

Squalid Infidelities A Question of Definition

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Randolph Jordan's first installment in an ongoing column exploring the concept of fidelity as it has been understood in a variety of contexts. Using issues raised in sound theory as the foundation of this column, ideas about fidelity are explored first in terms of sound reproduction and then applied to larger social contexts. Of particular interest is the concept of marital fidelity and the varying ways in which people grapple with the idea of remaining faithful to one's partner. As such, each installment will focus on a particular film whose narrative addresses marital fidelity in conjunction with a use of sound design that raises important questions in contemporary sound theory. The first installment lays the theoretical framework for the film analyses to follow in subsequent editions.

I've taken the title for this column from one of the most formidable on-screen marital confrontations in recent memory: Charlotte Rampling explaining to Stellan Skaarsgard in *Signs And Wonders* (Jonathan Nossiter, 2000) how he destroyed his family by taking off with home-wrecker Deborah Kara Unger. "First you betray me with your squalid infidelities," she says in a voice so scathing that I can feel it beneath the surface of my skin. "Then after I forgive you, because I'm still in love with you, you repay me by destroying the few things that you left unbroken. Have you any idea what we went through when you left?"

The question that she poses to her ex-husband here concerns the relationship between what's going on in his mind and the reality that exists outside of it.

This is a questioning of the faithfulness of reality's representation within the mind of a human being. Or perhaps, it is a questioning of what we mean when we use words like "reality" in the first place. The look on Skaarsgard's face while on the receiving end of Rampling's brilliantly delivered wake-up call indicates that he's living on another planet: safe within his own perception of the way things are. Furthermore, his reality is one that he wishes to manipulate to his own ends. This is evident by his selective re-contextualization of the aforementioned conversation, which he accidentally recorded on a portable cassette machine. While sitting on the subway after leaving his ex-wife that night, and then later while out for a walk with his daughter, he isolates the words "I'm still in love with you" from the context of the rest of the sentence in which it was spoken; he hears what he wants to hear. The tape recording is an outward manifestation of his selective perception. He remains faithful only to an idea in his mind. And, the recording technology is at a loss to present him with anything further. So, to answer Rampling's question: no, he has no idea what they went through when he left.

We're all familiar with the weight the concept of marital fidelity carries with it. The fact that a transgression of fidelity can be described as "squalid" emphasizes the binary positive/negative relationship that our idea of fidelity has with its opposite. It is not surprising to find this concept within areas of human experience that would seem quite a distance from considerations of one's marital vows and always in use with similar connotations of grave importance. One such area is the idea of fidelity as it is found in the realm of the

audiophile. Fidelity of the highest order is the Holy Grail for the culture of the Hi-Fi and its attendant enthusiasts. But the question that gets asked over and over is, to what are we trying to be faithful? And if there does exist something concrete to which we have decided to be faithful, what exactly constitutes this faithfulness?

Many have explored the different ideas of fidelity that have emerged in the world of sound recording, either from audiophile perspectives, or from film scholars wrestling with the place of sound in the domain of the moving image. This column will be an ongoing exploration of how the notion of fidelity has been understood and applied in the realm of sound recording and transmission. In each installment, I will be placing issues of fidelity and sound theory within the context of broader areas of human experience. To that end, each column will concentrate on the analysis of a specific film which makes productive use of our conflicting notions of fidelity within their forms and narratives (if anyone still finds this distinction palpable). Particular attention will be paid to films where sound design raises important issues in sound theory. Such films can be related to their treatment of the concept of marital fidelity within the stories they tell. My hope is that these films will be understood from a fresh perspective by focusing on their sound design. All the while, issues in sound theory will be better understood by relating them to more common realities of everyday thinking.

So, to begin our journey, a little tour of the ways in which the word “fidelity” has been applied over the years will prove useful to my purpose here. Before getting practical, however, let’s take a conceptual detour. If we think about fidelity in the marital sense, what we have in many instances of squalid transgressions is a desire of the offending parties to have their cake and eat it too, do we not? Ideally, there is a sense that someone participating in an infidelity would want to enjoy the fruits of a deeply committed relationship, while pursuing interests outside of this relationship. The desire to have the best of multiple worlds often places these multiple worlds within a dichotomy: a contradiction that seems hard to embrace. But if we are to believe the postmodernists (whoever they really are), we must accept that contradictions are a necessary and unavoidable part of life. Therefore, the only way to deal with a contradiction is to embrace it (or so the story goes...).

