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**Between the Ears: Acoustiographic Representations of Character
Interiority**

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Abstract

Between the Ears: Acoustiographic Representations of Character Interiority

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This essay aims to explore acoustiographies of the interior and interpret the cultural impressions that they perpetuate. While I do consider the conventional iconographies of headphones and full-body suits (e.g., spacesuits) that filmmakers employ as tools to focalize a character's internal subjectivity, acoustiographies often supersede or occur in lieu of such visual symbols. While the acoustiography of "leakage" symbolizes the disparity between the self-perception of the self and the social perception of the self, that of "head sound" aims at placing the audience inside the head of a given character by positioning the point of audition as if it were emanating from the character's head. Leakage is a diegetic sound that is somewhat obscured or filtered by some barrier blocking the sound's full frequency emission, whereas sound effects or music seemingly sounding from inside a character's head, as for example through headphones, represent head sound. These acoustiographies of leakage and head sound play a crucial role in the filmic expression of a character's interiority, which they accomplish through their ability

to physically represent interior space, but also figuratively represent a character's subjectivity.

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INTRODUCTION

Much film literature focuses on the significant power iconography brings to representing character subjectivity, but such literature often overlooks the various sound symbols, what I call acoustiographies, that define character interiorities specifically through representations of a damaged self. Consider the following analytical interpretation of the film *High Fidelity* (2000). “What really matters is what you like, not what you are like. Books, records, films—these things matter,” proclaims Rob Gordon (John Cusack), a vintage record storeowner and the main character in the film. Indeed, Rob organizes his life through his record collection, an assortment arranged autobiographically by date of purchase. He uses music’s materiality to give tangible form to his own identity—tactilely appealing in smooth, square packages. From the very beginning, Rob’s music collection and its place within the sound track function as a manifestation of his identity, his memories, and his life experience.

The film opens with the raw crackle of a turntable needle, wailing vocals and the psychedelic sounds of the 1960s rock band The 13th Floor Elevators. This disembodied song, “You’re Gonna Miss Me,” imbues the sound track. I say disembodied because, at first, its source is unknown—or, more accurately, its sources. Shortly thereafter, the image track fades in and locates its first source, a spinning record (Figure 1a), before cutting to a shot of the second (Figure 1b)—a sound system. A lone cable stretches the length of the frame from the system to an unknown space outside the frame. The camera slowly tracks to follow this stray cable across the room, with the music growing ever

fainter and as it does, and reveals the final and most important source: a pair of headphones wrapped around Rob's ears (Figure 1c) just as the song culminates in its climactic chorus, exclaiming, "You're gonna miss me, babe!"



Figure 1a: The Record: First Source



Figure 1b: Sound System: Second Source



Figure 1c: Headphones: Third Source

Like other films using popular music, the recording gives insight to Rob's current predicament. The tune's title and chorus,¹ "You're Gonna Miss Me," supplies commentary on his situation while its extrafilmic status—the band is considered to be

¹ While there seems to be disagreements over the perceptibility of lyrics during a film, Jeff Smith suggests that if the audience is acquainted with a song's title or chorus, then its usage can provide commentary on the situations it is used in. See Smith, "Popular Songs and Comic Allusion in Contemporary Cinema," in *Soundtrack Available*, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (Durham: Duke University, 2001), 407-432.

both creators of and yet outsiders to psychedelic rock²—contributes information about Rob’s identity as a rock ’n’ roll savant. Indeed shortly after the song fades, we learn that Rob’s longtime girlfriend, Laura (Ibene Hjejle), has just broken off the relationship. The song title speaks to Rob’s current predicament, reassuring him that Laura will end up regretting her decision.³ Similarly, the fact that he chooses to listen to a relatively obscure band (“You’re Gonna Miss Me” was the band’s biggest hit and reached #55 on Billboards Top 100 in 1966) that nevertheless has immense cultural capital—given the dominant historical narrative that spins the group as presaging psychedelic rock—helps project his identity as both a record store owner whose narcissistic characteristics emerge from his self-perceived status as a music connoisseur. As Robynn Stilwell notes, Rob’s compulsion for record collecting marks his masculinity (the need to “hunt down” material objects), but it also indicates his obsessive pathology.⁴

Content description of the lyrics and chorus as well as extrafilmic meanings provided above offers insight in to Rob’s character, but such analysis does not account for why the song is attributed to Rob in the first place. The music’s status as a recording and the individuated listening practice embodied in the symbol of headphones specifically conveys the song as Rob’s aural experience and intensifies the representation of the song as a manifestation of Rob’s interiority. This scene in *High Fidelity* effectively

² Paul Drummrod, *Eye Mind: The Saga of Roky Erickson and the 13th Floor Elevators, the Pioneers of Psychedelic Sound* (Los Angeles: Process Media Publishing, 2007), 8-10.

³ An interesting counter-reading could reverse the association, giving more power and emotional resolve to Laura. That is, Rob could be the one who ends up “missing” Laura and not the other way around. However, what is central is that both these readings are projections applied to Rob.

⁴ Robynn J. Stilwell, “Vinyl Communion: The Record as Ritual Object in Girls’ Rites-of-Passage Films,” in *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film*, ed. Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 154-155.

illustrates how crucial symbols, both visual and aural, are to promoting projections of a character's interiority. That is, iconic symbols, or iconography, and acoustic symbols, what I will refer to as acoustiography, frequently occur in films as a way of communicating sound track events as manifestations of character's interiority.

This essay aims to explore these various iconographies and acoustiographies of the interior and interpret the cultural impressions that they perpetuate. Specifically, I consider the conventional iconographies of headphones and full-body suits (e.g., spacesuits) that filmmakers employ as tools to both focalize a character's internal subjectivity and detach it from the physical and social world around them. However, acoustiographies often supersede or occur in lieu of these visual symbols. While the acoustiography of "leakage" symbolizes the disparity between the self-perception of the self and the social perception of the self, that of "head sound" aims at placing the audience inside the head of a given character by positioning the point of audition as if it were emanating from the character's head. Leakage is a diegetic sound that is somewhat obscured or filtered by some barrier blocking the sound's full frequency emission,⁵ whereas sound effects or music seemingly sounding from inside a character's head, as for example through headphones, represent head sound. These acoustiographies of leakage and head sound play a crucial role in the filmic expression of a character's interiority, which they accomplish through their ability to physically represent interior space, but also figuratively represent a character's subjectivity.

