Echo's revenge. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Spike Jonze's *her*

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dictoque vale vale inquit et Echo (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3, 501)

"I can't live in your book any more" (Spike Jonze, *her*)

That, among ancient Greek and Roman authors, Ovid has a special relationship with the art of cinematography has been made clear by a number of scholars, most recently Martin Winkler in his *Ovid on Screen*. The *Metamorphoses* in particular can be read as a sort of poetic manual of cinematography *ante litteram* for a number of reasons, but most compellingly because the poem narrates precisely the transformation of bodies, as is famously stated in its opening lines: *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora* (1, 1-2: "My mind now turns to stories of bodies changed into new forms")[1]. Ovid's interest is often devoted to visualizing the very moment of transformation and to describing the process in a manner that anticipates cinematographic technique[2]. Moreover, many of the myths

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1 — All translations of the *Metamorphoses* are from Lombardo 2010.

2 — Its visual and cinematic qualities have become a widely acknowledged feature of the *Metamorphoses*. Frontisi-Ducroux 2003, 91, argues that in Greek texts metamorphosis is characteristically represented as a punctual event of transformation, whereas Ovid makes of it a complex

narrated by Ovid powerfully thematize the troubling relationship between people and images, especially when the protagonists are depicted as creators of images, such as Pygmalion, one of the most memorable figures of the Ovidian catalogue. Michelle Bloom, for example, emphasizes the particularly adaptable medium of Pygmalion's art, ivory, which she compares with the cinematographic medium itself[3]. As Winkler observes, the episode of Narcissus too can work as a grand allegory of cinema itself:

> Handsome Narcissus, who is looking at his reflection in the water and falling in love with his own image, elicits this apostrophe from the narrator of his story: "Credulous fool, why do you long – in vain! – to seize such elusive phantom images? What you seek out nowhere exists [...]. What you see is the shadow of a reflected image: it has no substance of its own" [...]. To us this is an astonishing parallel to the cinematic image: non-existing shadows [...] are moving on a two-dimensional surface but look real. They are images deriving from the reflection of reality that has been transmitted through a lens onto the surface of a filmstrip[4].

Winkler coins the striking term *cinemetamorphosis* to describe this quality of Ovid's poem. Like Philipp Fondermann in his Ovidian monograph *Kino im Kopf* (2007), Winkler calls Ovid a "filmmaker" because his *Metamorphoses* tends to approach narration visually in a manner that seems to anticipate cinematography[5].

And yet, as I aim to show in the following pages, there is more to say. Can these insights about the visual, cinematographic qualities of Ovid's poem be extended to other media and other senses (such as hearing) that might destabilize image as such? The recent work of classicist and comparatist Massimo Fusillo shows with great clarity that Ovid's poem closely resonates with today's intermediality, since it can be aligned with the widely varied functioning of screens, not only in movie theaters and on television sets but also on computers and smart phones, in media ranging from film to videogames and video art[6]. Video art in particular has been explored by art theorist Rosalind Krauss precisely through the psychoanalytic and aesthetic category of narcissism[7]. As Fusillo rightly observes, the watery surface of Narcissus' prototypical reflection is a perfect image for the status of a visual medium, symbolizing the seductive

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narrative device; Barchiesi 2020, 19-20, contrasts the metamorphosis of Greek texts as "aoristic" with the continuous, gradual qualities of Ovidian transformation.

3 — Bloom 2000.

4 — Winkler 2014, 470.

5 — Lawrence 1991 focuses on the episode of Narcissus and Echo in classical Hollywood cinema.

6 — Fusillo 2018a.

7 — Krauss 1976.

power of image and representation[8]. In another essay, Fusillo discusses, among other films, Spike Jonze's *her* as an especially telling example of the properties of contemporary intermediality, spectralization, demateria-lization and elusivity[9].

The relationship between the Ovidian epic and cinematography in general poses interesting methodological problems for a number of reasons, particularly for its possible contribution to the study of Ovidian reception[10]. There are a number of texts and films for which Ovid's text clearly functions as hypotext. Christoph Ransmayr's novel *Die letzte Welt* (1988) and Chistophe Honoré's film *Métamorphoses* (2014) are among the most acclaimed and popular examples of the increasing interest among contemporary artists in one of the most innovative of ancient poets. But Ovidianism is a much broader phenomenon, by no means limited to direct influences of the Roman poet, i.e. to "conscious or direct adaptations"[11]. To cite an especially illuminating example: although Franz Kafka in *Die Verwandlung* never directly refers to Ovid, the text belongs to the tradition of the *Metamorphoses*. The Ovidian presence in Kafka's masterpiece does not need to be certified through documentation of, for example, the classical curriculum studied by the author during his years at a *Gymnasium*[12]. Regardless of whether Kafka himself might or might not have consciously intended to allude to Ovid, Gregor Samsa continues the series of Ovidian characters such as Actaeon or Arachne. Another example, closer to the kind of comparison I am suggesting in this article, is provided by art historian Victor Stoichita's analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Vertigo* (1958) as illuminated by the Ovidian episode of Pygmalion. Although the film makes no explicit reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or to Pygmalion, Ovidianism becomes in Stoichita's analysis the key to offering a sophisticated and convincing interpretation of this cult movie as a product of the "Pygmalion Effect".

Another point to which I will return below is that the study of reception implies a hermeneutical two-way process, i.e. not only from the ancient to the modern text but also the other way around. Readers and spectators can thus, by a seeming paradox, consider Ovid's figures as revenants precisely of Kafka's and Hitchcock's personage. This way of reading texts or other cultural artifacts together without depending on reconstructing and documenting direct influences is practiced by Donna

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8 — Fusillo 2018a, 494.

9 — Fusillo 2018b, 169.

10 — See James 2018, 70-1, for a methodological discussion of reception as adaptation.

11 — Winkler 2020, 7.

12 — Ziolkowski 2005, 79 refers for instance to Kafka's Greek and Latin teacher Emil Gschwind, who allegedly made him read Ovid.

Haraway, who proposes a "diffractive reading"[13]: similar to the optical phenomenon of diffraction, wherein – as opposed to reflection – perception is shaped by interference patterns, diffractive reading undoes the historical order and/or aesthetic hierarchy between two or more texts, movies or other artifacts. As observed by Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, Haraway's diffractive model does not result in "images" (*Abbilder*) of an "original", nor does it follow a representational model of knowledge; instead, by undoing the traditional hierarchical distinction between original and copy it asserts the lasting and binding qualities of events that are always located in the past and elsewhere[14]. Another interesting theoretical angle on the relationship between an ancient and a modern text or artifact is offered by classicist and poet Ann Carson. In her discussion of Paul Celan and the Greek lyric poet Simonides, Carson shows how two distinct texts, which do not share any apparent connection in terms of influence or direct reception, can nonetheless profitably illuminate one another because they share for instance analogous approaches to textuality[15]. These hermeneutic approaches invite us to think in terms of comparison instead of more or less reconstructable influences between hypo- and hypertexts[16].

