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Pillow, Talk: Kaitlin Prest's The Shadows and the Elements of Modern Audio Fiction

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Abstract

This essay is a study of *The Shadows* (2018), a series produced by Kaitlin Prest and Phoebe Wang for CBC Podcasts. I situate the work in the framework of Prest's career after her podcast *The Heart*, and argue that *The Shadows* crystallises a set of conventions about "audio fiction" that set it apart from "audio drama," "radio features" and other similar forms, at least at this particular historical moment. These conventions include: the embrace of naive themes; a preference for retroversion or 'queer temporality'; a focus on body sound; multiplication in mixing and editing that comes across as a multiplication of voice and consciousness; the prominence of inanimate objects as orienters; and an aesthetic of suspended poignance.

Keywords

Audio Fiction, Kaitlin Prest, Phoebe Wang, The Heart, The Shadows, Love, Feminism, Sex, Radio

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By Neil Verma

The Shadows: an audio fiction podcast in six episodes.
Produced by Kaitlin Prest and Phoebe Wang for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
LISTEN AT https://www.cbc.ca/radio/podcasts/the-shadows/

Revered veterans, weirdo sound artists, renegade provocateurs: *The Heart* may be the only podcast on whose daring and *brio* nearly everyone in the expanded radio world can agree.

Starting out in 2008 as the sex-positive feminist radio show *Audio Smut,* hosted by Kaitlin Prest at Montréal's CKUT, the show moved online after three years, deepening its exploration of gender, sex and power as it entered then-uncharted podcast space. Soon Prest moved to New York with collaborator Mitra Kaboli. *Audio Smut* continued for two and a half more years, its works attracting fans such as audio dramatist Jonathan Mitchell and producers Glynn Washington and Andrea Silenzi. By the time it was remade into *The Heart*, the show had more than 25,000 subscribers and showcased an impressive group of writers, mixers and editors, including over the years, Shani Aviram, Sharon Mashihi and Phoebe Wang.

It was the right moment. In the wake of 2014's *Serial*, New York's podcasting scene ballooned. The city was "radio heaven" to Prest. And it was around that time that ambitious new networks formed, including Radiotopia, the outfit where Prest's group found a home. At the time, U.S. podcasting was being enriched by a wave of mid-career public radio producers experimenting with the form, which resulted in programs that sounded better than ever, even if (let's be honest) many were somewhat middle-aged in tone and subject matter. Not so with Prest's work, which struck the ear as candid, queer, vulnerable. I sometimes make my students blush by playing "The Shit," a short exploring exactly the sexual fetish you think it's about, or "Afternoon Delight," a reflection on public masturbation.

The latter is now and then installed in public listening events, including a recent "sound sauna" at the Tempo Festival in Finland, because of course it was.

Although *The Heart* is more of an art collective than a radio show, Prest as its host has inevitably become a cult figure. It is only lately that we even have a discussion of "auteur" theory in radio in the North American context, and these are mostly focused on historical figures such as Joe Frank and Norman Corwin (Leland 2018; Smith and Verma 2016). Some writers have sought the same in podcasting, waiting with bated breath for a breakthrough figure to inspire a generation, a Jean-Luc Godard or Velvet Underground. In a 2017 tour-de-force essay on audio criticism, Sarah Montague has put Prest forward to help fill this role, likening her work to that of experimental filmmakers such as Barbara Hammer for her frank approach to power, gender and sex (Montague 2017). That sounds right. Prest reminds me a lot of punk author Kathy Acker; when *The Heart* talks about fucking around, it isn't fucking around.

The show's focus on interrogating the politics of desire, particularly when it comes to women's and queer experience, has manifested in (among others) the award-winning "Mariya," about a woman struggling with sex after female genital mutilation,[1] the "Pansies" series on femme expression, as well as their recent "No" series, a highly personal exploration of consent. Listen to these pieces, and it feels like your earbuds are doing something that matters, for once. The show lends force to Kate Lacey's idea that the ethics of speaking suggests an ethics of listening (Lacey 2013; 182-99). We have a responsibility not just to "listen in", Lacey argues, but to *listen out* for voices that aren't so easy on our ears, to travel away from the self. Nothing makes for better radio than empathy, but nothing is worse than empathy as a mere alibi—empathy that flatters us and affirms our values but at the end of the day asks nothing of us.

