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Authentically Badly Crafted by Professional Amateurs: Lo-fi Aesthetics in Noise and Words

ABSTRACT

On account of its self-conscious rejection of professional-standard playing and production techniques, and of its emphasis on the home-made, lo-fi practice is often discussed in terms of its authenticity. However, while the concept is widely discussed across popular music genres, what is meant by "authenticity" remains elusive and much open to being twisted to suit one's own ideological cravings. In this essay, I examine more closely how the concept of authenticity is commonly employed in lo-fi discourse, highlighting the tensions and contradictions surrounding the usage of the term, and evaluating ways in which the concept may be more usefully understood in the context of lo-fi practice. The central thesis informing my analysis is that technologically reproduced sound cannot escape re-presentation, and therefore any ideology that regards specific processes and working practices as marks of authenticity can only incur in logical inconsistencies and technological mystifications.

KEYWORDS: lo-fi, noise, materiality, authenticity, aura, aesthetics of imperfection, simulation.

INTRODUCTION: FROM SIGNAL TO NOISE

In his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, philosopher Arthur Danto resorts to a musical analogy to explain the preoccupation with materiality in the aesthetics of the *drip*, as exemplified in works like Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* paintings of the late 1960s:

> The drip, meanwhile, calls attention insistently to paint as paint. So in the tradition just alluded to, drips would have had the role that static does in the transmission of music, supposing it to be the role of acoustical engineering to make the medium between the source of music and the ear of the listener as transparent as the physics allows. Hence someone who wanted to call attention to the transcriptional aspect of contemporary audition would celebrate static as a mark of integrity, to be heard rather than listened through. (1981: 108)

This is a vivid analogy, enlightening for the precision with which the same preoccupation is translated from the visual to the audio arts. But even more remarkable is the fact that Danto wrote the above passage in 1981 – that is: one year before the launch of the CD format, some ten years before a self-consciously lo-fi music (as an established concept) could be produced, and almost twenty years before scholarship caught up with the phenomenon. Rather than prophetic, this seems to indicate how the development of a lo-fi aesthetics in music was necessary, inevitable, logical, and effectively the outcome of a predictable course.

Clearly, we can more pertinently talk of a lo-fi aesthetics, as a self-conscious rejection of hi-fi standards, only after the introduction of digital technology; in the analogue era of vinyl, transduction noise was not so much a sought-out option as it was simply inevitable. Nevertheless, we can find a preoccupation with channel noise and the sound of the machine itself already in some works from the 1960s. Steve Reich's *Pendulum Music* (1968) is a live performance entirely based on controlled audio feedback caused by a number of microphones suspended and made to swing in front of the same speaker to which they are connected, thus causing a feedback loop. Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room* (1969), again a live performance, starts with Lucier uttering and recording on tape a short statement. The same tape is then played back in the performance space, and the sound (which now includes the hall's acoustic characteristics) is re-recorded; the process is repeated several times until the signal, by successive degradation, becomes a resonant drone.

Within popular music, too, we can find pre-digital-age works which, while not identified as lo-fi at the time, could be seen as indicative of a tendency to approach production with a disregard for orthodox practice and with a view to craft a more individual and characterful sound print. A special mention here goes to R. Stevie Moore, active since 1968 and widely regarded as "the godfather of home recording." Moore's *I Wish I Could Sing* (1976) is quite an astonishing example that effectively combines a pop song format with the tape-montage electroacoustic techniques of *musique concrète*. Daniel Johnston's *Songs Of Pain 1980-81* are unmistakably lo-fi even for analogue-age standards, featuring an oversaturated signal, much hiss, and tape flutter as well as the sounds of coughing and throat clearing. And perhaps more surprisingly, we could mention Roxy Music's

Sultanesque, released in 1975 as the B-side of the 7" single featuring *Love is the Drug* on its A side. *Sultanesque* starts with a loop of some kind of modulated feedback, and eventually builds a simple rhythmic pattern made of very basic timbres, like a ticking sound in place of the kick drum and bursts of white noise in place of the snare. The sound of overprocessed electric guitars eventually joins the track, as well as few other manipulated timbres, including a reverse cymbal sound. No vocals. What a pity that such a remarkable track was not included in the subsequent album, *Siren* (1975), which only features *Love is the Drug* from the single in question.