⁵ In this paper, this physical barrier is most often a pair of headphones, although a physical barrier creating leakage could be any number of things, including say a closed door obscuring the emission of sound behind it.

With a shift in focus from the content of the music toward the acoustiographies of the sound track, let us now reconsider the opening scene from *High Fidelity*. The initial sound of the film is, in fact, not the blaring guitar of a 1960s psychedelic rock song but the scratch of a needle hitting and then running across the surface of a record. So although the image track delays the visual confirmation of the point of audition, it is nonetheless heard as diegetic; indeed the scratch of the record seems to draw the diegetic world into being. Hearing the materiality and imperfection of the needle as extradiegetic seems unlikely given the traditional role music plays in concealing film's illusory nature.⁶ Therefore the materiality of the record does more than hint at Rob's identity as a record collector—it situates the music as diegetic. The needle scratch, however, is the only sound that distinguishes the song as coming from a record. That is, while associations of the sonic event highlight the imperfection of sound from this recording technology, the grainy, muddled noise that usually accompanies a playing record is absent when the song itself starts up—the scratching needle does not match the recording quality. Without the sound of the needle drop there would be no way of distinguishing whether the song is actually diegetic given its clean, prominent position in the foreground of the sound track. However, this discrepancy between the material sound of the needle scratch and the “clean” sound of the record further promotes the ambiguity of the sound source. While the sound of the needle drop represents the materiality of the sound object, the clear quality of the actual recording, its foregrounded place within the sound track, and the lack

⁶ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 53-69.

of a spatial resonance implies a point of audition—Rob’s headphones. More importantly, however, is where the perceived reception of the sound lies. What *High Fidelity* renders is the experience of wearing headphones—the sound may emanate from the headphones, but its point of perception is in Rob’s head. These three factors: the placement of the music within the sound track, the pure quality of the recording, and the lack of a resonance within the surrounding diegetic space together embody the experience of wearing headphones.

Moreover, as diegetic sound, the recording effectively highlights the agency of the character through the choice of the selection, the control of the playlist. Films often anchor music diegetically by showing sources like jukeboxes or radios, but they are usually treated as what Michel Chion calls “on-the-air” sound;⁷ the songs emanate from speakers but main characters either do not exercise musical choice, or their agency is not foregrounded. Often this music occurs serendipitously, such as in *American Graffiti* (1973) when main character Curt (Richard Dreyfuss) sees the girl of his dreams for the first time and Frankie Lymon and the Teenager’s song “Why Do Fools Fall In Love” simultaneously blares out over the radio.⁸ Such music remarks on a current narrative event as if Fate were pulling the strings of the narrative out of a character’s control.⁹ In *High Fidelity*, by contrast, Rob regulates the music and so makes the musical

⁷ Specifically, “on-the-air” sound highlights a character’s unawareness of or indifference to the music playing in the scene. See Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University, 2009), 482.

⁸ Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce* (New York: Columbia University, 1998), 183-184.

⁹ Smith, “Popular Songs and Comic Allusion in Contemporary Cinema,” 407-432.

representation his own. There is no “God as disc jockey,”¹⁰ no prophetic Greek chorus here, but instead a character choosing his own sound track—who seemingly does so insofar as the filmmakers grant him his power over the sound track. Nevertheless, his control of the sound track has great significance since Rob uses all sorts of manifestations of playlists as a means of controlling his life. He even categorizes and ranks life experiences by Top Five lists, like a Billboard Top 20 hit parade, ranging from ex-girlfriends to favorite album B-sides.

Rob’s command over the film’s playlist manifests his egotistical need to control his life through his control of the music: it evidences his obsessive impulse to regulate himself and his social relationships through music. He is his own disk jockey. Moreover, by allowing Rob to “choose,” the film also represents him as though he is mapping his individuality directly through the song in a way not available to films that use music as situational commentary. Such individualization eases the identification process, making clear that the song is a sonic formation and expression of Rob’s identity rather than a moment of musical omniscience.

Tracing the acoustiography of headphone sound, or more broadly head sound, accomplishes something even more profound than Rob’s relationship to his records: it affords an identification with the sound experienced only by the main character, as it represents a point of audition available only to Rob—the music in his head—but also it identifies that sound as meaningful in defining Rob’s subjectivity. This is the point about head sound and why film associates it with the construction and representation of the self.

¹⁰ Chion, *Film, A Sound Art*, 423.

it is a sound available only to one person. However, the individuality that it thus defines often comes at a high social cost, that of isolation. The filmic representation of head sound, particularly through the use of headphones, allows the paradoxical communal experience of what would otherwise be an intensely personal, but incommunicable (because incapable of being shared) mark of subjective interiority that opens to the inscrutable “core of the self.” In placing the point of audition inside Rob’s head, the sound track intensifies film music’s long association with feeling and interiority,¹¹ as revealing psychological depth of character compared to the exterior world of the social action revealed by the visual action, even when that world is viewed from a particular point of view.¹² Instead of seeing from Rob’s perspective, instead of “walking in his shoes,” the physical placement of the sound track encourages us to hear the world as only Rob could hear it and in doing so to connect that sound specifically to Rob’s subjectivity as a sounding of the self.

In *High Fidelity*, this moment of inside the head acoustiography is short lived, however, and once the image track reveals the source the music moves from head sound to the externalized acoustiography of “leakage” where the music becomes noise. Here, the song’s point of audition passes from Rob to his girlfriend, Laura. At one level, this shift in point of audition serves as transition that decreases the music’s volume in preparation for spoken dialogue from Rob. However, it also serves a critical symbolic

¹¹ Heather Laing, *The Gendered Score: Music in 1940s Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).