The Heart rarely makes that error, and the result has been surprisingly good for business. Several pieces have been featured on high-profile programs such as *Snap Judgment* and *Radiolab*. Others have blazed new paths in the area of "audio fiction," such as "Strangers in a Small Café," featured on Serendipity. In 2015 Prest won both the Prix Italia and the first Hearsay award for "Movies in Your Head," perhaps their most widely heard piece. "Movies" sounded different from many other kinds of audio fiction thanks to work by composer Shani Aviram, as

[1] Reviewed by Michele Hilmes in *RadioDoc Review*, Vol 3, (2): https://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol3/iss2/8/

well as Prest's own research into perceptions about love, two elements that fed a fictional narrative about how imagined relationships distort reality around us.

But don't be fooled. Prest's work never leaves the world behind. In the first episode of "No," she mentions her high school stood between two cemeteries. Too perfect, I thought. On a whim, I googled it. Guess what? There are the headstones, in pixellated rows across Country Road 43. Prest's flourish is as likely to be close observation as her close observation is to be flourish.

Heartstopper

Today Prest is at a crossroads. *The Heart* has been put on hiatus and she has moved to Toronto. She has also become a kind of celebrity. In October she gave the keynote at the Third Coast International Audio Festival, where producer Phoebe Wang also received an award and gave a barn-burner of a speech exhorting radio to hire, promote and value people of color (Wang 2018). Over the last year, Wang and Prest have been researching and realising a new multi-episode work called *The Shadows* that was teased in social media for months and finally emerged in early autumn.

First conceived as an expanded revision of "Movies in Your Head," but one that would use a season-based model, *The Shadows* is a six-part semi-autobiographical work that took a year to research, record and create, mostly in and around Toronto. Prest spent upwards of 80 hours recording with one of the principal players alone, something unheard of in the audio drama world. On first listen, it is surprisingly quaint. Set in a fictional city of Mont Yuron (an amalgam of Toronto, Montréal and New York), the piece follows a puppeteer—named "Kaitlin Prest," played by herself—as she falls in and out of love with another puppeteer (Charlie, played by sound artist Mitchell Akiyama), while pining for a secret side lover (Devon, played by musician and artist Johnny Spence), and featuring an imaginative passage on the erotic life of Devon's borrowed sweater, which comes to life with Wang's voice. That one will be your favorite episode.

A wry sketch of what CBC listeners will recognise as a certain community of Anglophone Montrealers—and a portrait of the artist as a horny twenty-something—*The Shadows* is destined to be a touchstone for the field that we now call "audio fiction," a form mostly made by producers and writers who began in nonfiction and who resist both the heavy-handed genre concepts that drive

podcast-based audio drama and the theatrical qualities of traditional radio drama. Think of producers such as Ann Heppermann and Martin Johnson, Pejk Malinovski, Ross Sutherland, Jessie Borelle and Jon Tjhia, as well as feature-makers with literary sensibilities such as Cathy FitzGerald and Sarah Boothroyd, and veterans like Joe Frank, Jonathan Goldstein, Marjorie Van Halteren and Gregory Whitehead. Although Prest and her team found some inspiration in a variety of visual narrative media, my students say that "audio fiction" like this is more profitably compared to radio documentaries or literature than to film, TV, or even radio plays. Put *The Shadows* alongside a feature by Piers Plowright or Alan Hall, or a story by Woolf or Joyce, rather than "The War of the Worlds" or *Girls*.