Does this mean that it may, in fact, be possible to enjoy the experience of a live concert while sitting in our

living rooms? Does this make any sense? No, of course it doesn’t. The conflation of living room space with that of a concert venue is a contradiction. And yet, slogans like “Is it live or is it Memorex” tap into the idea that having a live band playing in our living-rooms through the magic of Hi-Fi media is something to strive for, if not expect. Even if we talk about sound, in and of itself, as the primary substance of our live music experience (which it really isn’t), we still can’t come close to recreating a live sound in our living rooms and we never will (for reasons that are more architectural than anything else). However, this doesn’t mean that listening at home is inferior to “seeing” it live. The live music ideal has been so glorified that it’s hard to imagine someone suggesting that they prefer to listen to music at home. But there are those who claim that listening at home may, in fact, sound better. There was a time when we might have been able to get away with the snobbery of the symphony-goer, given that this particular form of music lends itself well to being heard un-amplified within specially designed acoustic spaces. But we live in a world of many sounds, and many of these sounds are problematic for the symphonic ideal. The notion that Western Classical musical standards embody the Platonic forms, to which all of us must reach for but never grasp, is dying. Indeed, we now have music that actually cannot exist in a live context. What are we to make of that? And to what must our Hi-Fi units be faithful when representing these kinds of sounds?

Let’s return to the notion of having one’s cake and eating it too, or at least the problems of contradiction that this well known metaphor conjures up. The other day, I was walking along the street and I saw someone riding a bike in high-gear but moving very slowly. He was struggling hard to push the pedals, though the surface on which he was pedaling was flat. At the time this image struck me as bizarre. It seemed, in fact, to be happening in slow motion. His pedaling movements were clearly those of someone in high gear, yet his forward momentum was at a snail’s pace. What do we mean when we say, “someone is in high gear”? We generally reserve this term for someone moving at a very fast pace. Here we have an example of someone who is literally in high gear, yet remains in the wrong context for this high gear to translate into fast motion. This results into a kind of visual paradox, even though the cause and effect of the cyclist’s movements are nothing hard to understand. On a deeper philosophical level, this example illustrates that there are ways in which we can discover fastness within slowness, and vice-versa. Whether we’re talking about music or quantum physics, perceptions can be adjusted to observe both the long and the short of our

objects of analysis.

Consider the hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage, one of the world's greatest proponents of the power of perceptual awareness (beyond that which is taught by Renaissance perspective and the prison house of language). A recurring complaint about these films is that they move too quickly, that the detail of each exquisitely hand-painted frame is lost by their split-second existence in the spotlight. The result doesn't seem to flow smoothly, as we are bombarded with 24 paintings per second over the course of several minutes. What happens, though, is that this speed of movement creates an environment where we can see into other areas of the image. We find the underlying rhythmic structure and textural patterning, which depends on our inability to focus on any one of the motion's single elements. And so, slowness emerges from the fastness, creating simultaneity of experience. This may seem theoretically contradictory but, in practice, it is plain to behold.

The example of Brakhage's hand-painted films suggests our ability to experience simultaneities. Things can be both slow and fast at the same time, and each world can be a part of the other. Many would argue that similar things could be said about the idea of fidelity in the context of marital relations. Why must a commitment to one person exclude involvement with another? Why must a fast moving image negate the possibility for the experience of the slow? Isn't it just a matter of defining our terms and then shifting our focus to accommodate meaning? Does commitment in a relationship mean only one thing: abstinence from sexual encounters with other people? Surely not.

Commitment, like so many things, is open to interpretation depending on context. So, let's think about context for a moment. In "The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound," Rick Altman spells out what has been one of the main problems with the theorization of film sound: "the apparent assumption that all film sounds have the nature of musical notes... [that] they are single phenomena, produced instantaneously, emitted from a point source, and perceived in an immediate and direct fashion."^[1] Discussing the problems inherent in applying Western music theory to examinations of sound in film, he continues: "musical notation diverts attention from sound's discursive dimensions, concealing the fact that sound is in reality multiple, complex, heterogeneous, and threedimensional."^[2] Thus, for Altman, every sound is a unique narrative event that is not heard identically by any two listeners.