With the advent of personal computers and the significant noise reduction brought about by the digital recording standard, the relevance of the lo-fi aesthetics could only increase. In the mid 1990s bands like Tortoise and Portishead quickly became well-known names through the cultivated noisy sound print of their debut albums, Tortoise with *Tortoise* (1994), and Portishead with *Dummy* (1995). By the late 1990s the lo-fi aesthetics had reached the status of a mature and recognized field, encompassing a rich variety of stylistic approaches and a growing number of practitioners and audiences. In fact, by that time even in more mainstream productions we can observe a trend at embracing – or emulating – some of the more superficial aspects of lo-fi aesthetics. As Eliot Bates, among others, notes, «in multi-million dollar studios pops, hisses, clicks, and record noise are routinely added to "dirty up" otherwise pristine digital recordings» (Bates 2004: 289).

However, while mainstream studio productions are mainly borrowing the purely sonic aspect of lo-fi, a fully lo-fi aesthetics is defined not only by its technological approach to production but also by an equally unorthodox instrumentation and an amateur playing style. Perhaps one of the best examples of an outlandish performance can be heard in *Team*, part of Bon Iver's album *For Emma, Forever Ago* (2007), regarded by some as a classic in the lo-fi repertoire. In *Team* we hear a "drum part" (if we can call it that) mixed in the foreground, consisting in the combined sounds of a bass drum and a slack snare drum relentlessly marking all quavers to a standard that is way beyond amateur playing. Some listeners may actually find that part unbearable; but listened to as a sonic entity, as a totality, as a gesture, and in the context of the rest of the "arrangement," that drum part acquires a certain allure, especially when, in the latter part of the track, it is joined by multiple-part whistling as a delicate contrast to the coarse drums. From the same album, *The Wolves* is taken to a well-executed process of disintegration in its latter part. Overall, *For Emma, Forever Ago* is a rather sophisticated album that articulates well the lo-fi aesthetics through mainly uncluttered textures, punctuated by lusher sonic interventions at well-placed points. The band Guided By Voices represent another good example of lo-fi style. The band have been releasing since 1987 and they are still active. I think their earlier albums (*Devil Between My Toes* (1987), *Sandbox* (1987), *Self-Inflicted Aerial Nostalgia* (1989), and up to, roughly, *Universal Truths and Cycles* (2002)) illustrate better the lo-fi aesthetics through their relatively sparser textures, while later albums tend to be dominated by denser, distorted-guitar based textures, at which point it may become more difficult to hear the

audio as lo-fi, rather than simply as a specific type of sound not too dissimilar from the timbral qualities of hard-rock or metal. This is a difficulty I also find with other supposedly lo-fi albums. Centro-Matic's *The Static vs. the Strings Vol.1* (2002), for example, with its consistently congested and loud mix, sounds to me more like some unimpressive hard-ish rock with a few extra-notches of distortion added than a more developed lo-fi style. By contrast, Beatnik Filmstars, in their album *Shenaniganism* (*Tape Hiss & Other Imperfections)* (2007) are very capable of producing expertly crafted (anathema!) rich textures while clearly articulating a lo-fi aesthetics through sophisticated and tastefully integrated sonic artefacts.