Beyond that, the genre's features are hard to articulate. Luckily, *The Shadows* has done it for us. In this paper, I'd like to point out six conventions in Prest's work that can help to define audio fiction in terms of its themes, structures and strategies. I use "convention" here in Raymond Williams's sense, a "coming together" of aesthetic attributes as performed at a particular cultural, social and historical site. For Williams, a dramatic convention is not simply a technique or method that an artist might use. Rather "it embodies in itself those emphases, omissions, valuations, interests, indifferences which compose a way of seeing life, of drama as part of life" (Williams 1991: 165).

Of course, there are the usual caveats. First, I'm trying to describe not proscribe. What works for Prest and Wang won't work for every aspiring audio fiction enthusiast, nor should it. Second, this is a partial list. There are surely more elements than the ones I'm enumerating here, as well as some obvious ones I'm omitting on purpose. It's true, for instance, that audio fiction like *The Shadows* blends reality and fantasy, but so do lots of other narrative radio genres, so that won't get us very far. Finally, I'm not saying *The Shadows* is the "origin" for any one of its techniques, only the clearest crystallisation of them that I happen to have heard. Whatever you think of it, it's a piece that clarifies questions facing audio fiction, even if it can't answer all of them.

Those caveats aside, I confess that I do think that even as it dances toward an end for love, *The Shadows* could be the start of something for art. Yes, it is a bit shambolic and self-frustrated — what exciting work isn't? — but it remains the most important piece of its kind this year. With that in mind, here are six theses

on conventions of modern audio fiction for which I believe *The Shadows* is a rewarding reference.

Embracing Naïvete

A story about *the meaning of love*? Honestly? *Heterosexual* love, in this day and age?

Yes and no. While narration does play the sackcloth-and-ashes routine ("What is it that destines a love to die?"), it also seems mortified by the sheer squareness of the tale. Some of the weakest parts are normative love-movie clichés — a call from Charlie's patron pulling his grant because he has been distracted by a manic pixie dream girl; Devon's bullshit excuse for cheating on his wife "I love my wife … but there are different kinds of love." By contrast, the most authentic erotic touch comes when Sweater describes the experience of a kiss, and its most whimsical moments (a puppet show about polyamorous socks, for instance) abandon love's meaning for play. When I interviewed her for this article, Prest emphasised that she envisioned *The Shadows* as an assault on the myth of love, an anti-love story, an effort to deconstruct the pernicious myths that had so far guided her own life. Podcast critic Wil Williams put it this way: "*The Shadows* doesn't exist to play into tropes: it exists to force the listener to reconcile the tropes they've been fed with the reality of how actual people think, behave, and exist." (Williams, W, 2018).

Indeed, the piece feels most in its own skin when Kaitlin expresses scouring self-criticism and incredulity toward how unqueer it all is, mocking her own romantic fantasies. The piece satirises the desire to be what your lover wants (at one point she fantasises about seducing hyper-organised Charlie with "sexy spreadsheets") with increasing unease. The level of sincerity with which the piece approaches the concept of love is murky. What is Prest's title about, for example? Early, she presents Charlie with a juvenile puppet play about the scumbled shadows in Plato's allegory of the cave. Later on, the two work together on a performance and they learn to "be the shadow of the puppet" together. In the penultimate episode, Prest muses about how her sacrifices "build up into a dark shadow" that hover over the relationship. In all cases, shadows mark illusion, reversal, venom, smoke, not true love.

After all, *The Shadows* is less about love than it is about lovers as mutually

problematic objects. Just listen to the fifth episode, as Kaitlin and Charlie cement their relationship and cut off from their friends, careers and passions to care for one another. They begin to utter punctuating lines simultaneously ("The joy of making a sacrifice for the one you love" "Depriving oneself for a greater cause"), and enumerate one another's pet behaviors. Who is the figure in spotlight, who is the shadow? Either way, they're insufferable—especially to one another.