Adding the level of recording to this understanding of sound, he then notes that "when we listen to recorded sound we are therefore always listening to a particular account of a specific event."^[3] Evoking the proverbial "tree falling in a forest," he continues: "By offering itself up to be heard, every sound event loses its autonomy, surrendering the power and meaning of its own structure to the various contexts in which it might be heard, to the varying narratives that it might construct."^[4] So, he brings the role of perception to the forefront of discussions on sound.

The narrative analysis of sound that Altman speaks about is an analysis of what he calls the sound's "spatial signature."^[5] He refers to the subjectivity of interpreting these narratives, based on the listener's spatial position with respect to the source of the sounds, as the *Rashomon* phenomenon (in reference to the ubiquitous Kurosawa film – 1950 – and its play on the idea of subjective realities).^[6] To complicate matters, Altman notes that in addition to spatial signature, sound recordings also carry signatures of their own, "some record of the recording process, superimposed on the sound event itself."^[7] Given all these factors, Altman's main conclusion is that every sound is effectively a heterogeneous event that can never be heard by any two listeners in the same way. Thus, when analyzing sound, great care must be taken to pay attention to every little nuance. It is in these nuances that key information about the sound's production and propagation through space will be found.

In his chapter on sound theory in *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, James Lastra lays out the theoretical foundations behind Altman's position and situates him in the context of the bigger picture. He finds that debates about "originals" versus "copies" are at the heart of discussions about sound's heterogeneous nature. He identifies the philosophical category of non-identity theorists (including the likes of Rick Altman, Alan Williams and Thomas Levin) whose basic premise is that "even the original itself is intrinsically multiple and internally differentiated – a fact we recognize every time we choose between 'good' and 'bad' seats in an auditorium."^[8] Wherein lies the coveted original sound at a concert consisting of multiple sources playing to potentially thousands of different points in the space of the hall? Given this lack of an identifiable original sound, he notes that Levin argues for a "critical analysis" of the sound apparatus to understand what transformations a sound undergoes in the act of reproduction. However, Lastra feels that it would be problematic to base such an analysis on the assumption

that original sound can in fact exist and be measured against its reproduction, given the stance of non-identity theorists that no original can actually exist.^[9] So he asks the question: “Why, then, is the [idea of the] ‘original sound’ so persistent?”^[10]

He finds that the answer lies with Theodor Adorno’s work in “The Radio Symphony” written in 1941. Adorno argues that the technological transformation of certain kinds of music—in this case, a Beethoven symphony—can serve to tamper with the structure of the piece itself and thus degrade its essence.^[11] The idea of this loss of essence in a mechanical reproduction (calling to mind Walter Benjamin’s important essay on the subject)^[12] lingers to this day. It not surprising that this notion can be found in the questions posed about sound in relation to film. As Lastra suggests: “By defining sound recordings as partial, transformed, or to some degree absent with respect to the original, they present an almost Platonic theory of recording, where both truth and being decline as one moves toward the copy.”^[13] However, he also notes that:

Non-identity theorists assume their own equally biased model of listening—one that universalizes the acutely sensitive symphony listener [...] Such sensitivity is not characteristic of the way we engage with most sounds [...] They are functions of a mode of listening appropriate to a particular situation, and need to be analyzed as such.^[14]

Lastra maintains that, for most people, not every nuance of a sound’s characteristic is inherently meaningful. This also harkens back to Adorno’s work, since for him some music is not as affected by electronic transmission or recording as others, and it depends on the particular nuances of the piece in question.^[15] Thus, the extreme attention to detail called for by non-identity theorists like Altman seems to detract from the more important task of analyzing how sound is being used in film to put forth meaningful information. Lastra suggests that this latter perspective is more in line with Christian Metz’s ideas. Metz suggests that if the legibility of sound allows us to understand what it represents, then the difference between the experience of real or recorded sound is minimal.^[16] In this model, the idea of an original sound is manageable if it is taken to refer to a sound’s legibility as opposed to its minute details and possible variances based on the listener’s spatial orientation.