¹² The classic Hollywood model deviates from this formation however, wherever music serves as a catalyst for flashbacks, dreams and psychological deviance. Such scenes often reflect a character’s damaged interiority.

function: leakage demonstrates Rob's asymmetrical detachment from his social world. Even as the sound bleeds out into the world around him, Rob attempts to block the external world from bleeding in via his circumaural headphones. The significance of this self-imposed isolation becomes apparent when Laura enters the scene, revealing her presence in the apartment and revealing that she has broken off the relationship with Rob. Rob's retreat to his own personalized sonic space therefore functions not only as a focalizing mechanism for his interior but also as an instrument to facilitate his separation from Laura. In fact, as she gathers the last of her things, she must unplug his headphones to get his attention, confirming that Rob has been using the headphones to escape into himself. This metaphor of disconnecting from the self, plays a pivotal role in Laura and Rob's relationship. Laura acts as a morality beacon for Rob, as she reiterates the importance of career direction and advancement. She repeatedly disconnects Rob from his obsessive focus on his internalized subjectivity and works to remake him into a productive member of society.

This representation of "leakage" brings to the fore the social/subjective conflict that a dominant mode of headphone iconography embodies. Much like the acoustiography of head sound, headphones signal the autonomy of self through sonic cohesion, but a complete immersion in one's own sound world consequently necessitates a detachment from the social world. However, in order for someone to fulfill a meaningful role as a member of society, to define oneself as person, one must engage in

the social world.¹³ Thus the narrative in *High Fidelity*, or at least the narrative that invests in Laura as a moral beacon (and sees Rob as stuck in arrested adolescence), projects the ideology that to be a professional, to be a proper mate, to perform any sort of meaningful social role, one must “unplug” from the self. In contrast, a complete engagement in social realm threatens the autonomy of the self-perceived individual.

Crucially, headphone leakage makes clear the rift between what is understood as the subjective self and the socially projected person. While the acoustiography of head sound focuses on an intimate representation of the sonic interior by obscuring the surrounding sound ecology, that of leakage represents both constructions and in doing so the disparity between them. That is, when leakage occurs in the sound track, it expresses a social view of the sounding of the self, but the sonic representation of that self is itself obscured and incomplete. Leakage expresses the paradoxical hearing and not hearing, or knowing and not knowing, of the self by an other.

HEADPHONE LEAKAGE AS OBSCURED INTERIORITY

In an article on the culture of the urban Walkman, Shuhei Hosokawa offers his own take on knowing the secret of the other, asserting that the listener, or holder of the secret, only seemingly holds power over the beholder, the one viewing the Walkman user. To suppose that the beholder is subordinate to the holder is to assume that the beholder has an urge to know the content of the holder’s secret. According to Hosokawa this is not the case because what the Walkman communicates does not depend on the

¹³ Wilfred McClay, “The Secret of the Self,” *First Things* 158 (December 2005): 30.

content but instead on the concept itself—the notion of the secret. Instead, Hosokawa claims, the beholder “just knows that others have secrets as he does and that they will know that he himself also has something different with respect to the content, but similar in its form: the cryptic.”¹⁴ Hosokawa’s scheme, however, overlooks leakage and its power to divulge (whether deliberately or not) to the beholder the content (or at least something of the content) of that secret. Although Hosokawa’s position holds credence in situations like that of *High Fidelity*, where leakage is for Laura only Rob’s noise, a sign of his lack of social discipline, the content of leakage often acts as a communicable bridge between characters. For example, in *500 Days of Summer* (2009) leakage is the initial point of connection between Tom Hansen (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Summer Finn (Zooey Deschanel). Summer is new at the office, and Tom has quickly become infatuated with her, although she does not yet know him. The scene of their first encounter opens with the muffled sound of The Smiths’ “There Is A Light That Never Goes Out” emanating from Tom’s headphones as he tinkers with his iPod while entering the elevator. The scuttling footsteps of Summer can be heard over the drone of street noise as she hurries to catch the elevator and enters just before the doors close. It might seem that because Tom wears headphones he would likely not take notice of Summer, since he would be isolated in his own sound world, but his actions indicate quite the opposite: his initial glance betrays that he clearly recognizes her. After this glance, Tom “ignores” her by making certain to not so much as turn his head in her general direction. Therefore, although the headphones seem to suggest that Tom is looking for isolation, he

¹⁴ Shuhei Hosokawa, “The Walkman Effect,” *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 177-78.

is in fact quite interested in connecting with Summer. In contrast, Summer barely acknowledges Tom when she enters the elevator and certainly does not recognize him. As the doors close, The Smith's "There is a Light That Never Goes Out" and barely audible sounds of the elevator accompany a close-up of Tom and Summer. While Summer does not recognize Tom, she certainly recognizes the song, which inspires her to strike up a conversation with him. "The Smiths," she remarks, "I love The Smiths," before proceeding to sing along. Suddenly, the ding of the elevator signals the arrival on a different floor where she gets off and leaves Tom behind muttering to himself as the elevator doors close.

This scene offers an example of how leakage can bring two characters together. However, a simple connection does not guarantee a comprehension of an other's self—indeed the film ultimately suggests quite the opposite. While the shared interest in the music leaking from Tom's headphones motivates the conversation, both Tom and Summer have radically different impressions of what the music "is." On the one hand, Summer understands the similarity of musical preferences as merely a point that opens communication: it warrants small talk that might lead to something more but it remains basically a happy coincidence not freighted with metaphysical significance. Tom, on the other hand, misreads the essence of the conversation and ultimately the totality of their subsequent relationship. He understands this music as a metonym of the self: the song gives sonic form to his identity, and in identifying the song, Summer has, Tom feels, looked into his soul. Tom divulges as much to his sister when he tells her that similar

taste in music is the main reason he and Summer are fated for one another, and it is to this confusion that the film attributes the downfall of Tom and Summer's relationship.

Importantly, unlike the opening of *High Fidelity*, "There Is A Light That Never Goes Out" does not utilize Tom's head sound as a point of audition, but instead relies exclusively on leakage; we hear what Summer hears. The music, while audible, remains muffled, in the background and underneath the dialogue throughout the scene. Presented thus, the acoustiography of leakage plays a critical role in defining Tom's interior as separate from the world around him—as a place somewhat detached and not completely comprehensible to either Summer or us. It also conveys by turn, then, that Tom is also largely unaware of his projection of himself out into the world.