But these scenes are also incredibly rich, evoking for me Lauren Berlant's notion of what she calls "cruel optimism." For Berlant, optimism begins with a desire or attachment in which the object, scene or person seems to make open a cluster of promises for us; optimism becomes cruel when even though the loss of promises can't be endured, the object that bears them simultaneously threatens our flourishing and even our well-being. The result of losing that object isn't just the loss of love, but the loss of hope. "Where cruel optimism operates," she writes, "the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place" (Berlant 2011:24-25). Love is an outstanding example of the phenomenon, so is obsessive appetite, patriotism, even just working for a living in capitalist economies. What *The Shadows* says about the vexing impossibility of love — and, also, about how impossible love's impossibility can feel—allegorises a familiar trap in early 21st century life.

That's the first lesson about audio fiction that *The Shadows* offers, I think: naïveté of theme appears as an artistic deficit, yet it also becomes a doorway for raw experience.

Retroversion and Queer Temporality

Jack Halberstam has a highly useful idea of "queer temporality," which is meant to capture a nonreproductive approach to temporality that expresses skepticism toward traditional life-cycle passages emphasised by middle class values (Halberstam 2005). For Halberstam, at the core of heteronormativity is a timeline for our lives that is organised around family, longevity, security and inheritance, from which any deviation is pathologised. Pathology, of course, is in this idiom a social mechanism for excluding anyone who operates in queer ways, places or times. *The Shadows* has just this quandary; more than love, it is reproductive, normative time that Kaitlin struggles to rationalise to herself throughout the

course of events. What is the piece if not a failed attempt to put a heterosexual mode of behavior into a queer time?

It's what the structure of *The Shadows* struggles with, too. Across and within episodes there are a number of shifts of what I call "audioposition," a term meant to indicate where we are in the world of the fiction according to what we hear (Verma 2012). We "hear" Episode One from Kaitlin's audioposition; Episode Two shows us the same events from Charlie's; Episode Three is heard from the audioposition of Sweater and overlaps with four separate episodes. The remaining episodes entangle and then disentangle the sound worlds of Kaitlin and Charlie. To help us decode analeptic shifts in the disjointed narrative, repeated phrases act like red threads:

"I want to say I love you but I feel like it's too soon."
"Does that mean I'm your girlfriend?"

Each of these lines of dialogue appears in a single chronology twice, in separate episodes that tell the same set of events from another perspective. In each case they are contextualised differently, depending on the character whose audioposition we share.

Consider one of the last lines in the second episode, "Charlie ... I need to tell you something." It isn't until two episodes later that we learn that this "something" is that Devon (who we only now know to be a rival love) will be visiting the city, and Kaitlin is about to give a phoney excuse to spend time with him. These phrases clarify plot sequence, but at the same time they also shift our allegiances — the first time we hear Kaitlin wants to tell Charlie something, we think she is about to confess her feelings, but the second time around she comes off as a liar. Underneath those shifts, these repetitions also give the series a quality of *déjà entendu*.

In narratology, the time-shifting that Prest employs over the course of the three first episodes is called "internal retroversion." Things happen, then we circle back and hear them happen again, but this time we realise that there had been a gap in information before. As theorist Mieke Bal has observed, events presented in more than one light like this are "both identical and different" in the course of the narrative (Bal 2004: 90). Enough retroversion, though, and the very notion of the

availability of stable linear time, of moving toward security and longevity, erodes. What Kaitlin is considering working toward with Charlie is, it seems, the very thing the sequencing of the plot is working against.

The Shadows Nose

One productive way to listen to *The Shadows* is to focus on breathing, on sounds that come from the ecstatic gut, the mucus-covered glottis, the groggy larynx, the sloppy tongue, and especially the expressive nose. In a famous essay on the "grain" of the voice, theorist Roland Barthes linked an erotics of the voice to such a "bodily" approach, neglecting the adjectives we typically use to admire song and instead seeking out a noun, "the body in the voice as it sings" — the marks of materiality that stand outside of language, that thing that rubs against the song when we sing it (Barthes 1977). Ask not whether the singer's voice is on pitch, if it is voluptuous or clear; instead ask how many teeth she has, how much she drinks, what the shape of her vocal folds are, guess the length of the frenulum connecting her gums to her lips. Barthes's approach is compelling and paradoxical because it is an unashamed erotics of the voice, subjectivity itself, which at the same time insists on "facts" about the voice, objectivity itself.