Given the vagaries inherent in various arguments about original sounds and their copies, the final upshot of Lastra’s argument lies in understanding sound recording

as “representation” instead of “reproduction.” With this distinction Lastra eliminates the onus of recording technology to actually reproduce a sound in favor of simply representing it.

As Lastra suggests, the conceptual difference between reproduction and representation is clearly articulated in the way that recording sound for film has brought together two contradictory, though not necessarily incompatible, traditions of representation: those of the phonographic industry, and those of the telephonic industry. For Lastra, the question of fidelity comes down to two main perspectives on the subject: the phonographic model, which emphasizes perceptual fidelity, and the telephonic model, which emphasizes intelligibility.^[17] Perceptual fidelity refers to the idea that the sound represented remains faithful to the sound as it might be heard if the listener were occupying the space represented. Telephonic intelligibility, as one might guess, gives prominence to the treatment of narrative elements, in particular the spoken word. Thus, the telephonic model of representation seeks to render the human voice as clearly as possible, most often at the expense of other noise that would ordinarily be heard in the space represented. Indeed, this removal of background noise, and the enhancement of the human voice, has become the holy grail of telephone designers in the age of digital transmission, hence the appropriateness of the term “telephonic.”

If we think about these two modes of representation even for a moment, it becomes readily evident that one does not exclude the other in any given film. We regularly encounter films where one scene will make use of the telephonic model while another will emphasize perceptual fidelity. Moreover, surround sound technologies can actually give us both approaches simultaneously by using center channels to transmit intelligible dialogue, while the surround speakers deliver the immersive sound of the space represented on screen. Does this constitute a contradictory philosophy, or a stylistic incongruity on the part of the filmmakers? Or is it more a matter of understanding that the use of one mode, in any given place, doesn’t necessarily undermine any other use of the alternative mode? Let’s put it this way: does sleeping with one person necessarily undermine one’s relationship with another person? Might a shift in expectation, by moving from reproduction to representation, somehow relate to a shift in our understanding of marital fidelity?

It comes down to defining the terms of a relationship within the context of that relationship’s existence. In

Audio-Vision, Michel Chion uses the term “definition” in the way that audiophiles use fidelity: the resolution of the sound in question. “Fidelity” implies a faithful representation to something; “definition” concerns the quality of the representation in and of itself. So, in the same way that Lastra moves from “reproduction” to “representation,” Chion moves from “fidelity” to “definition.” Both Chion and Lastra thus avoid the problems associated with the notion that something that has been recorded or transmitted can stand in for something that has not been mediated in these ways. I would suggest that the negotiators of any given relationship should move away from abstract notions of what it means to be faithful. Rather, they must concentrate on defining the terms of their particular relationship in order to clarify their situation within its singular context.

Armed with this backstory, our next installment will turn attention to the first of the films to be scrutinized in light of issues of fidelity: *EYES WIDE SHUT* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999). Here, Tom and Nicole have clearly experienced issues with the differences between the inner world of their thoughts, and the outer world of their actions. This all comes to a head in a mass orgy presided over by a choirmaster who manipulates synthesizers and samplers, the very technologies that lie at the heart of contemporary debates about originals versus their copies!

We’ll have a field day. Stay tuned...

Randolph Jordan interviews Richard Kerr elsewhere in this edition.

FOOTNOTES

1 Altman, Rick. “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound.” *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*. Rick Altman, ed. New York: Routledge, 1992. 15.

2 *ibid*:16.

3 *ibid*:16.

4 *ibid*:19.

5 *ibid*:24.

6 *ibid*:24.

7 *ibid*:26.

8 Lastra 2001:125.

9 *ibid*:127.

10 *ibid*:127.

11 Adorno, Theodor W. *THE RADIO SYMPHONY*. 1941. Reprinted in *Essays on Music*. Richard Leppert, ed. Susan H. Gillespie, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002:258.

12 Benjamin, Walter. *THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION*. Illuminations. Hannah Arendt, ed. Harry Zohn, trans. New York: Schocken Books, 1968: 217-252.

13 Lastra 2001:131.

14 Lastra 2001:132.

15 Adorno 2002: 252.

16 Lastra 2001: 126.

17 *ibid*. 138-39.

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