Tom's misreading of Summer's affection for the Smiths as love for him embodied in the acoustiography of leakage promotes an understanding of such sound, along with headphone iconography, as isolating. It seems, then, that the employment of both headphone iconography and headphone leakage seems particularly useful in communicating a character's isolation from the surrounding social world. The disconnection signified in *500 Days of Summer* is relatively mild—Tom is socially involved with friends and family in the film; he just misunderstands his projection of his self, but the combination of headphone iconography and leakage acoustiography has considerable power to convey a character's alienation.

A filmmaker's need to communicate alienation might have several motivations, but often it has to do with representing a character whose subjectivity is in discord with the social world. These are frequently characters that have been psychologically

traumatized and require separation from the world around them in order to set aside their trauma. Headphone iconography plays just this part in *Reign Over Me* (2007), a drama based on a true story of Charlie Fineman (Adam Sandler).¹⁵ Charlie has recently suffered the traumatizing loss of his wife and children who were on one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center. In an effort to forget his loss, Charlie retreats from society, quitting his job and cutting all ties with friends and family. This extreme isolation is symbolized by a number of his daily activities—he rides a scooter, is constantly remodeling the inside of his apartment, and, in a particularly crucial symbol, he almost always wears a pair of headphones. In the course of the film, Charlie serendipitously meets his old college roommate, Alan Johnson (Don Cheadle), and they re-establish their friendship. After Alan exhorts Charlie to seek help, he finally agrees to meet Alan’s psychiatrist, Angela Oakhurst (Liv Tyler), to confront his lived trauma. A series of interrelated scenes in Angela’s office ensue. Each time Angela pushes a little harder for Charlie to reveal his painful story and reconnect with society, Charlie retreats to his iPod.

The first time that Angela and Charlie meet in her office, low-level ambient street sounds, although audible from the office, act as a backdrop against which the louder intimate sound effects (e.g. rustling clothes) are set off as foreground. This arrangement reinforces the office setting as a private, intimate space but also audibly represents the imposition of the reality of a world that Charlie tries so desperately, by means of his headphones, to keep from leaking in. When Angela urges Charlie to discuss his loss, he

¹⁵ Bryan Brown, “The Lighter Side of Grief: Loss in Contemporary American Cinema,” *Visual Anthropology* 22 (2009): 37-40.

retreats to the safety of his music. A close-up shot of Charlie's iPod follows as he selects "Birds of St. Marks," by Jackson Browne. The privacy of the conversation is further reinforced in this moment, as Browne's song leaks through Charlie's headphones over the outside traffic. When she presses Charlie to reveal more of his traumatic experience, he grows more and more agitated until he finally asks to end the session, removing his headphones as he does so. As Charlie leaves the room, he puts his headphones back on, storms through the waiting room and out the door with Alan chasing after him. "Birds of St. Marks" then takes over the sound track, segueing to the following montage of Charlie as he repaints his kitchen and then rides his scooter down an empty city street. At the end of a scene, Angela's voice renters over the song, cueing the next scene, another session. "Birds of St. Marks" continues into the scene and underscores the initial lines of their conversation before fading out.

As Bryan Brown notes, Charlie's choice to wear a pair of bulky, circumaural headphones emphasizes his self-enforced isolation over a more discrete style of headphones,¹⁶ but the intricacy of this representation of isolation comes through its representation through leakage. In the first session, the leakage from his headphones had initially located the sound the "Bird of St. Marks" as diegetic. The song later shifted to the extradiegetic rather than being focalized through Charlie's point of audition as sound in the head. Its employment still represents Charlie's interiority, but, instead of literally, it does so figuratively by constructing his fantasy. It is difficult to understand this song as

¹⁶ Bryan Brown, "The Lighter Side of Grief: Loss in Contemporary American Cinema," *Visual Anthropology*, 22 (2009): 37-40.

continually focalized through Charlie's point of audition because the shift of "Birds of St. Marks" from background to foreground is not synchronized with, and so not directly motivated by, Charlie's actions—that is, the switch does not coincide with Charlie putting on his headphones but only occurs after he has entirely left the scene. Instead, the foregrounding of the song is associated with the montage.

Nevertheless, "Bird's of St. Marks," a song about a dying queen locked up behind the walls of her ancient castle, seems a poignant choice. It should not be overlooked that, like Rob in *High Fidelity*, Charlie selects the song: he desperately tries to control himself through musical agency. And regardless of what space the music occupies, it represents a piece of Charlie's identity through his self-connection with it. Specifically, the film affiliates the song with Charlie's traumatic fantasy: the song does more than hold the montage together—it holds Charlie's perception of his subjective self together. Unlike in *High Fidelity*, the representation of self here is not rendered through literal head sound but through figurative extradiegetic sound, which has the effect of further distancing Charlie by denying anyone, including the film's audience, access to his head sound. Charlie's interior remains challenged but yet still fortified enough to deny trespassers. Angela's voiceover at the end of the sequence "unplugs" this delusional self: the sound advance marks Charlie's inability to block her out.

The second therapy session begins much like the first. Angela and Charlie talk, Angela once again pushes Charlie, Charlie once again gets upset, puts his headphones on, and stomps out, this time listening to "Love, Reign O'er Me," by The Who. As in the first therapy session, the song moves from diegetic sound coming out of Charlie's headphones

to apparently nondiegetic music in the foreground as Charlie leaves rather than the moment he puts on his headphones. Again, the music figuratively represents a delusional fantasy rather than trying to represent Charlie through the sonic construction of head sound. The final shot in this scene, does not end with Charlie, as did the first, but this time pans back to Angela, perhaps visually representing her intrusion similar to the sound advance that opened the scene. Curiously, the montage sequence that follows the therapy session begins with Alan at work rather than Charlie at home. And yet it still seems to represent an internal reflection of the isolation of the self, now presented intersubjectively. For Alan is isolated in his own workspace: he listens to his business partners as they meet without him in an office far removed down the hallway. Alan is close enough to hear the leakage of the voices but not close enough to decipher the content of the discussion. It is only after showing Alan that the montage returns to Charlie, who appears back in his apartment installing a new dishwasher. As in the earlier montage, he performs one of his most common activities—remodeling his apartment. If home is where the metaphorical heart is, then Charlie is constantly remaking the heart of the self, desperately covering up his past and his social role as husband and father. Like his obsessive need to control to remake his self through song as a means of erasing his past, he too must constantly reconstruct his most intimate world. And while Charlie's story of the self remains blocked from the outside world, a further component of music as figurative representation of interiority is revealed—intersubjectivity. In this montage sequence, both Alan and Charlie have a moment of reflection and the lack of a “going in

to the head” acoustiography allows the song to move fluidly in representing the isolation haunting both Alan’s and Charlie’s interiority.