Given its avoidance of professional-standard playing and production techniques, and its emphasis on the home-made, lo-fi practice is often discussed in terms of its "authenticity." As Alexandra Supper, among others, notes, «An important theme in existing scholarship on lo-fi music concerns the construction of authenticity» (Supper 2018: 254). However, while the concept is widely discussed across popular music genres, what is meant by "authenticity" remains elusive and much open to being twisted to suit one's own ideological cravings. In the face of such difficulties, Everett True remarks: «Establishing what authenticity actually *means* is highly problematic. A more sound approach is to use "the illusion of authenticity" » (True 2019, italics in original). True is not alone in questioning the usefulness of the concept. In their in-depth study of authenticity in popular music, Hans Weisethaunet & Ulf Lindberg set out by warning the reader that «when dealing with "authenticity," one should be prepared to meet a number of quite differing ideas and concepts» (Weisethaunet & Lindberg 2010: 465). With specific reference to lo-fi practice, Melle Kromhout openly acknowledges the artificiality involved in the performance of authenticity, and concludes that lo-fi «consciously stages its own artificiality, conducting what Auslander [1999] calls "authentic inauthenticity" » (Kromhout, 2012).

In the rest of this essay, I am going to examine more closely how the concept of authenticity is commonly employed in lo-fi discourse, highlighting the tensions and contradictions surrounding the usage of the term, and evaluating ways in which the concept may be more usefully understood in the context of lo-fi practice. But first I wish to consider the nature of mechanically reproduced sound and clarify certain aspects that are often the source of misunderstandings and mystifications, with a view of providing a firmer basis to our subsequent discussion of authenticity.

TRANSDUCTION: FROM NOISE TO SIGNAL

As part of his continued exploration of "all sounds," John Cage became interested in "small sounds" and wished to deploy them in his works. In the course of an interview, Cage speculates about a future time when technology would enable us to hear, through amplification, things we currently cannot hear, like the vibrations of objects, or the sound of «ants walking in the grass» (Kahn, 1999: 195). Cage's wish, however, is destined to remain forever unfulfilled, since it is based

on a techno/logical fallacy: in reality, if we could amplify a signal to such an extent we would *not* be hearing "what ants walking in the grass sound like," but rather – what ants walking in the grass *put through a zillion-watt amplifier* sound like. By which stage it would probably sound not much different than the sound of an antelope stampede when captured on current-day recording technology. In other words, there is no such thing as "the sounds themselves" in sound reproduction.

To illustrate how the same predicament plays out in artistic practice, we can consider the CD album *Blank Tapes* (2000) by the group Reynols, which, as the title implies, is supposedly *about* the sound of blank tapes. Ostensibly, this work would seem to be concerned with some notion of absence of content, with the residual noise in the channel (the "unwanted" in established practice), with the noise of the recording process "itself," with the idea of recording the recorder, etc. However, the fact that the tapes in question are themselves "blank" cannot tell us much in terms of the final result. Once we start production, a large number of options become available, first at the recording stage: setting (space); microphone type, distance and placement (on-axis/off-axis)[1]; input channel gain value; any dynamic compression/EQ inserted before the recording device; and second, at the editing stage, where we could, at the very least, normalize the signal to any desired value, and further, we could process the sound in a virtually infinite number of ways, from dynamic compression and EQ to any other fancy processing (modulation, distortion, etc.). And in fact this is precisely how Reynols have approached the task: the album's six tracks cover from the barely audible to full-scale dynamic range, thereby generating harmonics and other artefacts that *did not actually exist* before processing. This particular strategy could be seen as the audio equivalent to a film sequence in which a subject is framed differently in each shot in a sequence, alternating perspective, e.g. from (extreme) long shot to (extreme) close-up, high/low angle, etc. In other words, the work is "framing" and (re)interpreting its content. The original source may have been transduction noise, noise in the information-theory sense, but ultimately what we hear at the output stage is just signal, in this case – a noisy type of *sound*. Thus, while the work plays on the idea of "blankness" as absence of sound-as-signal, in effect the album's title merely refers to an initial source that bears little to no relation to the finished product. Which is absolutely right: the artists have done exactly what needed to be done; any attempt at some supposedly "realistic" rendering would have been not only dumb and pointless, but also self-defeating because simply there is no reference for what blank tapes or channel noise (the machine "itself") should sound like.

