

KIM KANKIEWICZ

DETECTIVE PHILOSOPHER LARUNDA APPREHENDS THE VOICE

The acousmatic phone caller, the threatening and perverse stranger (who, in film narratives, and doubtless also in reality, is most often a man), can adopt the powers of the acousmètre, telling you he can see everything, knows everything, and is omnipotent. Inasmuch as you can't locate him, you can't figure out whether he's bluffing.

—Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*

DETECTIVE PHILOSOPHER IRIS LARUNDA slapped the thick file onto her desk and hurled herself into her chair. The squad room quieted, and her male colleagues regarded her with amusement. Catching the eye of DP Peter Johnson, she straightened her posture and returned his smirking gaze with fluttering eyelashes and a prim smile. Johnson snorted and went back to his paperwork.

Larunda opened the file, uncapped a highlighter, and read. She knew she'd been assigned the Acousmètre case because it was a stone-cold turd and the top brass resented her promotion. It was two decades into the twenty-first century, and the Bureau of Inquiry remained as hostile to women as it was when the investigation began in the 1980s.

Larunda had been a child then, but remembered the sensational news coverage and her mother jumping whenever the phone rang. Throughout that summer, women across the city had pressed phones to ears and felt their hearts somersault when the voice purred their names. The voice called itself Acousmètre and said it had been watching them. It knew where they lived, described their front doors and the lights in their windows. *Don't hang up*, it said. *Honey, you know you're safe in that house.*

They'd felt anything but safe, especially when the voice escalated to overt threats. *Don't speak, whatever you do. I wouldn't want you to get hurt, not yet. If you hang up on me, you'll die.* Then a woman named Leona Stevenson

really had died of a fright-induced heart attack and the calls had abruptly stopped. Three decades later, with no statute of limitations for involuntary manslaughter, the case was still open.

As Larunda scanned the file, she was impressed by the doggedness of the original investigator, retired DP Mike Chion. Larunda could empathize with the victims, but she was surprised that a male detective had taken their fears seriously when the caller had never entered a woman's home or initiated physical contact. DP Larunda supposed the Bureau had responded to media pressure, and perhaps Chion had seen the case as an opportunity for the spotlight. He may have enjoyed the thought of rescuing a city of terrorized women tethered to their phones.

Chion had interviewed dozens of women to assemble a composite of the voice. It was hoarse, grating, breathy, throaty, gruff, husky, sinister, and sneering. With each new description, the voice further evaded capture. Chion had scrawled, "The voice is elusive. Once you've eliminated everything that is not the voice itself—the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color it, what's left?"

DP Chion had quickly abandoned the challenge of defining the voice, turning his attention to the speaker. "*Acousmatic* describes a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen," he had scribbled in the margin of his lined paper. "When the acousmatic presence is a voice, we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name *Acousmètre*."

From then on, Chion had been fixated on *Acousmètre*, filling page after page with speculation about the speaker's identity. Larunda wondered if that had been his mistake. Was it possible to apprehend the speaker without apprehending the voice? She decided to retrace Chion's steps, searching for clues he might have missed.

"The voice of a stranger on the phone poses the necessity of localizing the source of the call," Chion had written. He had started gathering evidence by tracing a call made to a repeat victim named Casey Becker. The call had originated from a phone booth across from Becker's apartment. DP

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Larunda assumed the phone booth was long gone, but she wanted to stand in the space the voice had inhabited. She stuffed the file into her satchel and walked to the elevator.

As she reached forward to press the down arrow, the elevator doors opened on DP Woody Johnson. He cocked an eyebrow.

“La-run-run-run-da,” he said, blocking her entrance. “How’s the case going? Need backup?”

“Piss off, Johnson.” She shouldered him out of her way and stabbed the button to ground level. Johnson raised his hands in mock surrender and backed into the squad room.

“Just trying to help,” he said. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

She flipped him off as the doors closed, then cursed herself for letting the Johnsons under her skin. They weren’t worth the collagen damage. She breathed deeply and rode to the ground floor on a slow exhale.