In these montage sequences, *Reign Over Me* takes advantage of what Anahid Kassabian calls “affiliating” properties of preexisting music whose freer relationship to the image track allows for the songs to be less constrained by the image. As Kassabian puts it, compiled scores proffer a loose connection to or affiliation with characters compared to composed scores, which, often written to fit the image track, frequently restrict identification to a single character.¹⁷ While music as head sound neutralizes this loose affiliation by assigning it the specific point of audition within a specific character, extradiegetic music has a more open relationship to the image because it is not tethered to a specific space. It is the ambiguous placement of “Love, Reign O’er Me” in extradiegetic space that allows the song’s meaning to signify both for Charlie and for Alan.

The third of Charlie’s therapy sessions with Angela is also the last. Again, the scene starts with Charlie and Angela talking until Charlie gets upset. However, this time after choosing music on his iPod, Bruce Springsteen’s “Drive All Night,” Charlie does not draw his headphones over his ears; he remains ready to interact. Indeed, Angela persuades Charlie to tell his story to Alan, who is sitting in the waiting room. With headphones around his neck still blaring “Drive All Night,” Charlie sits down and relates his story to Alan (Figure 2). As he finishes, the song moves into the foreground.

¹⁷ Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 117-39.

Although this song also never becomes head sound, it is directly tied to Charlie's sharing of his traumatized self. Again, the montage starts with other characters, spending a lot of time on the relationship between Alan and his wife¹⁸ before connecting the music to Charlie. Crucially, even with the song's prominence in the sound track, the other diegetic sounds, like that of a news story blaring from Charlie's television during the montage, is much more conspicuous, marking Charlie's gradual shift away from his fantastically constructed world back to social reality.



Figure 2: Charlie tells Alan his story while “Drive All Night” leaks from his headphones

Although each of these songs—“Birds of St. Marks,” “Love, Reign O’er Me,” and “Drive All Night,”—plays a less direct part in representing Charlie’s interiority than “You’re Gonna Miss Me” does for Rob in *High Fidelity*, they also reveal that music does not have to emanate from a character’s head sound for it to be linked in substantive fashion to his or her interior. Indeed, while the headphones in *Reign Over Me* function as

¹⁸ It is in fact marital problems that bring Alan to see his therapist, Angela, in the first place. Alan reveals to her that he has felt more and more removed as the years have passed. Again, the music represents a theme of isolation intersubjectively.

a symbol of Charlie's self-alienation and traumatic experience rather than as embodying his interiority, their representational status is still strongly linked to his subjectivity. In each case, the songs function to create continuity, holding together both the montage sequences and Charlie's delusionary constructed self by suturing over his traumatic memories. Of the three songs, "Love, Reign Over Me" is probably the most suggestive of interiority, but this relationship is more to the figurative notion of interiority than a literal representation of the physical space of a character's head.

This is not to say that the songs in these scenes are not important to Charlie's identity, in fact they are crucial. Like Rob in *High Fidelity*, Charlie decides what music to play; he asserts his agency through music choice. Moreover, he is granted control over the film's sound track as each song he chooses on his iPod later occupies extradiegetic space. Given that Charlie controls his (and, for much of the film, our) music world, it would be hard to argue that this music was not an expression of the self. However, the placement of the music within the extradiegetic draws attention to the music's figurative quality of representation versus the physical placement of the sound as emanating from Charlie. Unlike Rob who allows the audience to participate in his formation of his interiority, Charlie's refusal to allow others to inhabit his head further signifies his self-enforced removal from society.

HEADPHONE ICONOGRAPHIES AND ACOUSTIOGRAPHIES AS ISOLATED INTERIORITY

In contemporary film, representing social isolation seems to be a primary function of both headphone iconography and head acoustiography, but it is more central to the

former. When an acoustiography of head sound is absent in a sound track, but headphone iconography present in the image track, the goal is often one of symbolizing isolation. Consider a scene from *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997) where a local convenience store becomes the location for a shootout between two assassins. The store's occupants are only the two gunmen and a lone teenager, who listens to his Walkman as he slouches over an arcade game. Automatic gunfire erupts and grocery items explode behind him and yet the teen remains blithely unaware of the raging gun battle that ensues behind him. The film employs headphone iconography as humorous social commentary that raises a serious cultural issue: the separation of the self from the social world can be dangerous. Similarly, in *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992) Kevin (Macaulay Culkin), the child hero, misses the valuable information that he is on the wrong plane because he wears headphones.