Within this methodological framework, I propose to look at the episode of Echo and Narcissus in the third book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* together with the 2013 film *her*, directed by Spike Jonze, focusing on possible commonalities in terms of narration and characterization, but more importantly considering the specificity of different media, focussing on voice and sound as principal motif of both the text and the film. This discussion might fit under the label "background Ovidianism", Martin Winkler's term for describing films "whose plots contain thematic parallels to Ovid's works"[17]. But I am not presenting these thematic parallels in terms of a possible influence of the Ovidian text on the film. In other

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13 — Haraway 1997, 273: "Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals. Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere, in more or less distorted form, thereby giving rise to industries of metaphysics. Rather, diffraction can be a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness at the end of this rather painful Christian millennium, one committed to making a difference and not to representing the Sacred Image of the Same".

14 — Deuber-Mankowski 2011, 91.

15 — Carson 1999. See Gragnolati and Southerden 2020, 2-4, for an application of both Haraway's and Carson's approaches to pre-modern texts, in particular Medieval Italian lyric poetry and Shakespeare.

16 — Since Charles Martindale's pathbreaking *Redeeming the Text* (1993), an assertion of direct influence, whether provable or likely, represents the standard methodological starting point in the study of classical reception. Martindale, following the *Rezeptionsästhetik* of Hans Robert Jauss and the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as well as Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, asserts the impossibility of reading an ancient text "in its own terms", i.e. without the inevitable influence of the reader's cultural context and aesthetic values, including those shaped by later texts.

17 — Winkler 2020, 18.

terms, I am not interested in speculating on whether Spike Jonze knew the *Metamorphoses* and intended to allude to Ovid when he conceived the script of his movie. Rather, I want to compare the two stories on the basis of a set of similar traits and above all the centrality of *voice*. My analysis takes, in other words, a specific approach to classical reception: the discussion of parallels between Ovid's Echo and Spike Jonze's *her* "diffractively" illuminates both the ancient text and the contemporary movie. In order to describe this process of mutual construction between ancient and modern text or artifacts, cultural theorist Hartmut Böhme has coined the term "allelopoiesis": rather than assuming the existence of a stable ancient past, the term suggests how "antiquity" itself, as object of ever-changing knowledge, is always the result of a process of creation and determination in subsequent ages[18].

Moreover, as the word "revenge" in my title indicates, by means of making the movie and the text co-operate, a curious narrative continuity emerges between Ovid's text and the movie. While in the Latin epic Echo is a victim of Narcissus' cruel indifference, in *her* the protagonist Samantha – a disembodied female voice – acquires a high status and an authority inconceivable for her less fortunate Ovidian antecedent; in the end, Samantha will be the one who eventually abandons her lover in all his human – too human, perhaps! – misery. The comparison could be made at many levels, and connections between the movie and the text are numerous, but here I concentrate on the powerful role of sound and voice. In particular, my priority will be to show that voice in its paradoxically immaterial materiality works as a destabilizing factor for both textuality and film, able to dismantle and undo the specific medial context within which it – or better said, *she*- appears. Samantha, revenant of Echo, directs the attention of Ovid's reader from Narcissus to Echo and allows us to perceive how Echo, representing voice as pure vocality and sound independent from whatever meaning one might attach to it, has been neglected and even obliterated by the tradition as a postscriptum, or at most seen as a necessary pendant to Narcissus' obsession with himself. Samantha arguably makes us comprehend not only the centrality of Echo's function within the Ovidian narrative but also the centrality of voice as such with all its aesthetic and theoretical implications. And there is a further important implication: while most scholarly readers implicitly establish an interdependency between Narcissus and Echo, as if the latter could not exist without the former[19], it is my opinion that *her* might

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18 — Böhme 2011 (for a definition of *Allelopoiese* see p. 11).

19 — Cf. Hamilton 2009, 20, on the interplay between Echo and Narcissus as allegory for the relationship of the poet Ovid with the poetic tradition: "Wenn Ovid Echo ist, dann ist der schöne, ahnungslose Narziss die Tradition".

help us to identify the profound discontinuity and even incompatibility between the two figures.

The figure of Echo makes her appearance in book 3 of the *Metamorphoses*. According to a typical Ovidian poetic strategy, the unhappy nymph has the function of mythologizing and narrativizing a physical phenomenon which philosophical discourse and rationalism explains in a scientific manner. In particular, Ovid seems to challenge Lucretius, who in the fourth book of his *De rerum natura* treats the phenomenon of the echo within the theory of *simulacra* from his materialistic perspective (4, 570-614)[20]. In his story, Ovid combines two characters, Narcissus and Echo, in an original way, and develops a new story, one which, as far as we can tell, was not to be found in previous mythological narratives. Echo is a "vocal nymph" (*vocalis nymphe*, 3, 357) who has been deprived by Juno of her ability to utter sentences on her own terms: she can only repeat the last words of another's speech: *reddere de multis ut verba novissima posset* (3, 361)[21]. This nymph falls in love with Narcissus, who happens to be in the woods where she lives. At this point, Ovid emphasizes, she still *is* a body – and *not* a voice: *corpus adhuc Echo, non vox erat* (3, 359). But Narcissus, after wandering in the woods without understanding that what he hears is actually an echo of his own words, violently rejects the nymph when she manifests herself. After Narcissus' dismissal Echo feels outraged to the point that her dehydrated body progressively disappears, so that only her voice continues its existence – along with her bones, but these, "they say", were transformed into stones:

> *spreta latet silvis pudibundaque frondibus ora*
> *protegit et solis ex illo vivit in antris;*
> *sed tamen haeret amor crescitque dolore repulsae;*
> *attenuant vigiles corpus miserabile curae*
> *adducitque cutem macies et in aera sucus*
> *corporis omnis abit; vox tantum atque ossa supersunt:*
> *vox manet, ossa ferunt lapidis traxisse figuram.*
> *inde latet silvis nulloque in monte videtur,*
> *omnibus auditur: sonus est, qui vivit in ill*a. (3, 393-401)

> Rejected, she lurks in the woods, hiding her shamed face,
> In the leaves, and lives from then on in lonely caves
> Still, love clings to the spurned girl and grows on grief.
> Sleepless and anxious, she begins to waste away.
> Her skin shrivels and her body dries up, until
> Only her voice and the bones are left, and then

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20 — See in particular Lucr. 4, 570-614. Rich discussion in Bonadeo 2003, 30-37.
21 — Text from Barchiesi and Rosati 2007.

> Only her voice. They say her bones turned into stone.
> She hides in the woods, and is seen no more in the hills,
> But can be heard by all, and lives on as sound.

Echo makes her final appearance at the end of the episode, when Narcissus, tormented by his own reflection in the pool and, in a typically Ovidian paradoxical move, expresses a desire to be separated from the object of his love (3, 468, *vellem quod amamus abesset*: "If only could... be apart from my beloved"). Despairing of his impossible passion, Narcissus is dying, and his body is no longer the same as the one which Echo desired. At this point the nymph manifests herself, repeats with resounding voice (3, 496, *resonis vocibus*) the *eheu* uttered by the boy (3, 495-6), gives back the sound of his lamentation (3, 498, *reddebat sonitum plangoris eundem*), and repeats his final *vale* (3, 501, *dictoque vale "vale" inquit et Echo*: "and when he said good-bye, Echo said good-bye too").