The drive to Becker’s old address took Larunda past the cemetery where she’d buried her mother the previous year. She wished her mother had lived to witness her promotion to Detective Philosopher, affirmation that she was equipped to solve life’s mysteries. Her mother, a dancer, had gone to her grave refusing to identify the choreographer who’d fathered her only child. While supporting Larunda’s decision to forego marriage and motherhood, she’d constantly fretted over her daughter’s safety and her precarious financial situation. She’d willed Larunda her mid-century bungalow, complete with fallout bunker, and her guinea pigs, Agnes and Martha.

As Larunda neared Becker’s address, she was surprised to see that the apartment building was gone but the phone booth was still standing. It had been painted yellow and converted to a bus shelter. Larunda parked at a gas station and walked to the phone booth.

Inside the booth, someone had stripped the phone and installed a seat. The one opaque wall was plastered with film stills of slender white women in phone booths: Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby*, cradling the handset as a man in a sport coat lurked beyond the bi-fold door. Tippi Hedren in *The Birds*, clutching her head as crazed seagulls divebombed the booth. Audrey Hepburn in *Charade*, cowering in the space beside the phone as James Coburn

held a lighted match to her face. It was a shrine to fragile women in glass boxes, rendered voiceless in places designed for speech.

Larunda turned from the display and scanned her surroundings, imagining what Acousmètre had seen through the window across the street: Casey Becker crossing the room to answer the phone, the cord dangling at her side like a castoff smile, her hand moving to her face when she heard the voice.

As Larunda swiveled back for a last look at the shrine, she spied a bit of yellow paper poking out from behind a photo of Jane Wyman in *Stage Fright*. She unstuck a corner of the photo, and the paper fluttered to the ground. It was an ad torn from a telephone book. "Vox Capio Labs," the ad read. "Playing Around with a World of Sound." In red ink beneath the text, someone had doodled an oval-shaped sun and printed a name Larunda recognized from the Acousmètre file: Margot Wendice, an early victim.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed the number, relishing the thought that making a call from her cell inside a phone booth was like blowing a raspberry at hypermodernity. She sobered when a sonorous voice answered.

"Vox Capio Labs. How may I help you?"

"This is Detective Philosopher Iris Larunda with the State Bureau of Inquiry. Does the name Margot Wendice mean anything to you?"

"It's vaguely familiar."

"She was a victim in the Acousmètre case."

"Of course," the speaker said. "One of my first voiceprints."

Larunda tried to recall what she knew about forensic voice analysis.

"Are you saying you have a recording of her voice?"

"No, no. The woman was not the focus of the investigation." The speaker paused to let Larunda feel foolish. "I have a recording of the caller's voice."

Larunda wondered why Chion's notes contained no mention of this. She fished a pen from her satchel and tested it with a squiggle on the back of the yellow-page ad.

"Give me your address and I'll be on my way."

Forty minutes later, DP Larunda stood outside an old brick church. On the sign where a congregation might list its service times or a pious pun,

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someone had spelled out, “HEARING VOICES? DEUTERONOMY 4:12.” She entered the church through an arched doorway and found herself in a vestibule. The sun-bleached reflections of stained glass dappled the wood floor. From somewhere beyond the vestibule, a choir sang Mendelssohn’s “Behold, God the Lord Passed By.”

“In here,” boomed the voice that had answered her call. Larunda followed the sound to the sanctuary, where the pews had been replaced by a baffling array of equipment. She spotted microphones and monitors but couldn’t identify the rest. There were metal consoles the size of filing cabinets equipped with dials shaped like singing mouths, an ornately carved podium porcupined with hundreds of metal quills, and a colossal phonograph horn suspended by cables from the roof trusses. A length of corrugated tubing snaked across the floor, attached at one end to a handheld bellows and the other to a cheerleading megaphone labeled “VCL.” At the front of the sanctuary was a pipe organ with a two-tiered mixing board in place of keys and graduated measuring marks on the pipes.

