. E. Perkins, quoted in Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 13.
- 12 Judy Gerstel, “*Singin’ in the Rain* (1952),” in *The A List: The National Society of Film Critics’ 100 Essential Films*, ed. Jay Carr (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 266.
- 13 Martin Roth, “Pulling the Plug on Lina Lamont: Women in Hollywood Musicals,” *Jump Cut* 35 (1990): 59–65, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC35folder/LinaLamont.html>.
- 14 *Singin’ in the Rain*.

- 15 Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 187.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 17 See Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000); Sheri Klein, *Art and Laughter* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).
- 18 Roth, "Pulling the Plug."
- 19 Hess and Dabholkar, *The Making of an American Masterpiece*, 68.
- 20 Amy Lawrence, "Losing Her Voice: Silencing Two Daughters of Hollywood," *Style* 35, no. 2 (2001): 220.
- 21 Talkies were initially considered vulgar, a fact reflected in the film through the negative audience reactions to a screening of the new medium.
- 22 See Hess and Dabholkar, *The Making of an American Masterpiece*, 52–53.
- 23 Roth, "Pulling the Plug."
- 24 *Born Yesterday*.
- 25 Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 175–76.
- 26 *Born Yesterday*.
- 27 Rowe, *Unruly Woman*, 176.
- 28 *Singin' in the Rain*.
- 29 John Mariani, "Come on with the Rain," *Film Comment* 14, no. 3 (1978): 10; Alan Nadel, *Demographic Angst: Cultural Narratives and American Films of the 1950s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 42.
- 30 See James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 36.
- 31 James Card, "'More Than Meets the Eye' in *Singin' in the Rain* and *Day For Night*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1984): 88.
- 32 *Singin' in the Rain*.
- 33 Peter N. Chumo, II, "Dance, Flexibility, and the Renewal of Genre in *Singin' in the Rain*," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 1 (1996): 40, DOI: [10.2307/1225594](https://doi.org/10.2307/1225594).
- 34 Nadel, *Demographic Angst*, 56.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 47–48.
- 36 Mary Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 33, DOI: [10.2307/2930003](https://doi.org/10.2307/2930003).
- 37 Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 4.
- 38 *Singin' in the Rain*.
- 39 Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 215.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 214.
- 41 Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus*, 10.



Ralph J. Poole

- 42 Richard Barrios, quoted in Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 236.
- 43 Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus*, 10.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid., 10, 5.
- 46 Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 46.
- 47 Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus*, 20.
- 48 Doane, "Voice in the Cinema," 36.
- 49 Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 45.
- 50 Doane, "Voice in the Cinema," 45.
- 51 Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus*, 14.
- 52 Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 47.
- 53 Patricia Mellencamp, "Spectacle and Spectator: Looking Through the American Musical Comedy," in *Explorations in Film Theory: Selected Essays from Ciné Tracts*, ed. Roon Burnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 5.
- 54 Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 242.
- 55 *Singin' in the Rain*.
- 56 Mellencamp, "Spectacle and Spectator," 13.
- 57 Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 241.
- 58 Rowe, *Unruly Women*, 176–78.
- 59 Ibid., 174.
- 60 Nadel, *Demographic Angst*, 52.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 164.
- 63 Nadel, *Demographic Angst*, 50.
- 64 Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 164.
- 65 Gene Kelly, quoted in Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 203.
- 66 Baz Luhrmann, quoted in Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 207.
- 67 Hugh Fordin, quoted in Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 235.
- 68 Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 235–36.
- 69 Mellencamp, "Spectacle and Spectator," 12.
- 70 *Hail Caesar!*.
- 71 Mellencamp, "Spectacle and Spectator," 9.

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## The Horrors of the Harsh Female Voice in 1950s Hollywood Comedies

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