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Longing at the Found and Lost Telephones with a Memory



Doughnuts

In his introduction to *Sound Theory Sound Practice* (1992), Rick Altman reflects on the publication, twelve years earlier, of another collection of sound essays, *Cinema/Sound* (1980). He laments that, in retrospect, the articles in *Cinema/Sound*, “though conceived as a rehabilitation of the sound track, in all of its diversity...actually stresses only a very narrow range of sound-oriented concerns.”¹ The reason for this, he concludes, is that the methodologies employed and the objects examined “bear the stamp of its text-oriented era.” In *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, Altman proclaims the advent of a new era, one equally marked by its historical moment. In response to the insights offered by what he loosely refers to as “cultural studies,” Altman proposes a “different model,” a new way of thinking about cinema in general and the sound track in particular.² Instead of assuming that films are stable texts, he proposes that cinema be conceived of as an “event”—one in which cinema is seen “according to a new type of geometry. Floating in a gravity-free world like doughnut shaped spaceships, cinema events offer no clean-cut or stable separation between inside and outside or top and bottom.”³ In this three-dimensional model, the discrete cinematic text is understood only as a location of interchange between the work of production and the processes of reception. Any division between text and context is rendered as provisional, permeable, and fluctuating. Altman’s

model seeks to reincorporate within film studies everything that an exclusively “text centered” approach banishes or represses: the concrete, the fleeting, and the intangible; the historically, culturally, and geographically situated spectator; the influence of commerce; the architecture and conditions of exhibition spaces; the specificity of various media; the peculiarities of sound and image quality; the post-production process and its by-products; and the emotional state of the audience upon entering and leaving the theatre.

Certainly other cinema and sound scholars have articulated the epistemological limits of textual analysis, and these criticisms have effectively broadened the scope of the field of film studies. Altman’s writing distinguishes itself most notably as writing meant to alert and convert, an event unto itself—a manifesto. As Mary Ann Caws suggests, “The manifesto proclamation itself marks a moment, whose trace it leaves as a post-event commemoration. Often the event is exactly its own announcement and nothing more...At its height, it is the deictic genre par excellence: LOOK! It says. NOW! HERE!”⁴ As such the manifesto is a profoundly historical text. A text inspired by the troubles of the day, but one that demands also to be read ahistorically. The determinations of a text’s meanings are dependent upon its itinerant context; its expression seeks to be relative to the field of its present utterance. As I sit down to think through “my” text and object—the found answering machine cassette tape—I find my

attention drawn particularly to Altman's illustration of what a text resembles in this new field of film studies—"doughnuts flying through space."⁵ The "doughnuts" are rendered as a graphic sketch, multidimensional figures given volume through shading and shadow, squiggly cartoon-like lines trailing in their wake. This illustration indicates the animated, unpredictable and irreverent character of Altman's model. This tasty illustration is offered as a radical counterpoint to Altman's other conception represented by an illustration of the exclusively "text centered" era, the methodological past of film studies. This "past" is represented as a flattened solar system with the bright illuminating sun of "the text" at its center. The planets labeled "production," "reception," and "culture" rotate around the center, their trajectories defined by the forceful pull of the sun-text's powerful gravity. The "solar system" is an iconic model, one indelibly burned upon our collective consciousness, the representation of the known world post-enlightenment. Unlike the "doughnut" image, this one represents knowledge derived through rationalism, the drive for a unified master narrative: the sober discourse of science. One might assume that the two models cannot be understood as equivalents, but, as in all manifestos, Altman's seemingly humorous juxtaposition, "takes itself and its own spoof seriously. The manifesto moment positions itself between what has been done and what will be done, between the accomplished and its potential, in a radicalizing and energizing division."⁶ And yet, despite the seemingly irreconcilable differences between what these two illustrations represent—stasis/movement, serious/frivolous, past/future—the solar system and the doughnut share certain formal and thematic characteristics. Both models are conceived of as circles, yet the solar system's center is solid and fixed while the doughnut's center is, of course, empty. A bright sun or a black hole? What we might at first perceive as a radical opposition is, on second glance, perhaps better described as an inversion. Whether the text is centered or nowhere to be found, the question of its meaning is still distributed within a circular economy. But the goal of Altman's manifesto, it seems, is not to definitively describe what is or is not a text but rather to reanimate key conceptual questions. What is a cinematic text here and now? What historical