A man wearing a lab coat sipped from a five-foot bendy straw protruding from a brass jukebox—the source of the choral music. He appeared to be in his eighties and was surprisingly frail for his stentorian voice.

“DP Larunda,” he said. “Allow me to finish this voice sample and I’ll be right with you.”

The man took a final slurp through the straw and wrote something in a leather-bound journal before approaching Larunda for a handshake.

“Elgie Kersta,” he introduced himself. “Let’s go to my office.”

Larunda trailed him to a stairway off the vestibule, down to the basement, and through a fellowship hall with a kitchenette and musty carpet. When Kersta ushered her into his office, Larunda felt like she’d stepped onto the set of a high-sheen CSI drama. The room was absurdly dark, with a gooseneck LED lamp as the only light. A row of stethoscopes hung near a glass board that covered one wall. Kersta had graffitied the board with dry-erase notations and had tacked up suspect photos zoomed in on the subjects’ mouths and necks. A wraparound monitor on Kersta’s sleek metal desk displayed a graphic readout that Larunda took to represent sound waves.

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Kersta wheeled a second chair to his desk and invited Larunda to sit next to him at the computer.

"That is a voiceprint from the Acousmètre recording. I've digitized the audio so you can hear what you're seeing."

Kersta clicked on his mouse and opened a file. A muffled voice spoke through static.

A telephone is the opposite of a silent movie, is it not? It gives us a voice without letting us see who is speaking.

Larunda crinkled her forehead. What the hell?

The telephone permits a vocal intimacy that is rarely encountered in social life. Ordinarily you do not permit just anybody to speak right into your ear.

"Creepy," Larunda said. "How'd you get the recording?"

"The woman taped the call, and DP Chion brought me the tape." Kersta closed the file and hovered the cursor over a **PLAY** arrow at the bottom of his screen. "I then isolated a phrase from the call and filtered out the ambient sound."

Vocal intimacy, the voice said when Kersta clicked the arrow. The audio was much clearer, but as far as Larunda could tell there was nothing distinctive about the voice. She wouldn't even swear the speaker was a man.

"The image on the screen is a spectrogram showing the frequencies from the edited recording. A voiceprint," Kersta said. "We can record a suspect speaking the same phrase to determine a match. Each man's voice is unique because, in learning to speak, an infant first tries thousands of combinations on his vocal equipment, finally coming up with one that is his alone."

"And this is reliable?" Larunda thought she'd read otherwise. "Would it hold up in court?"

"We scientists are peculiar." Kersta smoothed the lapels of his lab coat. "We never admit anything is a hundred percent. The primary application is for investigatory work, not trials."

"And suppose I'm more interested in investigating the voice than the speaker," Larunda said. "Can your spectrogram help me understand the nature of the voice?"

"Ah." Kersta appeared pleased by the opportunity to explain. "For that

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we might turn to acoustic-phonetic analysis. That method assesses language and intonation along with what we call the segmental features, which are all about voice physiology. I have software that measures fundamental frequency and vowel formants, essentially mapping vocal fold vibrations and the unique geometry of the oral cavity.”

He paused to confirm that she was tracking.

“But that’s about the speaking apparatus,” Larunda said. “I want to grasp the voice.”

Kersta turned his chair toward her.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he said.

Larunda pushed her hair off her forehead and lifted her eyes to the ceiling. She blew out a puff of air and looked back at Kersta.

“All these measurements require an interpreter, right?” she said. “I want to know what the voice is before anyone hears it.”

Kersta shook his head.

“A metaphysical question,” he said. “I’m afraid I can’t help you with that. I guess that’s why you’re the Detective Philosopher.”

“I guess so,” Larunda said. “But thanks for showing me the voiceprint.”

On the drive back to the station, Larunda considered Kersta’s final comment. She’d received it as a brush-off, but now she decided to embrace it. Yes, she was a Detective Philosopher, and a damn capable one. With this crap case as fertilizer, she’d turn over new ground in identifying the voice.