Audio fiction takes Barthes on, overthrowing the tyranny of the throat in traditional radiophonic expression, instead focusing on the resonances of faces and bodies. Charlie's first appearance is through the sound of exhalation, as he rehearses with Kaitlin at her mentor's studio; they pant together before they speak together. Ignore the words in *The Shadows* entirely, and its story is still told by bodies. Charlie is a nose breather. Kaitlin favours her mouth, and has high whispery tones that fill the whole soundscape of the series. Devon's voice is silky smooth, full of lung; when he and Kaitlin meet on a train in Newfoundland, they do little more than sigh, one after the other. The focus of bodily expression also changes over the course of the work. When Kaitlin dumps him, the sighing Devon is reduced to a snotty, sniffly mess filtered by the phone. By the end of Kaitlin and Charlie's relationship, Kaitlin narrates break-up sex as an external narrator, from clinical distance. We hear less and less of the facts of their faces as they face up to the facts.

Note that we hear these bodies from extremely close. The technique is distinct from audio drama, where we are often encouraged to imaginatively position

upright bodies in larger space, like figures on a chessboard, which is why the emphasis is usually on footsteps, doorways and other thresholds. Audio fiction, by contrast, doesn't need to communicate distant coordinates or fast choreography of heroes and villains chasing down endless alleyways. Everything and everyone the story needs is nearby. Indeed, although there are location markers—the restaurant at Kaitlin's bullshit waitress job, the sound of a drum circle at a famous Montréal monument, the signature screech of the Toronto subway—for the most part the kinetic world of the play happens inches from the bodies of its characters, or closer. *The Shadows* tells us about its characters by how they breathe near one another, not by how they walk around one another. That's why it feels perfectly natural to take on the audioposition of a sweater, and why the series is at its most "visual" not on the puppetry stage, but in bed.

This microsonic approach is accentuated by recording technique. Although Prest and Wang had world-class mics and studios available—narration was recorded with a Neumann U87, a peerless mic for voice—they opted mostly for location recording, which was done with cheap Zoom H1 stereo recorders held by the actors themselves, in their own apartments, in their own bedrooms, often after long conversations and coffee, as well as a rigorous discussion of boundaries before things got steamy. The double stereo recorder technique produced a lot of headaches for logging tape, but it is what made possible purely sonic shifts of perspective from one version of a scene to another, when both audiopositions occur in separate episodes. The technique also has obvious ramifications for the "grain" of the whole series, as it picks up all manner of sonic detritus, such as sloppy plosives, muttering and sniffling, words and phrases whispered so low you nearly miss them. Even mic handling noise is not discarded, lending the piece the imprimatur of *vérité*.

It's a felicitous choice, if you care about exciting sound and sharp dialogue delivery. And thanks to its emphasis on shallow sonic fields of the human body, *The Shadows* is to my ears the first audio drama anywhere to get pillow talk right.

Texture, Shock, Multiplication

Let's talk about mixing and editing. On first listen, you will find in *The Shadows* extended runs of fast scenes that come across as flurries of working, eating, walking, playing and humping that rapidly change scene, format and tense. Voices

that we are used to hearing in slow, mature ways suddenly become childlike, and vice versa. Facts pass by too quickly (Charlie smokes pot every day?) to follow up on. The effect can be comical. When Kaitlin and Devon have their tryst, we hear a sex scene, followed by a singing scene, followed by another sex scene, followed by bedroom banter, then more sex, then a call to Charlie, all in about a minute. These rapid sequences also expand the world of the piece. Note the use of the voices of Prest's real and imagined friends in her head throughout *The Shadows*, in a mode I've elsewhere called kaleidosonic, in this case used to interiorise a chosen family of voices into the pinpoint of Kaitlin's thoughts (Verma 2012). Her mind is never quiet, never alone, in fact it is a whole village that unfurls in musically-phrased sequences that move to a thudding, intensifying beat. Kaleidosonic aesthetics make communities out of individuals.