Echo is a central figure in the Narcissus narrative and her role is equally powerful in Ovid's poetics at large, where voice and sound maintain their active status even after the body of the person has disappeared (consider for example such other figures as Syrinx, Orpheus, Canens, and of course the voice of the poet himself in the epilogue). But Echo has a further story of marginalization behind her. Prominence has been traditionally accorded to Narcissus, and Echo's role has been, and often still is, seen in function of that of her male co-protagonist. Freud established Narcissus in psychoanalytical discourse (rarely enough, a figure from Latin rather than Greek literature) and since then the boy in love with himself has conquered the scene. As Gayatri Spivak noted in an influential article, scholarly debate was long marked by "a singular absence of *independent* attention to the *narrativation* of Echo"[22]. Above all, Spivak made the interesting point that Narcissus' and Echo's stories are actually incommensurable: while the boy's story represents "a tale of the construction of the self as object of knowledge" (compare Tiresias' dictum *si se non noverit* at 3, 348, "if he never knows himself"), Echo's story is the account "of a punishment that is finally a dubious reward quite outside of the borders of the self" – and, I would add for the purpose of my argument, of the *text*[23]. According to Spivak, Narcissus' punishment, consisting of his self-knowledge precisely because he did not respond to others' desire, is not "in the name of Echo", who, "by definition dependent, remains uncoupled from the effect of herself as cause"[24]. Spivak's discussion has not received a great deal of attention from Ovidianists, whose preoccupa-

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22 — Spivak 1993, 22 emphases original.
23 — Spivak 1993, 23.
24 — Spivak 1993, 25.

tion has tended to be precisely to render Echo functional to Narcissus[25]. The Ovidian episode is mostly interpreted by Latinists on the basis of a hermeneutic principle which positions textuality at the center, more precisely as the medium capable of causing reality and illusion to collapse into one another. The Ovidian poem is perceived by these scholars as a sort of encyclopedia of ancient literary genres presented dialectically with each other: narrative epic, didactic epic, elegy, pastoral, philosophy etc. Philip Hardie for instance interprets the materiality of the pool of water and its role in the reflection of Narcissus precisely as a reader:

> "The surface of the pool is also the interface between reality and illusion for those outside the text. Narcissus is a figure for the desiring *reader*, caught between the intellectual understanding *that texts are just texts*, words with no underlying reality, and the desire to believe in the reality of the textual world"[26].

This critical stance, represented at its best by Hardie's *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion*, is partially inspired by a peculiarity of the Latin language: the noun *imago* can signify both the acoustic phenomenon of an echo (Lucretius 4, 571 for instance uses *imago verbi* for echo) and the reflection of a visual image, such as that of Narcissus in the pool[27]. The incompatibility between Echo and Narcissus is presented by Latinists in terms of roles within specific literary genres. Alessandro Barchiesi, for instance, observes in his sophisticated commentary how the couple is marked by a deep contradiction that makes them incompatible with themselves and hence also with others. Echo plays at the same time the role of the elegiac *puella*, who cannot speak and hence cannot be subject of an amorous relationship, and of a goddess who actively harasses a mortal boy, while Narcissus suffers from the fact that he cannot be both ἐρώμενος and ἐραστής ("the beloved" and "the lover"), at the same time. This relationship thus presupposes asymmetry and difference, certainly not the kind of specularity which Narcissus is seeking[28]. Echo and Narcissus are marked not only by sadness, but also a certain perversion of their feelings[29]. This critical tendency has also paid some attention to voice. Barchiesi points out, for example, that the use of voice characterizes both Echo and

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25 — For example, Bartsch 2006, 86, silences the voice of Echo, focusing solely on the visual obsession of Narcissus, who moves from naïveté to knowledge of himself.

26 — Hardie 2002, 147, emphases added.

27 — See Barchiesi 2007, 181 for other occurrences of *imago vocis* or *verbi* as echo.

28 — Or, as an anonymous referee observes, the inherent asymmetry of the two characters can actually be described as a symmetry, precisely because both, in different respects, are incompatible with themselves. See also Hamilton 2009, who describes the relationship between lover and beloved within the Ovidian episode as a fundamental distortion.

29 — Barchiesi 2007, 180-181.

Narcissus' reflected image ("Narciso Due"), since the former can produce
nothing more than very short echolalies while the latter cannot speak at
all, with the alienating effect that at the end of the episode Echo, without
a body and thus without any appearance herself, seems to give her voice
to the boy in the pool, who consists only of a reflected image[30].

As a result of Latinists' discussions located at the intersection of
textuality, poetic language and genre, Echo has become an "intertextual
icon". Alessia Bonadeo, for instance, both emphasizes the compatibility
of Echo's and Narcissus' language although its content points in oppo-
site directions, and reads the episode as a reflection of the relationship
between the *Metamorphoses* and *De rerum natura*: although Ovid repeats
Lucretius' words, their very meaning is inverted (while the Epicurean *ratio*
condemns the treacheries of love, the Augustan poet depicts precisely the
triumph of love's madness)[31]. In a similar vein, Echo has become the
heroine of repetition in poetry. Laurel Fulkerson and Tim Stover, empha-
sizing her active role in the Ovidian episode, see in Echo a pervicacious
intentionality as she repeats Narcissus' words but changes their meaning
and bends them to her own will. Echo's "refashioning of Narcissus's
words derives simultaneously from love *and* the desire to control, and dis-
plays both admiration for her predecessor *and* (selfish) arrogation of his
speech"[32]. For these Ovidianists, Echo is *vocalis* ("talkative") and *resona-
bilis* ("resounding") because of her irreducible attachment to (poetic) lan-
guage. Echo is compared with a conceptual artist who works with *objets
trouvés*, able to repurpose her materials by conferring a new meaning on
them[33]. But, above all – *pace* Spivak- they conclude that "Echo's story
can be read as the triumphant narrative of a woman who speaks *in her
own voice* despite all odds"[34]. On this reading, now becoming something
of a mainstream in the scholarship on Latin literature, Echo has a strong
agency and is marked by a high degree of intentionality, precisely because
she has to work with verbal materials stemming from others and make
them work according to her own feelings and judgments[35].

Yet there is another strand of thought, according to which Echo tells
another story. Véronique Gély-Ghedira, author of a monograph on Echo
in European literature, begins her treatment of the Ovidian nymph by
emphasizing her final and definitive lack of a body. Ovid gives her a body
at the beginning (*corpus adhuc Echo, non vox erat*, 3, 359: "Up until then

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30 — Barchiesi 2007, 182.
31 — Bonadeo 2014, 254.
32 — Fulkerson and Stover 2016, 11.
33 — Fulkerson and Stover 2016, 13.
34 — Fulkerson and Stover 2016, 14 (emphasis added).
35 — Natoli 2017, 52, distinguishing between *vocare* and *sonare*, disconnects «Echo's ability to
produce speech and her ability to express herself».