Meanwhile, something from Chion’s notes was tugging at her memory. Back at her desk, she pored over the file.

“Everything hangs on whether the Acousmètre has been seen,” Chion had written. “The Acousmètre has only to show itself for it to lose its power.”

Had he hoped to lure the speaker into sight?

“In how many fantasy, thriller, and gangster films do we see the Acousmètre become an ordinary person when his voice is assigned a visible and circumscribed body? When the heretofore invisible Big Boss appears in the image, we generally know that he’s going to be captured or brought down like any imbecile.”

It was as if Chion had wanted Acousmètre to remain at large.

DP Dick Johnson entered the squad room and approached Larunda, jabbing the air above his shoulder with a backward motion of his right thumb.

"Gal at the front desk wants to talk to you," Johnson said. "Claims she's a witness in your case."

"What persona are you going for, Johnson? Hard-boiled Dick?" She locked the file in a drawer then grabbed a notebook as she rose from her seat. "We're not *gals*."

Larunda greeted the witness, who introduced herself as Kit Preston, and led her to an interview room.

"I understand you're investigating the Acousmètre case," the woman said as she settled into her chair. "I'm an original witness, and I remembered something I'd like to report."

"How did you hear about me?" Larunda said.

"Your boss was on the news."

"That figures." Chief Johnson might resent women, but he wasn't above ballyhooing Larunda's promotion for public applause. "Tell me what you remembered."

"I was scared for my life back then," Preston said. "Naturally, I emphasized the death threats when I gave my statement. The caller said he wanted my blood all over him. He had this strange formal diction. 'We all meet death somewhere along the way.' I was petrified."

Larunda shuddered. "Go on."

"I didn't notice until later how obsessed he was with making me scream," Preston said. "He kept coming back to it, even gave me instructions. 'Get over to the window and scream as loud as you can. Otherwise you only have three minutes to live.' I called 911 and told them someone was going to kill me."

Larunda recalled from Chion's file that another woman, Sally Bedina, had mentioned Acousmètre's preoccupation with screaming. And there was something else in Chion's notes that she'd dismissed as pretentious rambling.

"Wait here," she told Preston. "I want to read you something."

She retrieved the file from her drawer and returned to the interview room. After riffling through the pages for a few moments, she found what she wanted.

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“Listen to this and tell me if it rings a bell: ‘Since the cinema first discovered women screaming, it has shown great skill in producing screams and stockpiling them for immediate and frequent deployment. Film functions like a Rube Goldberg mechanism full of gears, pistons, chains, and belts—a machine built to give birth to a scream. The screaming point, in a male-directed film, immediately poses the question of mastery, of the mastery of this scream.’”

Larunda glanced at Preston as she finished reading.

“No, that’s not familiar.” Preston leaned across the table to study the page. She pointed at a small drawing in the top margin. “But I recognize that symbol. Detective Philosopher Chion kept doodling it while he interviewed me.”

An oval-shaped sun. Or an open mouth emitting a scream. The image that had nagged her subconscious.

“His signature,” Larunda said. “Your information is helpful. Thank you for coming in.”

“After all these years, I still feel violated,” Preston said. “It’s a relief to talk about it.”

When Preston had signed her statement and left the station, Larunda logged on to the Bureau’s email directory and found an address.

“I know who you are,” she wrote. “Call me.”

She packed her satchel and exited the squad room, blowing a kiss at the Johnsons as she left. At home, she nuked a burrito, fed Agnes and Martha a few carrots, and streamed an episode of *Cagney & Lacey* before going to bed with her phone in arm’s reach.

In the still dark hours of morning, Larunda awoke to the sound of a voice. She sat up and groped for a weapon in the bedside cabinet. Could she reach the fallout shelter? And then what? There was no cell signal in the bunker.

The voice sounded distant. She’d thought it was inside the house, but maybe not. Slowing her breathing, she reasoned that she may not be in physical danger. Acousmètre had voiced a lot of threats, but he’d retired after Leona Stevenson’s death. His intention, it seemed, was not bodily harm but vocal control. Acousmètre wielded his voice to subdue and disintegrate women’s voices, until all that remained was a scream that he could possess.