In this case, the technique lends the show flow, texture, and movement. It densifies the work and speeds up time. Contrast that with another strategy we also hear in *The Shadows*, one based on shock and reversal. The first episode begins with an instance of this. Kaitlin asks about how love ends and begins, a sequence punctuated with sobbing scenes of breakup, but then quickly segues to a young baby crying, then a chugging hardcore song, with hoarse lyrics ("A new life begins …"). The sequence conveys the sort of conflict once fetishised by early montage theorists. It also disturbs our sense of tone. Is this supposed to be touching, frank, funny? It's unclear.

Other reversals are more jarring. Episode Two starts with a long sequence of Charlie's fantasised headlines about future fame as a puppeteer, which feeds in to an imagined interview with NPR icon Terry Gross, but it's the real Terry Gross, playing herself, which sends a Brechtian ripple across the texture of the story. Another alienation occurs when a scene of stifled arguments between Kaitlin and Charlie ("we're fighting over what we've given up over one another") segues to the real Kaitlin's interviews with her real parents about the happiness of their marriage. In Episode Six, Kaitlin's reverie about what it felt like to masturbate as a young Catholic girl ("ashamed, disgusted, and confused") is cut off by uncontextualised vomiting; it takes several moments until we learn that we are in the present now, and Kaitlin is at a wedding in the Catskills, hurting after too much booze.

Smooth kaleidosonic sequences and shock/reversal editing choices are integral to audio fiction as it is being practised here, but they are just a backdrop to an even more defining method, one emphasising multiplicity. There are several points in the narrative in which two temporalities of voice—character narrator, and character in scene—overlap with a third. When Kaitlin and Charlie kiss for the first time, for example, we hear three separate Kaitlin voices speaking to us, a narrator, the character, and a "second-self" that second-guesses everything ("is this because we're drunk?"). Later, sixteen minutes or so in to Episode Four, as Kaitlin debates a possible future with Devon and one with Charlie, I count 29 separate overlapping phrase fragments emerging in just sixty seconds, distributed in various places across the width of the stereo image as Prest accuses, absolves, denigrates and vindicates herself in a maddeningly recursive loop.

"Everything would be fine if I could just ask Charlie to be in an open relationship."
"Yeah, but would it really?"
"My obsession with Devon feels like a full-time job..."
"While I'm working the other full-time job which is spending as much time as humanly possible naked with Charlie..."
"While I'm working my part time job of waitressing..."
"While I'm working—"
"The job that I've always wanted"
"— which is having actual real puppetry contracts"
"Like love might not be finite but the hours of the day are …"

The sequence pops out like spattered paint as it devolves into self-frustration. In audio drama the stereo image is usually like a frame or stage, here it is more like a canvas or page. And the fragmentation it emphasises persists even after she makes a decision:

Kaitlin as Narrator: "In the end, I decide, I'm never going to tell Charlie"
Kaitlin on the Right: "It's *your* body, *your* heart."
Kaitlin on the Left: "That is so dishonest and fucked up."
Charlie: "What's wrong?"
Kaitlin: "Nothing."