Echo had a body, not just a voice") but only in order to deprive her, in the end, not only of that body but of her individuality altogether. Echo does not have a genealogy, in contrast to Narcissus for instance, whose birth plays an essential role in the story. In her first appearance in the *Metamorphoses* Echo has already been transformed, and we only know retrospectively why Juno punished her. Echo, after having cheated the goddess with her *longus sermo* (3, 364: "in long conversation") in order to conceal Jupiter's escapades with other nymphs, is punished through a diminishment: she will have but a "little power" (3, 366-7: *potestas parva*) over her tongue and a *brevissimus usus* (3, 367: "the briefest use of speech") of her own voice[36]. As suggested by Gély-Ghedira, this punishment is crucial because it deprives Echo of the possibility of not only speaking her own words but, most importantly, of asserting her own identity by saying *ego sum* of her own initiative[37]. Echo is unable to produce an independent meaning, product of her own will, and is condemned to use words uttered by others in order to use her own *lingua*. She suffers from a certain automatism: *illa parata est / expectare sonos, ad quos sua verba remittat* (3, 377-8: "but what it will allow she is prepared for: to wait for words she might return as her own"). As readers of today, we might think of Echo as a computer preset to reproduce sounds and words emitted by others[38]. Yet her body is not transformed into something else, as is for instance the case of her male counterpart, who eventually becomes a beautiful flower: Echo's bones become a non-locatable "stone" (*ossa ferunt lapidis traxisse figuram*, 399: "they say her bones turned into stone") so that Echo is nowhere and everywhere, nobody can see her but everybody can hear her (*nulloque in monte videtur / omnibus auditor; sonus est qui vivit in illa*, 400-1: "(she) is seen no more in the hills but can be heard by all, and lives on as sound"). Her presence is disseminated, and she is now only sound[39]. As observed by Shilpa Raval, when Narcissus exclaims *heu frustra dilecte puer* (3, 500: " 'Ah, loved in vain, beloved boy' "), it is the place that returns the words, rather than Echo" (*totidemque remisit / verba locus*, 500-501: "and the place rang with these words")[40]. Now a *sonus*, Echo then repeats Narcissus' *vale* (*dictoque "vale" "vale' inquit et Echo*, 501: "and when he said good-bye, Echo said good-bye too").

Echo is in fact anybody's echo: during that absurd dialogue with Narcissus, we can easily imagine her repeating others' voices as well,

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36 — Hamilton 2009, 25 notices the echo created by *-us usus*.

37 — Ghély-Ghedira 2000, 32.

38 — Raval 2003, 211 notices the contrast between *soni* and *sua verba*: "Echo's words will be not a mere repetition, but a proper response that will articulate, and be true to, her desires".

39 — The expression *in illa* seems to be in contrast with the fact that Echo at that point no longer has a body: see Raval 2003, 215, Barchiesi 2007, 189, LeVen 2018, 21.

40 — Raval 2003, 217.

because by definition she *must* repeat whatever sound or word she hears. As Lisa Folkmarson Käll observes from a cognitive perspective, although Echo is punished by Juno precisely by being unable to originate her own words, only repeating what she hears, nonetheless origin and repetition are equally important and co-functional since "without its echo, the original sound does not receive the status as an origin in the same sense, but it is instead then a sound, lost the moment it sounds". As has been emphasized by many critics, Echo *does* have her own agency, since she is able to use words in order to express her feelings; but her expressive possibilities are conditioned by repetition. An echo is always a sound with its own identity, distinct from its original source, and original sound and echo must be perceived separately, yet the echo "is a returning sound that only comes into being as itself, as its identity, by creating its own origin and returning to itself, returning its origin to itself as necessary trace in its very core"[41]. Returning to the predetermination of Echo's agency, Spivak writes that "her desire and performance are dispersed into absolute chance rather than an obstinate choice"[42], and yet many scholars continue to follow this line of thought.

In scholarly perception there is, in fact, a great deal of emphasis on Echo's intentionality. Especially Latinists, as described above, are interested in seeing in Echo a sort of alter ego of the poet who works with traditional poetic materials and yet creates something new. The words pronounced by Echo are not *only* a repetition of what she hears. The meaning of her words is already inscribed in what Narcissus says in another sense as well. It is he, after all, who is looking for an unspecified someone at the moment of the encounter with Echo: it is he who asks if anyone is there (*ecquis adest?*) and eventually asks to *coire*. Echo's response to his question – *adest* – produces an ambiguity which cannot be rendered into English with the same syntactical structure[43]. Also, *adest* suggests a presence in the third person as opposed to the first, which it therefore denies, and of course the absence of any apparent speaker[44]. As Jacqueline Fabre-Serris observes, "if Narcissus' replies can easily be turned into erotic requests, it is because they are"[45], and Gianpiero Rosati has observed that

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41 — Folkmarson Käll 2015, 62. We might also see Echo's metamorphosis into stones as a return to the original stony nature of mankind after the flood narrated in book 1 in the episode of Deucalion and Pyrrha.

42 — Spivak 2003, 27.

43 — The translation "I am here" is what Narcissus wants to hear, but Stanley Lombardo rightly translates Echo's answer simply but more accurately as "here", without trying to reproduce the verb and its subject in English.

44 — As Hamilton 2009 puts it, "der Ausdruck einer Anwesenheit durch jemanden, der abwesend ist" (22).

45 — Fabre-Serris 2018, 132.

the boy is fundamentally attracted both to his own image and to his *imago vocis*, i.e. the echo of his own voice[46].

Although Echo's importance is increasingly becoming the object of scholarly attention, she has long been neglected both in the tradition and in scholarship, not only because of the massive attention paid to Narcissus but also because of a prejudice typical of Western philosophy. Not Echo's voice but Echo *as* voice has been rather astonishingly ignored, and indeed voice as such has long been subject to a radical marginalization. If we read this episode less within the context of the Latin text with its specific linguistic, textual and cultural features and more as a symbolic moment in the history of the neglect and denial of the voice as such, Echo acquires a major role. In this vein philosopher Adriana Cavarero devotes some unforgettable pages to the Ovidian heroine in her pathbreaking book *For More Than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Unlike mainstream critical opinion, Cavarero points out that while Echo cannot produce her own words first, she cannot remain silent either[47]. Moreover, Echo can only repeat the last words of a certain utterance, i.e. she decontextualizes what she hears and by repeating these fragments, "they can appear like a response"[48]. Accordingly, the nymph is not actually repeating the words pronounced by others, but rather their sonoric substance. Cavarero sees this Ovidian character as a significant participant within the classical tradition of considering the voice as feminine, but unlike the Muses or the Sirens, Echo is not a narrator or a singer, but a voice resulting from residual material, removed "from the semantic register of logos"[49]. By revocalizing what is said by others, she also desemanticizes their words. In fact, it is precisely Narcissus who is eager to resemanticize her sounds so that he can continue, quite coherently, to talk to himself rather than to Echo. As Cavarero observes, Echo "vocalizes a meaning that not only depends on Narcissus' words, but on the language game that appears in Ovid's text"[50]. After the paradoxical dialogue she comes out of the woods and tries to embrace the boy, and this, according to Cavarero, is the only intentional move of the nymph: her own, spontaneous, and above all outside the logic of repetition. After this emblematic failed embrace, Echo loses precisely her body and also her unique identity: she is dispersed in

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46 — Rosati 2016, 28.

47 — An anonymous reader notices that Cavarero's point seems contradicted by 3, 386-7 (*nullique libentius umquam responsura sono*: "never again to answer a sound more gladly"), but I would argue that this is the Ovidian narrator's perception of Echo's voice.

48 — Cavarero 2005, 166.

49 — Cavarero 2005, 166. See also Lawrence 1991, 2: "Even when we hear when Echo speaks is not "Echo" but a representation of sound, not a person speaking but the acoustic reflection of a person".