and material contexts are included in its present designation? What can we do with a text, and what can it do to us in this moment? As film studies opens up to the challenge of examining ephemeral objects, cinematic by-products, para-cinematic texts, add-ons, cast-aways and hand-me-downs, Altman's contrasting models of thought—the solar system or the doughnut—serve as a compelling reminder that retreating into textual analysis and auteur-centered approaches may provide a kind of legitimacy, but they do not necessarily promise simply sticky-sweet rewards. Whatever knowledge we produce about visual/aural texts in this moment can also be produced by desire and fleeting indulgences, needs or present hungers, sweetness and things forbidden and possibly bad, the personal and the embodied, and objects clinging to the edges of legitimacy as much as by big theory, sober discourses, or empirical research. The doughnut hole may not be so empty.



The Found and Lost

I have a particular interest in second hand stores.

The experience of being around things that are old and worn, the recently outmoded, the broken, the forgotten, and the discarded fascinates me. This fascination arises from a curious mixture of feelings: the nostalgic recognition of some object from my childhood, the thrill of finding something "precious" in the midst of so much "junk," the raw encounter with objects that bear the marks of their journey from "origin to trace,"⁷ the sense of cheap abundance. The thrift store is the place where I devise and begin assembling my collections—miniature porcelain dogs, picture frames, and answering machine cassette tapes. Another reason for my enduring interest in thrift stores is that it is a space where I feel quite comfortable trying on and buying men's clothes. The usual kinds of gender policing that go on in what I will call the "first hand" stores is absent or at least qualitatively different in a second hand store. By "gender policing" I mean the segregation of the physical space between a men's and women's side and the corresponding "proper" dressing rooms usually staffed by an attendant who displays the "properly" gendered appearance or affect. In the 'first hand' store, this system is most forcefully enacted at the



The Electronic "Secretary"

dressings room, a space invested with the same kind of symbolic energy as public restrooms. It is a place where the unsettled and unresolved nature of "sexual difference" is disavowed through the fantasy of its absolute reducibility to a naked and revealed body. In contrast, the second hand store also uses an explicit and familiar system of classification such as "men's clothes," "women's clothes," "children," and "housewares," but everyone knows that zones of categorization are not to be relied upon, that they lack the authority to describe, legislate, or enforce. The second hand store is usually so chaotically organized, over-stuffed and under-staffed that one feels perfectly entitled to re-shelve objects based upon whim or need. A pair of pants that seemed desirable when I was looking at them back in aisle one, after a second look, can be put back on the rack in aisle five. And then there are the "secret stashes"—shirts hidden behind books, books hidden behind shoes, concealed so that the person who secreted the item can come back later with money or their girlfriend to get it. And the feeling that this behavior is acceptable in this space is reinforced by the many built-in levels of arbitrariness at work throughout the second hand store.

Beyond the randomness produced by the customer, there is a more basic arbitrary system that

is produced through the way that the second hand store receives and distributes its wares. Clothes, objects, materials are donated, and then it is the job of the employees to evaluate the items and to decide on the proper location for each item at hand. For example, presented with bags and boxes of clothing, the employee must classify these objects based on their knowledge of an assortment of colors, solids, patterns and fabrics, some from recent decades, but many of uncertain historical origin or geographic location. Unlike the "first hand" store, where a shirt arrives with a predetermined gender designation and commodity status which are vigilantly reinforced through a variety of systems (store design, product display, advertising, etc.), objects arrive at thrift stores without explicit designation or status. The organization of the second hand store, and the placement of objects within it, is the result of how an individual employee classifies an object based on their initial "reading" of it. The employee's "expertise" at evaluation and recognition is what determines the identity and value of any given object. So, the classification system of a second hand store, the "truth" of any given object in this context, is based on recognition and/or mis-recognition. Within this context, it is important to note that discourses of gender, among other things, play out through the work of identification