Headphones as symbols for social obliviousness, however, are not new and in fact go as far back as headphone technology itself. Jonathan Sterne asserts that the separation of hearing, the individuation of sound, and the necessity of an assumed privatized acoustic space were all essential components in the development of audile technique that emerged as common practice with the rising middle class during the nineteenth century. These practices, developing first out of the invention of stethoscopes and telegraphers as early as the 1810s, focused the ear on the specificity of sound. Although recording practices underscored the formation of audile technique such practices were evident before the invention of recording in the quiet, introspective audiences that accompanied the rise of the middle class. As first recordings and then radio emerged and became

popularized in the first few decades of the twentieth century, advertisements surrounding them either demonstrated the necessity of headphones and headsets, while newspaper comic strips mocked the practice of wearing them. In fact, Sterne provides newspaper comic clippings from the early twentieth century that, much like lone teenager in Grosse Pointe Blank, depict characters dangerously withdrawn from the surrounding social world.¹⁹

While using headphone iconography to figure social isolation is not new, film's ability to add an acoustiographic layer to the representation offers new possibilities for exploring the social work of headphones. By juxtaposing the internal head sound of one character with the sound of external leakage heard by others, the characters' radically different positions are underscored through aural disparity. In other words, head sound is in actuality available only to the individual wearing the phones; it is not a shareable, communal experience. Leakage, by contrast, is a social sound, potentially available to all, even if not meaningful to all. That is, leakage through headphones could be construed as music like in *500 Days of Summer*, where the content is hearable, or it could be conceived as noise—its presence known, but not its meaning—as in the case of Laura in the opening scene of *High Fidelity*. Film can and does play with the juxtaposition between these two points of audition, shifting from a point of audition inside a character's head sound to that experienced by those who are outside it. The

¹⁹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University, 2003), 154-77.

representational effect is to separate the experience of anyone wearing headphone from everyone else in the scene.

A particularly salient example of such a representation occurs in *About a Boy* (2002). This film tells the story of Marcus Brewer (Nicholas Hoult), a marginalized adolescent who spends most of his time in his own thoughts. This social isolation is further complicated by his status as the only child of a single mother. Unfortunately for Marcus, his obliviousness to the surrounding world often makes him an easy target for torment by his peers. In one scene, the twelve-year-old dances his way down the hall at his high school as he listens to Mystikal's "Shake Ya Ass" on his portable CD player. The film initially represents the song from his point of audition, with the song occupying the foreground. The only other sound is Marcus rapping along. Even so, his voice is barely audible in comparison with the recording. This head sound is complemented with a collection of extreme close ups of him before cutting to a medium shot as he dances down the hall. Even as the head sound is maintained through most of the sequence, shots of Ellie (Natalia Tena), a schoolgirl on whom Marcus has a crush, are interspersed with those of Marcus dancing down the hallway, indicating both that she is nearby and that he is unaware of her presence. Suddenly, the sound shifts point of audition from Marcus' headphone sound to that of the school hallway. The rap song that had dominated when the point of audition was focalized through Marcus becomes barely audible leakage as it merges with the ambient sound from the hall, dialogue of other characters, and the suddenly rather loud sound of Marcus' voice rapping along to the recording (Figure 3). Unfortunately, Ellie overhears Marcus just as he raps out "show me what you're working

with.” In this case, Marcus’ detachment from his social world is represented first and foremost through the distinct sonic differences between his sound world and the sound world of the high school hallway community. Marcus’s isolation here is figured by the acoustiography of head sound, which also becomes a sign of Marcus’ interiority.



Figure 3: Marcus raps and dances in the hallway

The actual iconography of headphones seems secondary to the acoustiography of head sound in conveying Marcus’ detachment in this scene. Indeed, an earlier scene where Marcus’ interiority is represented sans headphones reinforces the acoustiographic primacy of head sound. In this scene, Marcus starts daydreaming during class and ends up breaking into song. This time the song is quite different, “Rainy Days and Mondays” by The Carpenters. The song is introduced in the prior scene where we learn that Marcus’ mother suffers from depression. Although the song is not explicitly grounded in a sound source in this scene, its filtered, distant sound bears the acoustiography of diegetic, “on the air” sound. During the scene transition and similar to *Reign Over Me*, the filtering is removed and the song moves from background to foreground; however, unlike *Reign Over Me* where the attachment of the songs to Charlie is somewhat tenuous, the song

here seems carried into the next scene by Marcus, as the camera slowly zooms in on the boy during a teacher's lecture. In fact, although the teacher can be heard lecturing, speech here remains secondary to the boisterous sound of The Carpenters. As the chorus enters, Marcus begins to sing along, almost involuntarily, as though what we hear on the sound track in fact represents Marcus' point of audition, or rather, as if we had gone into his head. As he sings, however, the song fades away, lingering slightly after Marcus finishes the chorus, at which point the students erupt in laughter.

PHYSICAL ACOUSTIOGRAPHIES: INTERNALIZED BREATH

Often the interior of a character is materially marked not through music, but through breath and the sound of the body. These bodily sounds are often accompanied with some sort of full body suit that marks off a privatized acoustic space. A scene in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) draws on both the notion of corporeal acoustiography and the full body suit as a manifestation of privatized acoustic space. On his first day back in the field, bomb technician Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) dons his special suit in preparation for a defusing mission. The shear weight and thickness of the suit's padding make getting into it a communal activity, as the two other men of his unit help him. This physical contact, reinforced sonically with the slapping of pads and the ripping of Velcro, opposes James' subsequent situation where he must confront the bomb alone. James is in fact doubly isolated from the world and those around him: the kill zone of the bomb enforces a proximal isolation while the foot-thick padding of his suit separates his body from the physical world. Both forms of isolation serve to protect bodies from physical

violence but at the price of severing sociability. This proximal isolation is figured cinematically through both image and sound, through both exteriority and interiority: exterior representations of the abandoned alley (sights and sounds) as well as interior representations of James (the mask, his voice, his breathing). Soon, he is far away enough from the others that he must be shown in his own shot that indicates his separateness from the others, an effect he compounds by throwing a smoke grenade to “create a diversion” and to obscure his visibility (Figure 4). Thus even when he is shown, he is only half visible through a plume of smoke. Furthermore, the sound editing of the scene also sonically isolates Sergeant James. In fact, before the images of the abandoned streets appear, the booming voices of James’ fellow army compatriots echoing down the desolate street, devoid of objects to absorb or cover their reverberation, can be heard as a representation of proximal isolation. That is, the echo in itself may not signal proximal isolation; rather the echo calls attention to the lack of ambient sound, which in the film’s shots of crowded street scenes is abundant. However, radio contact between James and his men allows the voice to breach this proximal isolation. Still, James’ highly filtered voice seems distant over the radio in contrast to the rich, resonating voices of his partners—the lack of the immediate physical captured in his mediated vocality.