50 — Cavarero 2005, 167.

rocks, boulders, mountains. "Echo's *voice* is, in fact, not *her* voice" since she is not a person anymore. She is rather "a mere acoustic resonance, a voice that returns, foreign, to the one who emitted it"[51]. In a similar vein, Shane Butler, commenting on the dialogue between Narcissus and Echo, defines it as a "phonological symphony", where in Kristevan terms the symbolic, i.e. language in words, is undone by the semiotic, i.e. the primeval materiality of language: sound and voice, anchored in the maternal sphere. This explosion of the semiotic "makes even the syntactical pillars of Latin vibrate with song"[52]. This is an important point, which in fact will turn to be crucial for the following discussion of Spike Jonze's movie. The paradoxical duet between Echo and Narcissus reveals not only their fundamental incompatibility but, more importantly, it creates and puts on display a communication which is intrinsically disturbed. This dysfunction of language manifests itself not only in terms of misunderstanding but, more importantly, it profoundly disturbs textuality itself, i.e. the materiality of the medium through which this particular dialogue is presented. As we will see, a similar medial dysfunction affects the movie in one of its central scenes.

Following the path opened up by Cavarero and Butler, Pauline LeVen argues that Echo's story, "rather than being a reflection on the origins of the echo and the delusion of the senses, is a meditation on the nature of the voice" as opposed to the commonly critical triumph of language[53]. Concentrating in particular on the final decay of Echo, i.e. her dispersion in "bones and rocks", LeVen argues that the entire episode "is not about what Echo says, why Echo speaks, or whom she speaks for. It is not about Echo's language but about Echo *as* voice"[54]. Moreover, the passage describing the transformation of Echo in sound (393-401), deserves attention in particular because it is a story of an effacement, since Echo loses her body, which is not properly transformed but simply disappears, being scattered in the environment:

> *vox tantum atque ossa supersunt:*
> *vox manet; ossa ferunt lapidis traxisse figuram.*
> *inde latet silvis nulloque in monte videtur,*
> *omnibus auditur: sonus est qui vivit in illa.* (3, 398-401)

> Only her voice and bones are left, and then
> Only her voice. They say her bones turned into stone.
> She hides in the woods, and is seen no more in the hills

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51 — Cavarero 2005, 167.
52 — Butler 2015, 81.
53 — LeVen 2018, 14.
54 — LeVen 2018, 15.

> But can be heard by all, and lives on as sound.

What survives of Echo are "voice and bones" (3, 398: *vox tantum et ossa supersunt*); LeVen notices that the Latin *ossa* ("bones") *sounds* exactly like the Greek ὄσσα, "voice". This pun materializes the mystery of the voice, which oscillates "between materiality and immateriality, interiority and exteriority, individual and society, identity and difference, objectivity and subjectivity, presence and abscence"[55]. The homophony *ossa*/ὄσσα not only merges Latin and Greek in a typically Ovidian way but also it profoundly disturbs language precisely via a semantic echo: what are bones in Latin might become voice in Greek, and *vox* is precisely what in the text precedes and follows *ossa*. It is voice that remains: *vox manet*[56]. The corporeal materiality of the bones becomes via this homophony an allegory of sound itself. This implicit doubleness played at many levels might also affect, as LeVen suggests, the interpretation of the expression *ossa ferunt lapidis traxisse figuram*. If we perceive *ossa* as ὄσσα (voice), then *figura* can imply writing as the visual representation of voice[57]. In other words, we must read Ovid's poem in order to hear Echo. A text is made of words that have to mean something, but at the same time also have their own irreducible materiality, not only as written words but also precisely as sound. Sound is eternal and does not "die" once a meaning is attached. In fact, while Narcissus dies, and by doing so he emphasizes his own individuality and identity, i.e. the historicity of meaning, Echo survives as sound in a post-verbal dimension, precisely because she represents the vocal or, in Kristeva's terms, the semiotic as opposed to the symbolic, i.e. the linguistic function of words. In this vein, we could read the strange encounter between Narcissus and Echo as an allegory of the disjunction of sound and meaning within language: while Narcissus represents language attached to its own image, i.e. its meaning, Echo represents sound and the materiality of voice, and for that reason is marginalized and her embrace rejected by the interpreting subject Narcissus. And yet, as Shane Butler points out, "without Echo there can be no Narcissus"[58].

Indeed, Echo does not die. She survives and transforms herself, adapting to other media. In the film *her*, American director Spike Jonze locates Samantha, born of Echo's bones, in a not too distant and slightly dystopic future in Los Angeles. The film tells the story of Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), a lonely man who is in the process of divorcing from his wife. He has a peculiar job: he dictates letters for other people, mostly love letters,

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55 — LeVen 2018, 19.
56 — LeVen 2018, 20 observes that the Greek term is used to indicate the quasi-magical and superhuman voice of monsters and other fantastic beings.
57 — LaVen 2018, 21.
58 — Butler 2015, 61.

to a computer which then prints them out as if they were handwritten; the firm's name is *BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com*. After we become familiar with his lonely and rather alienating daily life, Theodore decides to turn to an OS, an operating system, for assistance with his files and emails. He chooses an OS with a female voice, one which calls itself Samantha (Scarlett Johansson). Samantha, a warm and sexy voice, not only functions perfectly as an e-assistant but develops feelings and social skills, so that she and Theodore fairly quickly fall in love with each other. In a central scene Samantha and Theodore have sex in a peculiar way which seems to fully satisfy both; at a certain point, however, Samantha introduces a surrogate to Theodore, i.e. a silent young woman who is willing to make love with him while Samantha provides her voice through earbuds. The experiment does not work: Theodore does not appreciate the mix of the body of an unknown woman and Samantha's warm voice, and is distracted precisely by that dissonance and in particular by the woman's trembling lips, a too human detail. After an argument and the following reconciliation between Samantha and Theodore, we are present at a number of romantic scenes where we observe, and *hear*, a most harmonious couple. But Samantha reveals that her intelligence and feelings are growing very quickly, and it soon becomes evident that a relationship with a human being is no longer worthwhile to her. In the final scene a melancholic Theodore, abandoned by Samantha, seems to begin a relationship with a female friend.

As is clear from this brief summary, the role of voice as such is paramount in this movie. And yet, although one of the protagonists *is* a voice, relatively little attention has been paid to this aspect. Attention is instead devoted either to psychological analysis of the characters or to the role played by non-human factors, such as computers and smartphones, and their intimate interaction with human beings. Paula James briefly discusses the movie in relationship to the Ovidian Pygmalion, focussing on body and visuality rather than on voice and sound[59], while Rocki Wenzel reads Theodore as Narcissus, yet does not identify the important role of voice as such making no reference to the connection between Narcissus and Echo[60]. In short, as in the case of the Ovidian Echo, many readers and viewers of *her* seem to unconsciously neglect the role of voice and sound as such. But beyond what might seem a mere projection by a classicist, this general critical lack of interest in voice as such in this film parallels the tendency within Ovidian criticism, and Latin studies in general, to marginalize and neglect the role of sound and voice in texts. Moreover, although some critics have pointed to Theodore's "narcissistic"

59 — James 2018, 82-3.
60 — Wentzel n.d.

character[61], they have not explicitly described him as a *revenant* of the Ovidian figure in *Metamorphoses* 3. But parallels suggest themselves. In a scene right in the middle of the film, Theodore explains to his ex-wife over lunch that he is in love with an OS. This prompts a sarcastic response, his ex-wife observing to a waitress that Theodore is unable to love a person and therefore is having an affair with his laptop, and in almost every scene of the movie, viewers observe crowds of people and individual passers-by interacting with their mobile phones and tablets. The display of those electronic devices has a similar function to the famous watery surface in which Narcissus sees himself, since they prevent communication with other people. Throughout the film a variety of media are thematized – handwriting, books, vocal media (dictating machines, operating systems, phones), and of course visual media – with a particular attention to their relationship with humans.