In audio fiction, editing multiplies difference within voices, and by correlation, within characters. Consciousness is chaos in stereo space. I am reminded of

Gregory Whitehead's notion of how to approach the voice in radio. "The fact is, we cannot find our voice just by using it," he writes. "We must be willing to cut it out of our throats, put it on the autopsy table, isolate and savor the various quirks and pathologies, then stitch it back together and see what happens. The voice, then, not as something which is found, but as something which is written." (Whitehead 2001: 90)

Unlike in audio drama, which has almost always used stereo to achieve the illusion of space that is supposed to resolve in the listener's mind, audio fiction uses the stereo image as an autopsy table for the layering of experience, creating something that can't be rigorously disciplined. This is why these sequences are so unlike antecedent radio pieces about mental distress, like Arch Oboler's "Alter Ego" in 1938, Arthur Kopit's "Wings" in 1978 and Marjorie Van Halteren and Jay Allison's "Breakdown and Back" in 1985. Audio fiction wants to unfurl the multiplicity of the self, but not in a way that promises resolution, instead leaving it hanging like sheets in the air.

It will come as no surprise that *The Shadows* never had a real script. Most tape was improvised by actors, including moments between official scenes, with narration worked out later. During production, Prest felt a little embarrassed by the lack of a script, but that seems to have passed. When I asked her what she learned about her own practice by making *The Shadows*, the answer was unequivocal: "I write with sound, and I know that now."

A Turn Toward "Things"

In her classic book *Queer Phenomenologies*, Sara Ahmed writes of how our understandings of sexuality are bound up in our understanding of positionality, of "orientation" and all that word implies. This idea leads her to an engagement with the phenomenology of Husserl, considering how seemingly inert objects play a role in perception. "We are turned toward things … Things make an impression upon us," Ahmed writes. "We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us insofar as we share a residency with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things." For Ahmed, objects give us orientation in the world, just as our particular orientation in the world gives objects their status as objects relative to us (Ahmed, S 2006: 27).

Bear that in mind when you consider Sweater, a speaking object passed from Devon to Kaitlin when they first meet, star of the surrealist third episode, and (let's face it) the only really likeable character in *The Shadows*. Of course, Sweater is not the only fetishised object in the piece. At one point Charlie gets obsessed with cocooning his finger with Kaitlin's finger through wax; later on Kaitlin's love letters to Devon get insistent, "I want you in my toothpaste." The microphone itself is another key object. In a scene at the airport, we hear the mic crushed between Devon and Kaitlin's bodies, a scene that oddly gives us great intimacy and great distance at once, as the mic struggles to connect the sound of their heartbeats. All of these objects reflect orientations of desire; it is as though desire couldn't exist without them.

Human-object relations are, I am convinced, central to audio fiction. Small wonder that Sweater is the most significant orienting presence in *The Shadows*. It knows systems of exchange and gift ("the lending of a sweater is a sacred message"), it knows where it comes from (a sheep named Gladys), it knows what love is ("Providing a barrier between the tender skin and the winds of the cruel city") and it knows what it wants, the coveted place of "favourite" sweater, the love of its owner. The fiction does all it can to mark Sweater with abject fluids—sweat, tears, saliva, snot, ketchup, sex—to make it disgusting, but it also does all it can to give it as rich an imaginative life as anyone else in the story, with lovely passages of sweater sex and fantasies of marrying Kaitlin, in the first human-sweater relationship sanctioned by law.

By the end of the episode, all this changes. Kaitlin has scorned Devon and elected to wash all the effluvial humours associated with him from Sweater, which is now again diminished from its role as an object of love and revealed instead to be a mere mediator of love between others. We hear a series of tortures: the long-unwashed sweater having its memories dissolving in suds; an amusing but destructive tumble-dry sequence that oscillates between our earbuds; and overtop of melodramatic strings, in the single most closely-miked detail in the entire series, the sound of moths chewing it up. It's like a jealous ritual designed to take Sweater from us as listeners, a literal dis-orientation of the listener from the world of the fiction and the object through which we achieved residence within it.

The Search for Exquisite Loss

The Shadows starts and ends with the creation of a performance, one that is strikingly classical. In the beginning, Kaitlin dresses as a mermaid and sings a plaintive song with her accordion in the subway. It is the siren song that brings Charlie to her, that turns her into a love object. “Do you know how you fuck a mermaid?” she asks, as their relationship deepens, “You don’t fuck a mermaid. A mermaid fucks you.”