Figure 4: James walking through smoke grenade

Sergeant James' corporeal isolation is represented through different realizations of both point of view and point of audition. Furthermore, the acousticography of the breath plays a crucial role in marking point of view shots. However, as James edges down the alley different points of audition arise either from the world exterior or interior to him. Whether the point of audition is placed outside or inside James' bombsuit, breathing remains the primary distinguishing sound. At first, the breathing seems to represent different things, as the exterior breath and the interior breath sound markedly different. On the inside the suit, we hear the breath coming from the body (Figure 5). Air rushes between James' nostrils as he deeply inhales and exhales. These corporeal sounds sound sharpen as the ambient noise filling the streets diminish. On the sergeant's exterior, however, the breathing seems to represent the barrenness of the streets so still that the loudest sound remains a man's respiration. However, this external breath, like James' voice over the radio, is mediated; it is not the sound of James' breath we hear but the sound of his breath against the face glass of his helmet—a reflected breath. In a not trivial way, the (other) sounds of the body have been removed from the sound track and he has

been reduced to breath: breathing thereby reproduces in its own way, in its own register, the physical isolation and so also reinforces the proximal isolation, the isolation of the body from itself as a sign, perhaps, of self-alienation. Indeed, as James walks down the deserted alley, he looks every bit an astronaut on the moon.



Figure 5: POV shot from inside the bombsuit

Another example of the acoustiography of the breath occurs in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in the famous scene where Dave (Keir Dullea) dismantles the supercomputer HAL, but unlike the prior examples the sound of breathing connects the two characters. This scene features only two sound events as Dave, in a full space suit, makes his way through a maze of hallways on the spaceship to HAL's "brain room"—HAL's eerily human voice and constant, repetitive respiration. Although easily attributable to Dave because of its corporeality, Michel Chion notes that the breath does not match the point of audition of Dave's voice, which suggests that this breath emanates from outside Dave. Chion interprets it as HAL's as during the sequence Dave quite literally inhabits HAL's interiority. That is, when Dave enters the "Logic Memory

Center,” he enters HAL’s metaphorical “head.”²⁰ Before this moment, the film has starkly presented HAL as a never-blinking, cycloptic eye. These “eyes” appear all around the space ship and contribute to the sense of HAL as a decentralized being. HAL’s fragmented “body” gains coherence by being centralized in his “mind”: HAL’s voice, his thoughts, and his breath are all associated with one particular location. By imagining the breathing as emanating from HAL’s interior, it at once brings his human qualities to the forefront while simultaneously symbolizing the intimacy of the innermost place that Dave has entered.

Chion’s interpretation is problematic for at least two reasons. First, when HAL begins to sing “Daisy,” the human-like aspects of his voice slowly dissipate—his voice drops lower and the tempo exponentially elongates—but the breathing pattern stays constant. The breath matches HAL’s point of audition no better than it does Dave’s. Secondly, after Dave shuts down HAL, the breathing continues, implying that HAL cannot be the source. Moreover, the breathing continues at the same pace throughout the scene. Its regularity and consistency, only interrupted the one time Dave speaks, allow it to set the pace of the scene and become a measure of time. This rhythmic pattern—breathes in, breath out—occurs continuously for over six minutes and is only silenced by the appearance of a government film once HAL has been completely shut down.

For this reason, I prefer Chion’s other hypothesis that the sound represents transgressed boundaries between HAL and Dave. In this case, the breathing is attributable completely to neither of the characters but instead represents their shared space. What

²⁰ Chion, *Film, a Sound Art*, 332-34.

better way to represent an intimacy between characters than through the sound of breath—a sound audible from head sound. Yes, Dave occupies HAL’s interior, but HAL also occupies Dave’s interior, is in his head. That is, in this scene Dave hears HAL through a sound receiver located within his helmet. HAL’s voice is a head sound and as such we hear Dave’s point of audition, his privatized acoustic space even though the image track never enters Dave’s interior in this scene.

One reason that full body suits like space suits and bombsuits work so well for defining interiorization is that, like headphones, they embody the notion of privatized acoustic space and lucidly express notions of isolation and separation. The space inside Dave’s suit is “his” space, the space of “his” body. It is marked so by the boundaries of his suit—quite literally part of his interior is projected in the space immediate his exterior. While the suit makes this space visible, in each case it is the sounds of the body, particularly breathing, that mark this acoustic space as private. Labored breathing does not actually typify regular human experience—we do not notice our own breathing in most cases. Acoustiographies of point-of-view breathing are always rendered; they mimic the sounds of respiratory machines, or perhaps even the sounds of the stethoscope. Indeed, mechanized breath has become just as much an emblem of Darth Vader as his mask. In fact, his breathing is a sort of sonic mask, suggesting the corporeal, but also obscuring it. The sound of breath indicates mortality, but its filtering and mechanization conceals its human quality.²¹ However, Vader’s breath works very similarly to

²¹ James Buhler, “*Star Wars*, Music, and Myth” in *Music and Cinema*, ed. James Buhler et al. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 40. See also: Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 193-95.

headphone leakage in that it is never experienced as head sound—it is always an externally projected. Its form as such suggests self, but it does not reveal the content of that self. Therefore, breath as acoustiography can work as either leakage or head sound, but its ultimate goal remains representing a manifestation of character interiority.

ACOUSTIOGRAPHY AND SUBJECTIVITY: REPRESENTING THE SELF

While internalized corporeal sounds often mark a particular physical space inside a character's head, music often inhabits the subject, usually projecting some trait of the character although in an incomplete manner. That is, it represents something, but that something lacks coherence in its very status as a multiple-meaningful object. Music, then, symbolizes what Wilfred M. McClay, in talking about the difference between the "Self" and "person," refers to as the "secret of the Self." For McClay, the Western conception of the self is a complex and fractured thing—an entity we strive to know in other beings but is ultimately beyond our grasp. This internalized subjectivity is not reducible to any single nugget of essence, but instead, "the self has proven a highly unstable concept, having a tendency to dissolve on closer examination into a kaleidoscopic whirl of unrelated colors and moods, an ensemble of social roles, a play of lights undirected by any integrative force standing behind them all."²² What is lost in the enigma of the self is captured in the person—the form that embodies the world's perception of us, our social relations, our experience in a word. Music, as a polysemic form, then, is able to represent the self exactly because of its status as not having a fixed meaning. When fixed in the

²² McClay, "The Secret of the Self," 30.

acoustiography of the head space of the character, music can be understood as emanating from that character, but its content is as plural and ethereal as the McKay's self.