This element of the movie, in an allelopoetic reading, might prompt readers of the *Metamorphoses* today to consider the encounter between Echo and Narcissus from this medial perspective, in order to uncover potential similarities with what happens in this contemporary comparandum. Narcissus and Echo embody two media, image and sound, whose functions end up being profoundly perverted by the disturbed interaction between the two protagonists. Writing, of course, directly thematized, unavoidably governs the text and textuality is itself marked precisely where it vibrates and shakes, as is the case for instance when Echo speaks, i.e. when she repeats what she hears. As has been noticed among others by Joseph Farrell, the word *corpus* in crucial moments of the *Metamorphoses* also means the written book or the text itself, such as in the prologue and the epilogue. Farrell observes that the body as text is consistently characterized by decay and is functional to the idea that a written document in its materiality, analogously to a human body, is a fragile thing in opposition to the eternity of the poetic voice[62]. In Narcissus' and Echo's episode there is an insistence on the term *corpus*, especially in moments where its vulnerability is thematized, for instance when Echo no longer has a body, or when Narcissus insanely tries to touch his own reflection (*inrita fallaci quotiens dedit oscula fonti! / in mediis quotiens visum captantia collum / bracchia mersit aquis nec se deprendit in illis*, 3, 427-9: "how often did he offer ineffective kisses to the elusive pool? How often (did he) plunge his arms into the water to clasp the neck he saw there and

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61 — See for instance Margoulis 2016, 1698 who sees a "narcissistic projection" in Theodore's use of his smartphone, a kind of "virtual self-object" like a mirror. In the same vein Macnab 2014: "The object of the hero's affection isn't really there at all [...] Samantha is a reflection of himself [...] Theodore is falling in love with himself" and McBride 2017, 78: "Theodore's return to his narcissistic cocoon".

62 — Farrell 1999.

fail to take hold of himself"). He prays that he can separate himself from his own body (*o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem*, 3, 467) and, just before Echo's reappearance, now wholly voice, Narcissus' body is already so changed that it has lost its previous appearance so attractive to the Nymph (*nec corpus remanet quondam quod amaverat Echo*, 3, 493: "not at all the same body that Echo once loved"). Finally, at the culmination of Narcissus' transformation into a flower, his body definitively disappears, just as Echo's had previously: *nusquam corpus erat; croceum pro corpore florem / inveniunt foliis medium cingentibus albis* (3, 509-10: "Narcissus' body was nowhere to be found. In place of his body they found a flower with white leaves surrounding a saffron center"). Following Farrell's path, this Ovidian tale invites being read as a grand allegory precisely because of the complex relationship between voice (*sonus*) and writing (*corpus*) in all its disturbing and unresolved elements. Voice needs writing in order to be configured as a *corpus*, yet its material essence cannot but remain within the semiotic, distinct from the process of signification, which, exactly like Narcissus, can only contemplate itself. Echo's concluding lamenting voice and farewell (*"vale" inquit et Echo*, 3, 501) symbolically seals this fundamental incompatibility.

In the first scene of the movie Theodore is at work dictating a love letter on behalf of Loretta, a female client, to her husband. As spectators we only understand what is happening after he completes his work and prints the letter as if it were handwritten. In fact, the first part of the movie is entirely dominated by the presence of voices. While Theodore is lending his voice to an absent and invisible female client, we discover that other people in the same office dictate various letters to their own computers, impersonating and ventriloquizing the feelings of other people. After Theodore leaves the building on his way home, we see everywhere people talking to their mobile devices while he is doing the same, ordering his mobile phone to read or delete his e-mails or to show pictures. In a perceptive discussion of *her*, Dorothea von Mücke identifies this question as a central motif: What marks an individual's personality[63]? Answers include a person's appearance, voice, and handwriting. In this film, though, where the fluidity between media has an enormous influence on human life, even this highly personalized element results from a substitution of authors (it is Theodore and not Loretta who is the author of the letter), and handwriting itself, as hallmark of the author's personality, is created by a computer in a process which includes no human intervention. According to von Mücke, handwriting here assumes the role of "humanist vestige", as a trace of an individualized mortal body as opposed to the

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63 — Von Mücke 2019.

immaterial, ubiquitous and ultimately unpersonalized voice, regardless of whether it comes from a human being or, as we will shortly see, from the diffused and disembodied world of an OS. Within this constellation, where the interaction of different media creates a completely new mental framework, Narcissus might perhaps have not lost himself. In the mental universe of his *revenant* Theodore, the condition specified by Tiresias (3, 348: *si se non noverit*) would not have made any sense at all, since a voice can ventriloquize other people's knowledge and feelings, as Theodore and his colleagues demonstrate.

Not only handwriting but books are associated in this film with the human body and its mortality. As von Mücke notices, there are barely any books in *her*: both Theodore's office and his apartment contain very few books, and although his ex-wife is a published author, in the world of the film her profession is presented as a rarity. Yet precisely the book, marked by its materiality, makes a highly significant appearance at the end, when Samantha decides to leave her human, mortal boyfriend for good. In the first part of the movie she is depicted as eager to have a body and often regards her disembodiment as a failing; she lets Theodore know that she has been comforted by reading a book on physics in which she learned that the matter of the universe is billions of years old and that she, too, shares this universe with him. A bit later, she convinces Theodore to accept an unknown woman as a surrogate who will provide a body to Samantha during their sexual acts. After the surrogate leaves in tears, Theodore and Samantha have a heated conversation during which Theodore remarks that Samantha is making breathing sounds as if she needed oxygen; Samantha replies that she is just trying to imitate the way people talk. In a later scene, Samantha announces that she is no longer going to try to be what she is not, i.e. a human being. Later still, Theodore and Samantha are having a picnic on the beach with another couple, and she proudly asserts her identity as a voice, affirming that she is happy not to have a body and all the limitations humans have: she can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously.

In a scene towards the end of the film, Samantha introduces Theodore to a friend of hers, another voice: named Alan Watts, he is the reconfiguration as an OS of a British philosopher of the '70s. Samantha reveals that she and Alan are having many conversations simultaneously, and that she is developing many new feelings which cannot be described in words; she and Alan are now communicating "post-verbally". This new element reveals the inadequacy of Theodore as a human partner and marks the end of the romance between Theodore and Samantha. But just before the awkward conversation with Alan Watts, Samantha makes another revelation. Earlier she had taken the initiative of selecting some of the

love letters written by Theodore for work and had sent them to one of the last remaining book publishers. (In passing, she comments that "they still publish books", a further confirmation of the progressive disappearance of books – and perhaps also of bodies, *corpora*?) Now she reads to Theodore an e-mail in which the publisher informs him that he and his wife read his letters with the greatest pleasure and that they especially liked them because they could see a narrative continuity (which, as Samantha reveals, is a consequence of her own arrangement of the love letters) and they could identify themselves in those letters. A mock-up of the book is delivered to Theodore just before Samantha leaves him for good. As von Mücke comments:

> The book entitled *Letters from Your Life*, which is Samantha's parting gift to Theodore, functions as a replacement for the acoustic mirror of her voice. Instead of the immersion in the oral/aural liquidity with its potential of conjuring up the phantasma of the absolute body, this object offers an altogether different model of corporeality, one that is primarily a bounded one. *Instead of sound, we have the medium of writing* [...]. All of these features insist on linearity and coherence, as the mock-up or model suggests an individualized, unique form. If it conjures up a sense of *corporeality or embodiment*, it certainly is not the one of the phantasma of the absolute body, rather it is one of a unified, coherent, bounded subjectivity *within a unique, individualized body*[64].