Six episodes later, that’s just what’s happened. The series ends at the same setting. She’s finally ended it all, got good and drunk while staring out at sailboats, then taken up the mermaid outfit again, heading underground to perform as the “heartbreak mermaid,” a human puppet stuffed full of love that’s failed, a siren returning to her rock. She sings wordlessly, the unlubricated keys of her accordion thunking along, for a minute and a half. Then the sound bleeds into the screech of subway cars and a dusty record plays us out. What to make of this tableau, with its allusion to the *locus classicus* of erotic sound art, the forbidden song of the Sirens in *The Odyssey*?

In 2001, back when I lived in Montréal myself, Leonard Cohen (a patron saint of *The Shadows*) came out of a long hiatus, half of which was spent secluded in a Zen facility in L.A. He returned with a record he wrote with Sharon Robinson called *Ten New Songs*, one of which is “Alexandra Leaving.” I’ve always loved it. It’s based on a 1911 poem about Mark Antony by Constantine Cavafy, who in turn based it on an episode in Plutarch. In Cavafy’s poem, Octavian’s army is at the gates of Alexandria and Antony knows that he has lost the war for Rome, lost history. From a window he hears music as an effigy of Dionysus is taken from the city, the god abandoning him. Cavafy’s narrator is reminding Antony of his courage, exhorting him not to simper but rather to feel the moment with all his being, to savour a loss so full that it is almost ineffable. It is a moment of rare wisdom few would ever have, one he had been preparing for his whole life.

Cohen, whose art is about how to lose beautifully, turns this into a story of losing love:

Suddenly the night has grown colder
The god of love preparing to depart

Alexandra hoisted on his shoulder,
They slip between the sentries of the heart

Upheld by the simplicities of pleasure
They gain the light, they formlessly entwine
And radiant beyond your widest measure
They fall among the voices and the wine

It's not a trick, your senses all deceiving
A fitful dream, the morning will exhaust
Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving
Then say goodbye to Alexandra lost

For Cohen and Robinson, loss is what makes our first commitments present. Saying goodbye to the object of love is torture, yes, but we waste that torture if we don't also see it as latent with dignity, with beauty. We say goodbye to the person we have lost, then we say goodbye to loss itself. This is the same lesson Kaitlin learns. It's not great love that makes art possible, nor great heartbreak. Rather it's the space opened by extrication, the slipping of the love object from the sentries of the heart, that opens a chance to complete the mermaid performance.

In retrospect, it's clear that *The Shadows* has been looking for just such a moment of exquisite suspended animation, all along. When Kaitlin seeks out advice from a woman who had an affair for 18 years, she discovers the old woman paralysed by the choice of whether to visit her longtime lover, who is dying, in spite of her husband's wishes. When Kaitlin tries to understand how her parents love one another, she finds herself dumbfounded by a home movie of when they were young trying to figure out a video recorder, but reacting to one another with unexpected tenderness. Similar tableaux occur in her own love story, particularly in fantasies that dominate so much of the imaginative life of the series—fantasies of artistic glory, of ageing, of gardening with a lover, of travel, of being naked in front of her children, of righteous celibacy. Kaitlin tries on a procession of idealised puppet selves, possible futures that shimmer all the brighter because they are unchosen. I am reminded of Svetlana Boym's insight that nostalgia isn't always about the past, it can be prospective, too.

Kaitlin in her subway, Cohen in his retreat, Antony at his window—all are nostalgists *par excellence*, figures longing for something that never existed. In her reading of *The Odyssey*'s Siren episode, Boym observes that "Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (Boym 2001:8). In the face of that loss, nostalgists double back, get lost, move in zigzags. They never make it home. Instead, Boym writes, "The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee."

So is audio fiction these days, a genre searching for those willing to subscribe to its cherished artistic myth: that there are poignant singular moments of sonic experience that stand outside of rules and ideologies, like the moment a siren finally begins to sing, not for sailors on the waves, but for herself.

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