and classification by individual employees. So, Mrs. Jones's petite blazer is displayed under a sign reading "BOYS' JACKETS," while Mr. Williams's madras plaid shorts, so high waisted and made from such delicately woven and muted fabric, are placed in "BETTER WOMEN'S CLOTHING." And, it is not only gender maintenance, but also all kinds of systems and structures that open onto the opportunity for misrecognition in the space of a second hand store. The truthfulness of this assertion is evidenced, at least partly, by the ubiquity of "dressing rooms" in second hand stores, spaces that are for the most part curiously non-gendered.

The apparent randomness of categorization in thrift stores seems intimately tied to the explicit reason why objects are there in the first place—they are used. Objects in a thrift store reference the body of some unknown individual as they emit traces of their previous uses—goo, smells, and stains. I have taken to carrying "handy wipes" with me for encounters with a crumpled handkerchief in a jacket pocket or the mysterious sticky substance that coats my hand after holding a children's book. In their study of the cultural role of second hand stores in Britain, Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe observe that, "charity shoppers appear to have distinct limits, boundaries, which they constitute through the purchase of second hand clothing. So, in answer to the question 'is there anything which you'd never look at in a charity shop?' we were consistently and without hesitation told 'underwear' by everyone we interviewed. Moreover, the majority went on to add nightwear, shoes, and bedding to their list."⁸ It doesn't seem coincidental that shoppers feel the need to impose strict "limits" at or near objects that have come in to repeated contact with zones of the body associated with excretions, areas where distinctions between inside and outside are most destabilized—the genitals and the anus. Outer garments don't bear the inscription of another's body with the same indexicality as underwear or sheets, but this example provides a clear illustration of the processes of reception that every object in a thrift store is subject to. That is, shoppers must negotiate the threshold between desire—the ability to see yourself in the object and to make it yours, and disgust—the inability to re-contextualize or wrench it away from the physical

trace of its original context.

I think of a second hand store as a "found and lost." I use the phrase "found and lost," of course, as a deliberate inversion of the more familiar phrase "lost and found" in the hopes that this simple maneuver, like Altman's own inversion of the "solar system" into a "doughnut," re-animates questions of naming and meaning that attend to the context of the second hand store. The "lost and found" is a place where narratives of ownership and belonging become narratives of preservation and stability. To establish ownership, of course, requires papers, accountability, documentation, proof, and evidence. The "found and lost," by contrast, is a place where narratives of ownership and belonging become narratives of destabilization and fluidity, where the identity of any object is produced through re-finding and desire. Like Altman's inversion, my maneuver doesn't signal a radical break but is rather a recasting of enduring modes and paradigms. In a thrift store, the identity of an object lies *both* in its intended function and its other repressed or unintended uses. So, trying on and buying 'men's clothes' in a thrift store is an activity produced through levels of intention, interpretation and mediation. "Men's clothes" is a classification now produced somewhere in the gaps between the object's "original" naming and intention, its travels through various contexts and uses, possible opportunities at play within its new field of constraints, and my desire and my limits. Of course, the work of re-signification occurs within a larger context of decreased value, eroded worth, or insignificance, and so localized acts of gender deregulation may have little or no effect on the larger institutions that also serve to define and sustain it. At the very least the second hand store offers momentary and localized opportunities for de-familiarization and re-signification of materials and their meanings. It is here, in this context, that one most often finds discarded analog answering machines, a technology now obsolete, almost completely usurped by digital answering machines, voice mail, instant messaging, and email. Dirty white or faux wood paneled, analog answering machines sit on the shelf next to electric typewriters, fax machines, boom boxes, VHS cameras and players, record players, 'not' cable ready televisions—technologies that no longer transport us or our

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imaginations into the future. The analog answering machine and its cassette tapes are now available in this revised technological context to people who can't afford newer digital systems, or to those who want to be enthralled by the lives of people who once used these now "primitive" technologies. For tape-based answering machines emit not only odor and goo, but also sound and voice.