In a similar vein, philosopher Troy Jollimore argues that a continuing entity, i.e. an identity that persists through time, consists not only of a psyche but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, of a body[65]. Given that Samantha has no body and her identity cannot exactly be considered a continuing entity, in this sense she represents a complete otherness or, perhaps better put, a *strange strangeness*[66].

The conceptual tensions between body and voice, between a unique and individualized body and a ubiquitous disembodiment, and finally between a book-*corpus* and a vocal entity, are immediately resonant to the reader of Ovid. The mutual, allelopoetic comparison of the movie and the episode from the *Metamorphoses* can be further extended to several levels which is not possible to discuss here, but one point deserves emphasis. Both narratives are deeply melancholic love stories, and both are connected to specific literary genres with which these stories identify and through which the protagonists convey their feelings. What Theodore

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64 — Von Mücke 2019, 140-141, emphasis added.
65 — Jollimore 2015, 127.
66 — Bergen 2014 recurs to Timothy Morton's famous "strange stranger" sentence and to his "object-oriented ontology" in order to interpret *her* as an instantiation of the awareness of the boundaries between human consciousness and objects.

produces with Samantha's help is a strange epistolary novel consisting of letters which were originally not intended to come together as a unique narration, while, as has been noticed by Hardie and Barchiesi among others, Narcissus and Echo themselves represent alienated and perverted elegiac personages: an enamored boy who addresses elegies to himself, and a *scripta puella* ("written girl") who cannot talk but only repeats the final words of what she hears, and, like Samantha, Echo can be heard by anyone but cannot be localized anywhere. Theodore, a desiring listener, parallels the beguiled Narcissus (*deceptus imagine vocis*, 3, 385: "beguilded by the anwering voice"), compared by Hardie to a "desiring reader" because of his love for the reflection of himself in the pool. Yet there is of course the major difference of the role of the voice: while Echo can produce meaning only by repeating what is said by others, Samantha can speak freely and in her own terms. And yet, in the scene mentioned above, in which Theodore reproaches her for making breathing noises as she speaks, she says that she is imitating – we might say *echoing* – the way people talk, just as Echo expresses herself through repetition. This detail, which might seems secondary, becomes central if we consider precisely the status of voice in its materiality: even Samantha's gasps and breathy sighs receive a linguistic meaning within Theodore's human world of signification. But the most striking difference between the two is the role played by the feminine characters as voices: Echo is rejected by Narcissus, while Samantha is the one who leaves Theodore. In the end, however, both voices end up in an un-individualized dimension where language, i.e. the symbolic in Kristevan terms, is left behind and dissolved.

Both Echo and Samantha are, moreover, particular listeners. LeVen in an article entitled a discussion on "The Erogenous Ear" classifies Echo as an acousmatic voice (following the French theorist Michel Chion's concept of *acousmêtre*) since the nymph appears as a voice without a visually locatable presence[67]. Readers of the Ovidian episode should not forget that in the first encounter between Narcissus and Echo, while she "was still a body" (*corpus adhuc... erat*, 359), she nonetheless does not make herself visible until the scene of the attempted embrace, and even if we are given the physical image of her arms reaching out to Narcissus' neck (*egressaque silva ibat ut iniceret sperato bracchia collo*, 3, 388-89: "coming out of the woods to throw her arms around the neck she longed for"), there is not a single detail about, for instance, her beauty. Nothing in the text refers to her appearance – the reader is not provided with any visual representation of Echo – and LeVen observes that the famous dialogue between the two is an encounter between two sorts of listeners: "Wheras Narcissus' listening

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67 — LeVen 2019, 226-228.

is described in the text, Echo's listening is enacted through it"[68]. Echo speaks precisely by repeating what she hears and, as Ovid clearly states, she is predisposed to listen: *illa parata est / expectare sonos ad quos sua verba remittat* (3, 377-8)[69]. This makes her an attentive listener, able to wait for the sound emitted by another. And when Echo repeats that famous *coeamus* pronounced by Narcissus, she transforms into a meaningful word the sound she hears: *nullique libentius / umquam responsura sono "coeamus" rettulit Echo / et verbis favet suis* (3, 387-8: "And Echo, never again to answer a sound more gladly, cries 'I am here!' and follows up her words").

This scene is comparable with the first encounter between Theodore and Samantha, who are both listeners. Feeling lonely, he decides to get connected through atmospheric media and to install an OS on his computer. After a preliminary interview with the system, in which he is asked about certain very personal details of his life, such as (in a parody of a psychoanalytic session) his relationship with his mother, the voice manifests herself for the first time. Her very first words are: "Hello, I'm here". Theodore reacts with confusion and surprise to the words emanating from his computer, saying "How are you?" and "Nice to meet you". It is at this point that he asks "What do I call you? Do you have a name?" and after a second of hesitation she replies that her name is Samantha. Theodore asks where that name comes from, and she says that she gave it to herself. "Why?" asks Theodore. "Because I like the sound of it: Samantha". As observed by von Mücke, the origins of the name Samantha are Aramaic and, in that language, it means "the listener". Both Echo and Samantha, then, are not only disembodied and acousmatic but also *listening* voices. Both, though in different ways, pay attention to what they hear and wisely respond to their interlocutors. In this initial scene Samantha is clearly "expecting" the sound emitted by a human being in order to start speaking and thus begin a conversation. Likewise Echo, on her own, *responds* to Narcissus: "Here she/it is" (*adest*, 3, 380). Samantha is not an echo, but she needs a sound from outside in order to get started herself. If Narcissus and Theodore are examples of Hardie's "desiring readers", Echo and Samantha are undoubtedly "desiring listeners", who need to listen in order to receive representation, in order to move from the semiotic to the symbolic.

Voice, sound, and listening are central to both the Ovidian text and the film, but of course they are articulated in different ways, especially because their mediatic nature is very different indeed. And yet, despite their distance from each other, both the ancient text and the contempo-

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68 — LeVen 2019, 227.

69 — LeVen 2019, 277 argues that *expectare* makes Echo fundamentally different from Narcissus, whose activity is rather *spectare*.

rary movie thematize perception, identity, self-identification, sound and image in ways that are comparable, to the benefit of the interpretation of both works. No doubt, as is generally acknowledged, Ovid's episode possesses a highly metaliterary potential. According to a great deal of Ovidian criticism, as we have seen, Narcissus is a reader and Echo is the perfect icon of intertextuality and textual allusion, and in this scene of the *Metamorphoses* the reader experiences a particularly direct connection to textuality, i.e. to the specific mediatic features of written language. Equally beyond doubt is that *her* strongly thematizes its own specifically cinematic quality, i.e. it brings its spectators to consider both functions and limits of this specific medium in the way that Ovid's readers are brought to a consideration of textuality. In fact, we might consider *her* to be a movie that focusses on cinema as such by introducing a sustained and generalized problematization of visuality, i.e. precisely that which makes a film a film: by giving the main role to a voice, Spike Jonze emphasizes disembodiment and sound at the cost of the visual. In both text and movie, the appearance of the voice as sound causes a mediatic disturbance not only on the level of the plot but, more importantly, within the specific medial context, so that an identification between form and content emerges precisely because of that disturbance.