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Larunda swung her legs from the bed and planted her feet on the ground. She would confront and expose Acousmètre, bringing him down like any imbecile. But as she listened to discern the voice's location, she realized there was no menace in the sound. It was like the voice of her mother in another room, or conversation in a squad room with more women and fewer Johnsons. At the same time, it was as close as the confidences of a friend by her side. Then she knew: This voice was inside her.

The sensation sparked a long-buried memory from when she was learning to speak. She must have been two or three years old when the language in her brain proliferated so rapidly that her voice couldn't keep pace. She'd developed a stutter and recalled appointments with a speech therapist. Over the same period, she often perceived an audible voice producing the sounds she hadn't yet mastered. After alarming her mother by answering too many utterances that no one had spoken, she'd kept the voice to herself. Now she understood that it had never left.

She lay back on her pillow, quieting her thoughts to amplify the voice so she could examine it. It took some experimenting to fine-tune her reception. Too much awareness and the voice receded; too little and it was lost in the noise, like trying to remember a dream upon waking. When she finally apprehended the voice, its beauty made her weep. It was the sound of her name spoken without words, the music of her mother tongue.

Larunda let the voice inhabit her for some timeless spell. She knew she couldn't harbor it forever. She was tempted to declare the inner voice a metaphor of empowerment but could not find power in a voice that no one heard. On the other hand, a voice that relied on a listener surrendered its agency.

The sky was light when the chirp of her cellphone startled the voice away. The call came from a private number.

"This is Larunda." The caller remained silent. "I know it's you, Chion. Start talking."

"The voice is there to be forgotten in its materiality," Chion said. "Only at this cost does it fill its primary function."

"Oh, cry me a river. That's only tragic if you're used to being heard."

"Consider the voice in relation to what it is not, but which replaces it. I'm suggesting here that the Acousmètre of old sometimes takes the form now of a visible being."

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“On second thought, stop talking,” Larunda said. “You want to be recognized now? You think this is the part where I coax out a confession so you can get off on the sound of your own voice? That’s why you left that Yellow Pages ad in your weird shrine.”

Chion inhaled loudly, preparing to speak.

“No, I’m speaking now,” Larunda cut him off. “I’ll tell you what happened. It wasn’t enough for you to theorize. You had to conquer. You exerted your voice to silence them then extract their screams. And now you want to clear your conscience or claim credit before it’s too late. Tell it to someone who cares.”

Larunda ended the call, wishing she had a cradle to slam her phone onto. Hypermodernity, what could you do? She scratched out a report over toast and coffee and added it to Chion’s file. Then she turned to a fresh page and began a list, taking more care with her handwriting this time.

“Later, tiny dancers,” she told Agnes and Martha as she refilled the hay in their feeding rack on her way out. They voiced their approval with a chorus of wheeking sounds.

At the station, Larunda strode into Chief Johnson’s office and dropped the file onto his desk.

“Acousmètre is ready to confess. I’m going to hear from the remaining witnesses to wrap up the case.”

The chief raised his eyebrows.

“The details are in my report,” Larunda said. “Let Johnson make the collar. I don’t need to see the perp’s face.”

She left the chief’s office and carried her satchel to her desk, where she withdrew the list of names. Casey Becker, Margot Wendice, Kit Preston. And dozens more. She would find them and invite them to speak.

Author’s Note

While Mike Chion is a figment of my imagination, his case notes and dialogue are quoted from Michel Chion’s *The Voice in Cinema*, translated by Claudia Gorbman. Acousmètre’s phone dialogue is quoted from the films *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), *Dial M for Murder* (1954), *Midnight Lace* (1960), *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), and *Scream* (1996). A small portion of Elgie Kersta’s dialogue (“Each man’s voice...” through “...not trials.” on page 6) is quoted from newspaper interviews with voiceprint developer Lawrence G. Kersta.