The use of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" in *The Graduate* (1967) is a quintessential example of music's powerful connection to selfhood, but the whole film acts as a study on the alienating effects of a negation of the social. That is, the further Ben Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) is removed from sociality, the further immersed he becomes in the silence of his self. The film starts with the background drone of airplane noise and a close up of Benjamin Braddock staring off in to the distance with his shadow blanketing a plain white background (Figure 6a). A heavily filtered voice comes over the loudspeaker, "Ladies and gentleman, we are about to begin our descent into Los Angeles." At this point the low rumble of the aircraft and the voiceover continue as the camera zooms out to reveal that Ben is not in fact by himself but sitting on an airplane full of passengers. While most of the passengers wear headphones, their demeanor differs little from Ben's as most sit silently and motionless as they stare blankly into the space before them. The next shot features Ben as he walks down a long, white corridor in the airport to pick up his luggage (Figure 6b). The image track themes are reasonably similar to the prior shot. Ben, now walking, remains withdrawn from his surroundings as he was on the airplane. Again, he is presented against a white background—this time a tiled wall—with his shadow trailing behind. This shadow's meaning is two-fold, however, as it symbolizes an absence of the self from the surrounding in the absence of light it but also draws attention to itself and thus to the figure of Ben—the one difference in a sea of white. In the following shot, Ben's suitcase is shown moving down the conveyor belt in

baggage claim (Figure 6c). It mimics the prior shot in that it too is shown against a white background with its shadow cast. The suitcase itself makes manifest the significance of Ben's shadow—through its personification it draws attention to the interior/exterior binary so crucial to the film. Its boxy exterior is clearly cut against the white background, but its interior and its contents remain hidden.



Figure 6a: Close up of Ben on the airplane Figure 6b: Ben walking through the airport



Figure 6c: Ben's Suitcase

The sound track here imparts depth to Ben's interior through its embodiment in music. The loud hum of the airplane underlying the entirety of the opening shot disappears completely and in its place Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sounds of Silence" plays. The crisp recording quality of the song stands out, especially in contrast to the steady white noise washing over the prior airplane scene. Simultaneously, an automated

voiceover is heard over the loudspeaker in the airport. However, unlike the voiceover on the plane this voice sits further back in the sound track and removed with tunnel-like echo. The contrast between the two voiceovers stresses the foregroundedness of the song, which the second voice sounds underneath. David Shumway further notes the stark content featured in the image track (a still airplane, a blank white wall, etc.) that optimizes the song as narrative commentary.²³ While the recording's significance is evident through its repetition and, to a lesser extent, its lyrical commentary, we should not overlook that it appears in the foreground of the sound track each time it sounds. It is precisely this space in the sound track, which "The Sound of Silence" occupies, that is of importance.

In contrast to the relative ease of locating "The Sounds of Silence" in the head sound of Benjamin Braddock, its meaning as representation of Ben's interiority is harder to pin down. The self, while needing some level of separation to form, is revealed as ultimately unwhole—a splintered self that lacks clear definition. The open-endedness of the song's essence affords a way of creating diverse meanings that symbolize the incompleteness of Ben's subjectivity. Though seemingly paradoxical, it is the very openness and impossibility of reduction to a single meaning that engenders his interiority. This is not to say that the meaning making system is completely open ended. The title of the song, "The Sounds of Silence" suggests the film's main themes of social isolation and an antithetical reading would be highly unlikely. It avoids specificity and therefore also

²³ David R. Shumway, "Rock 'n' Roll Sound Tracks and the Production of Nostalgia," *Cinema Journal*, 38, no. 2 (1999): 37-38.

an absolute containment of meaning, but at the same time restricts the number of possible meanings.²⁴ The song, then, helps give form to a complex self—a “figure in the carpet.”²⁵ The motivating factor, then, for employing the acoustiography of head sound in *The Graduate* is to create a compelling connection between Ben and “The Sounds of Silence” as a representation of his somewhat ambiguous self.

CONCLUSION: ACOUSTIOGRAPHY AND THE DAMAGED SELF

The articulation of Ben’s subjectivity remains crucial for themes of isolation in *The Graduate*, themes that ultimately relate to a broader film subject—the damaged self. Indeed, the need to accentuate a character’s personal flaws and pathologies relates to—or, perhaps better, is an expression of—the cost of representing an otherwise inaccessible interiority. Regardless of the degree, it is the damage to the interior self that connects the isolated Ben Braddock with the narcissistic Rob Gordon, the traumatized Charlie Fineman, or the delusion Tom Hansen. Similar manifestations arise through physical breath emphasizing social removal like Sergeant James, David, and Darth Vader. Such acoustiographic representations of psychic damage make interiority audible. While, as head sound, “The Sounds of Silence” embodies Ben’s despair in the negation of the self, the extradiegetic music in *Reign Over Me* represents Charlie’s extreme withdrawal as his fantasized escape from his trauma. Similarly, in *500 Days of Summer* the leakage from

²⁴ I think Leah Ceccarelli’s framing of the term polysemy, a text that allows multiple interpretations, but also limits those meanings to a finite amount, gets at this notion of plural but limited best. See Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (November 1998): 397-99.

²⁵ Wilfred McClay, “Introduction From Self to Person – Some Preliminary Thoughts,” in *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past*, ed. Wilfred McClay (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 11.

Tom's headphones, the difference between the world that he hears and that Summer hears, prefigures his misreading of Summer's remarks and ultimately of their entire relationship: it is the product of a deluded self. Like the phonograph needle whose sputter announces the materiality of the recording medium, the acoustiography represents a damaged self so that interiority may assume an audible form. For a self to sound, then, it must do so through a focus on its defects—where the needle and record intersect producing noise rather than signal. Between the ears, the damaged self crackles with something intrinsically human that would otherwise remain beyond hearing.

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