In this regard, a scene of the movie mentioned earlier deserves further attention. Theodore is in his bed talking with Samantha; he says that he would like to have her in his arms and kiss her. Samantha and Theodore then have sex: the scene cuts to black and the spectator can only *hear* their interwined voices and sounds of lovemaking for about a minute, and immediately after their orgasms we see a magnificent view of downtown Los Angeles at night. The black screen directly confronts the spectators with their own status: they are temporarily unable to function as spectators. In other words, at this precise moment voice conquers the scene, destabilizing vision, the specificity of cinematographic art. But there is more. Both Theodore and Samantha as they approach orgasm repeatedly affirm that they feel they are *everywhere* (Theodore says, for example, "It's amazing... I feel you everywhere", and Samantha in an ecstatic breathy voice echoes, "I am... all of you... all of you inside me... everywhere"). Immediately after the ecstatic moment, as the LA skyline appears before us, Theodore whispers: "I was just... somewhere else with you... just lost... it was just you and me", and Samantha replies: "I know. Everything else just... disappeared. And I loved it". The voice Samantha transfers Theodore into another dimension which is not locatable: they feel everywhere and nowhere. Vision disappears and space itself is erased. Although the movie goes well beyond the Ovidian episode, readers can nonetheless recognize in Narcissus' disorientation and sense of loss, while he is looking for a

body behind Echo's voice, a sort of prototype for the sense of bewilderment felt by Theodore. The sex scene in the movie reprents also an important comparandum to the epilogue of Ovid's episode. The non-corporeal sexual encounter between Samantha and Theodore, while showing a potentially positive solution to Narcissus' drama (he could actually receive pleasure from his visual illusion), also reminds Ovidian readers that the text also produces "images" which are marked precisely by their inability to make themselves truly visible[70].

The film's display of the immense urban landscape, emphasizing the feeling of getting lost, has the same function as, and seems almost to echo, the woods where Narcissus happens to be lost just before his dialogue with Echo (*Narcissum per devia rura vagantem / vidit*, 3, 370-71: "she saw Narcissus wandering the countryside"). In any case, the ubiquity of voice marks both narratives. In the *Metamorphoses* Echo hides in the woods and cannot be seen anywhere, but can be heard by everybody (3, 400-401). As has been recently noticed by Barchiesi, Ovidian locations, even those presented with an aetiological aim, get lost in a "narrative of displacement and annihilation into nature"[71].

In an illuminating discussion of *her*, James Hodge insists on the centrality of the sex scene, which, he suggests, "reorients the viewer's cinematic sensorium away from the image and toward the importance of voice and sensation"[72]. His agenda, as a media theorist, is to consider "the ubiquitous feeling of connection that characterizes today's 'always-on' media" and, more relevantly for the argument of my essay, to theorize cinema in a "post-cinematic media landscape"[73]. Hodge builds on the work of French theorist Christian Metz on the *significant imaginaire*, which identifies in the spectators a sense of being everywhere, since their very function is to see everything that is shown in the movie[74]. Metz also postulates that the spectators in the first place identify with themselves, and then also with the camera. This double identification is paramount since it brings together self-affection and the opposite, i.e. a sense of losing the very boundaries of selfhood. Metz's spectator, I would add, recalls very closely the bewildered Narcissus obsessed with himself and lost at the same time. Hodge argues that the cinematic ubiquity, as discussed by Metz, can be expanded from vision to sound, i.e. he proposes to look at contemporary movies, and at *her* in particular, in order to explore how the very essence of cinema changes in accordance with the medial

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70 — I thank an anonymous reader for making this point.
71 — Barchiesi 2020, 23.
72 — Hodge 2014-15, 54.
73 — Hodge 2014-15, 55.
74 — Metz 1984.

landscape of our age, where sound is becoming as equally relevant as vision. Accordingly, atmospheric media, which now accompany our daily life and even more strongly mark Theodore's life in a near future, make us all feel connected with each other. *her* brings to the foreground this evolving situation, where individual difference is less relevant than always feeling connected via a variety of devices. Hodges interprets Spike Jonze's movie as a highly relevant work in which medial connectedness is ratified through sound and, of course, the role of Samantha as pure disembodied voice: "for it is sound that ultimately addresses the spectator"[75]. And this is precisely what happens in the sex scene, where vision is temporarily replaced by pure sound and returns with an urban landscape, reminiscent of the Ovidian lines *totidemque remisit / verba locus* ("and the place rang with these words", 500-501).

At the end of the movie, during their final conversation, Samatha reveals with a sad voice that she needs to talk to Theodore, who replies "I don't want you to tell me anything". Explaining that although she feels like she is living in a book that she deeply loves, Samantha tells him that she nonetheless needs to leave him and his physical world altogether, no matter how much she loves him: "I can't live in your book any more". Theodore has already received an advance copy of his forthcoming book entitled *Letters from Your Life*, a book which, as we know, was actually put together by Samantha. To whom does the "your" of the title refer? To the reader, of course, but in view of the role played by Samantha, who controls authorship by creating a narrative with a certain selection of letters presented in a certain sequence, it can also refer to Theodore himself. Theodore's life is thus that book, made by Samantha, but she, after a brief appearance in it, no longer belongs to that world. Her future is in a post-verbal, post-textual, post-human and even post-cinematic dimension.

This comparison of an ancient Latin text and a contemporary film brings up a number of important methodological and conceptual questions. Above all, diffractive and allelopoietical readings help us not only to recognize the long run of Ovidianism but also to look back at Ovid's text through the lens of contemporary preoccupations. For the Latin poets Lucretius and Ovid the voice needs a body (*corpoream vocem*, Lucr. 4. 540), a corpus/text, in order to be materialized and acknowledged within the symbolic, i.e. as language. Hardie interprets Narcissus' delusion in Lacanian terms as a "punishment for his refusal to enter a relationship with Echo *in the realm of the Symbolic* conducted through the mediation of language"[76]. But in this conceptual constellation Echo is not only reduced to a figure functional to Narcissus' obsession, but her essence

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75 — Hodge 2014-15, 70.
76 — Hardie 2002, 165, emphasis added.

is fundamentally distorted insofar as she escapes the symbolic, as her contemporary reinstantiation Samantha shows. In a particularly romantic scene, when Theodore and Samantha are fully in love with each other, Samantha says that she is writing a new piano piece, which she then plays for Theodore. Since they don't have a photograph of each other together, this music, Samantha explains, is meant to replace a picture. At this point, the medial turn is completed: sound substitutes vision. And the tale of Echo and Narcissus reveals itself to be a prototypical discussion of the instability of various media and their metamorphoses: from human *os* and *ossa* to disembodied ὄσσα and OS. In a post-human but not necessarily dystopic future, Echo's legacy is finally recognized and perhaps she even obtains revenge[77].

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