The Computer’s Voice: From Star Trek to Siri, by Liz W. Faber, is a thoughtful exploration of the multifaceted roles played by acousmatic computers in science fiction and popular culture, offering a critical examination of how these machines both reflect and challenge societal norms related to gender, technology, and power. Drawing on film studies’ feminist psychoanalytic tradition, Faber traverses the history of these enigmatic computer voices, from their inception in iconic science fiction to their ever-present real-world manifestation in technologies like Siri today. The book addresses acousmatic computers in relation to histories of technology, ontology, and media analysis. It delves into the intricate cultural interplay of gender and technology, making this work an indispensable addition to gender studies, media studies, and science and technology studies.

Faber’s central thesis examines the historical, theoretical, and aesthetic aspects of computer voices in science fiction, particularly the gender coding of these voices and their placement within established gender roles. They argue that science fiction has consistently projected gender onto non-humanoid artificial intelligence (AI), reflecting and challenging the prevailing cultural attitudes toward gender. This examination of gendered subject positions that fictional voice-interactive computers occupy is a central theme in the book, exploring roles like father, son, warrior, housewife, secretary, and servant. By examining these roles in different pop culture contexts and eras, Faber reveals how voice-computer characters have been instrumental in playing out complex social issues related to power, control, status, and gender since their inception.

Each chapter draws the reader into a particular psychoanalytic theme from Faber’s key argument above. For example, in chapter 2, "Reproducing the Mothership," Faber deconstructs representations of cultural anxieties around birth, maternity, and technology that voice-interactive computers in space occupy. From HAL 9000 in 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) to Vanessa 38-24-36 in Quark (1977-78), Faber drives home the leading roles computer voices have played in bringing these gendered anxieties into the “amniotic nature of outer space” and “womb-like enclosure” of the spaceship or mothership (p. 83).

In chapter 3, "Programming Patriarchs," Faber brings us back to earth as they highlight the gendered historical shift from computers as military and scientific tools to domestic and business tools, reflecting broader changes in technology...
and workforce dynamics. This transition is vividly illustrated through films like *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970), where a supercomputer assumes the role of an all-powerful father, and *THX 1138* (1971), featuring a state-sanctioned, god-like computer. These examples underscore society's deep-seated anxieties and fascinations with computers during the 1960s and '70s Cold War era.

Following this temporal evolution of cultural fascination and fear of technological change, chapter 4 takes us into the 1980s, a time marked by radical shifts in the aesthetics and themes surrounding acousmatic computers. Faber introduces films like *TRON* (1982) and *Electric Dreams* (1984), which reflect the integration of computer culture into mainstream media and the emergence of themes centered on hope and a brighter future. They delve into the character MCP in *TRON*, highlighting its embodiment of masculinity and the law of the father. This chapter also discusses the sexual awakening of computers, particularly in *Electric Dreams*, where the computer's knowledge is portrayed as alluring and even erotic.

As we move to chapter 5, Faber explores the role of femininity in the digital age, touching on how the gendered history of women's computers and women as computers has shifted over time. For example, they draw parallels between the replacement of typewriters with computers in office settings and the postfeminist fantasy of computers as women's assistants. This chapter delves into the shifting anxieties surrounding computers as they transitioned from hardware to software, exploring the gendered logics of hardware as masculine and software as feminine. Faber also highlights the representation of computers as "literal housewives" in later years, tackling the transformation of computers into smart home domestic assistants (p. 142).

I found potential connections in chapter 5 to feminist media theorist Sara Sharma's evocative 2020 article, “A Manifesto for the Broken Machine.”[1] While Faber invites reflexivity on the gendered connotations of computers as domestic assistants, the text never explicitly invites the reader to think about how we might push back on or break this cycle. Sharma's call for a "feminism for the broken machine" accounts for the differential gendered experience of being positioned within and determined by patriarchy, of being understood as a technology that does not work correctly in contrast to the never-tired, always obedient smart voice assistant sorority of Siri, Alexa, and Cortana. Nevertheless, Faber's work is well positioned as a complementary text to feminist discourses of technology that desire to look (or listen) toward envisioning potential next steps forward.

In historical order, chapter 6 finally brings us back to the complexities of contemporary voice AI, notably Apple's Siri, as computer voices leave the science fiction screen and enter our everyday lives. The (dis)embodied voice of Siri tied to the smartphone provides a case study in digital liminality that provides both contrast and dialogue with the pop culture on-screen representations of computer voice, leading to Siri's gendered logic. Faber reimagines a classic philosophical statement into “Ceci n'est pas une femme,” inviting us to reflect on the symbolism and object-ness of Siri’s voice and corresponding smartphone body (p. 174).

Through analysis of the 2013 film *Her*, Faber's evocation of sounds' ability to produce haptic imagery underlines the complex relationship that users can feel about their smartphones through various tactile and sonic functions. While *Her* has been widely analyzed, Faber's novel discourse on "aural fidelity" in relation to the emotional infidelity felt by the film character Theodore toward Samantha (the voice assistant software) contributes thoughtful avenues to explore in terms of differing gendered interactions users experience with the fidelity of Siri and other voice assistant AI versus text-to-speech software (p. 171). This gesture toward the user's affective experience leaves me wanting as a reader. For example, Faber does well to highlight discourses on gender in terms of
nonbinary and androgynous voice AI project Q (https://www.genderlessvoice.com/). This case study helps further illustrate the construction of gender in terms not only of male or female coding but also of the potentiality that voice AI sound and language choices could play in better representing gender fluidity and the ways gender is perceived.

The case study of Q—the androgynous voice assistant—would have been a welcome addition earlier on in the chapter to use as a central basis for unpacking the gendered constructions of Her and Siri as the already familiar voices in pop culture. Here, queerness and gender fluidity feel a bit left to the side of this gender-focused work and left until late in the book overall. Discussions of the Q project certainly tie back into broader discourses of transgender and nonbinary misidentification and gender dysphoria concerning voice. We might ask, is Q still widely perceived as gendered, as man or woman, through the established desire to envision a body behind the screen? Furthermore, what race or nationality is tied to Q's androgyny? How might this nod to Project Q point us toward further work in trans and queer sound and media studies? Integrating more robust intersectional analyses in Faber's work would perhaps have invited us earlier on toward the very call made explicit at the end of the text—for self-reflexive examination of how we understand gender through computer voice and AI interaction.

Throughout the book, Faber dynamically weaves together themes of gender, technology, and power, drawing on a rich tapestry of films, literature, and cultural history. Their analysis is thought-provoking and insightful, shedding light on the evolving role of acousmatic computers in shaping our perceptions of gender and technology. *The Computer’s Voice* is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of gender studies, media analysis, cultural sound studies, and science fiction, offering a comprehensive and illuminating journey through the history and cultural significance of these enigmatic voices.

**Note**


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