Telephones with a Memory

How to understand answering machine cassette tapes? The answer to this question lies somewhere between the work of its production and the process of its use. In the case of production, the answering machine tape is like other "domestic" recordings made on consumer grade recording devices such as the snapshot or the home movie. Like these other forms, the answering machine tape is defined both by the materiality of its particular technology and the generic conventions associated with its use.

Most analog answering machines use two cassettes—one for outgoing and one for incoming messages. Outgoing messages are usually recorded on a thirty second looping cassette and most often suggest to the caller what information they should leave on the incoming message tape. Incoming calls are recorded on a thirty or sixty minute cassette and are recorded one after the other in a linear sequence. In addition to recording an outgoing and incoming message, most analog answering machines allow for phone conversations to be recorded as they occur while some machines allow for "memos" to be recorded through an embedded microphone. Analog answering machine use began to spread during the 1970s, and by 1985 the technology had "found a place in the daily life" of telephone communications.⁹ At the height of its popularity, the analog answering machine was the most widely used of all sound recording technologies and was integrated into the vast majority of phone systems in the United States. What is particular to the analog answering machine, and what distinguishes it from the other phone related technologies that have replaced it, is the artifact that it leaves behind—the cassette recording. Answering machine recordings should be understood historically, culturally, aesthetically, personally, and materially.

My specific concern is with the intersections

of text and context as they relate to answering machine cassettes and how the space of discovery, the "found and lost" of the second hand store, situates the texts overheard on these cassettes. If systems and structures can open up to new meanings in the space of a second hand store, then what new opportunities for meaning production are made available through the answering machine tape? How is this particular text produced in the gaps between its "original" intention and subsequent travels through various contexts and uses and its interaction with my desire and my limits? Through this antiquated technology, how did, or does, the phone call become reconfigured or revealed?

Liberated from its original context, and now available to us in the "found and lost," the answering machine cassette becomes a device that transforms the ephemeral conversation of the phone call into an object of history and the archive, a thing to be replayed, studied, and re-contextualized. In his history of the answering machine, David Morton recounts the troubled beginnings of this technology first invented by Valdemar Paulsen in 1901. His machine, the "telegraphone," marketed as the "the phone with a memory," went into its initial production around 1910 but failed to catch on with the public. Despite the initial excitement about this technology, the "memorializing" quality of the recorded phone call created considerable anxiety for both phone company executives and customers alike. Morton writes:

AT&T took a stronger interest in the telegraphone after 1930 because of the belief among its top management that it was of considerable importance to the company. They believed it was a breakthrough in the technical sense, but that its unrestrained use might decimate the telephone business. The main objection within AT&T to the telephone recorder was the fact that it threatened the privacy of calling. Executives knew from experience that many people relished the idea of listening in on others' conversations but at the same time they hated the idea that they themselves might be the subject of eavesdropping.¹⁰

The desire to listen, it seems, is matched



only by the anxiety produced at the thought of having one's intimate conversations revealed and publicized. So, like other items in a second hand store, the answering machine cassette tape refers back to a life and therefore stands as an indexical link to some body. Accordingly, its meanings are negotiated across the threshold of desire (the ability to see yourself in the object and to make it yours) and disgust (the inability to re-contextualize or wrench it away from its original context). Some of

us might "mis-recognize" what we hear, think that the banal, the tragic, and deeply personal messages contained on the tapes are there for us. These fragments of other people's lives, never intended for the ears of strangers, may have something to say about not just those speaking, but also those listening. The recorded phone call can be text whose reference, like a manifesto or a deictic expression, is determined by its context: "Hi. It's me. Are you home?" Are you there? Are you listening?

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Notes

1. Rick Altman, "General Introduction: Cinema as an Event" in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.
2. Altman, *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, 2.
3. Altman, *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, 3.
4. Mary Ann Caws, "The Poetics of the Manifesto, Nowness and Newness" in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xx.
5. Altman, *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, 2.
6. Mary Ann Caws, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, xxi.
7. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 134.
8. Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, *Second Hand Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 158.
9. David Morton, *Off The Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 133.
10. David Morton, *Off The Record*, 114.