It is also worth pointing out that the raw material did not even need to be blank tapes (or channel noise) to begin with: the same result could have been obtained through appropriate manipulation of a different source. Constructing specific sounds from sources that do not

[1] This is assuming that the sound is captured through microphone(s). It may be that Reynols have simply recorded the tape machine's output straight into a recorder (I think this is the idea, though we simply cannot know), in which case the manipulation is all in the recording gain settings and further processing.

necessarily correspond to the intended result is standard practice in sound design (the foley/sound design as practiced in film work): celery makes good breaking bones sound, stabbing cabbage produces effective punch sounds, and frying bacon can be used to reproduce the sound of rain (not to mention its suitability for glitch works!). Generally this is done for purely practical reasons, but the interesting point is that quite often this strategy can achieve more convincing results. It is true that, in film, the phenomenon of audio-visual synergy helps in achieving the "realistic" effect. But the fact remains that the relationship between the chosen source material and the final result, post manipulation and editing, can be as loose as we want it to be. To interpret such procedures as "faking" would be missing the point – once a sound comes out of a loudspeaker, the question of how (where and when) it has been produced becomes totally irrelevant – what you hear is what you get; any procedural baggage is dissolved in the channel. The laws of sound re-production and the nature of the acousmatic are exact and merciless in their swallowing of intentions and erasure of procedures. The ontology of a mechanically (re)produced sound is defined at the output stage, once the digital data is converted into an analogue signal and turned into an acoustic phenomenon by the loudspeaker. In discussing the dislocation between source and sound brought about by reproduction technologies, composer and theorist Simon Emmerson remarked, «Perhaps all artists are in the end practitioners of *trompe l'oeille* [sic][2]» (Emmerson 1994: 96, italics in original).

This same preoccupation with exposing the "machine itself," the materiality of the production processes, etc., as illustrated with *Blank Tapes*, can be observed in a wide range of works concerned with a noise/lo-fi aesthetics. As Supper notes «A common thread running through existing scholarship on lo-fi music (…) is that it foregrounds the materiality of the recordings and thus rejects the idea of audio transparency» (Supper 2018: 263). In lo-fi discourse, this aesthetic stance is considered a mark of authenticity. Essentially, this rhetoric sees the aesthetics of transparency as an illusionistic trick predicated on the attempt to efface any trace of the production process to deliver a supposedly "unmediated" musical work. Thus, by foregrounding the production process the lo-fi work performs an operation similar to Brechtian theatre in which the theatrical machinery is exposed in order to shatter the diegetic illusion and remind the audience that what they are witnessing is, in fact, a play. Similarly, lo-fi audio shatters the illusion of an ideal work immaculately reproduced by a transparent channel, thus underscoring the mediation that takes place is any act of communication.

However, here immediately a paradox presents itself. Talking about works that deliberately include noise as an integral part of their discourse, Caleb Kelly (2009) asks: «if all communication is affected by noise, what is the noise in this case? This argument quickly leads to a feedback loop: are we hearing noise or are we hearing the content of communication, are we hearing the noise of

[2] The concept of *trompe l'oreille* is employed in electroacoustic music literature with regard to the fabrication of artificial soundscapes. Peter Batchelor defines *trompe l'oreille* as «the presentation of recognisable (or referential) sounds in a manner sufficiently indistinguishable in spatial and sonic behaviour from reality» (Batchelor 2007).

the noise of the content of communication? – and so on» (Kelly 2009: 78). Furthermore, as recognized by Supper, «the mere presence of recording artefacts such as tape hiss in itself is not enough to "break the illusion of an unmediated experience with the music" (Dolan 2010, p. 464) » (Supper 2018: 263). In other words, merely reverting to analogue technology and letting the routine artefacts of the recording process *be*, as opposed to a more orthodox practice which would try to suppress them, would not be enough for the work to qualify as lo-fi since, as many writers have pointed out, we are accultured to listen past such epiphenomena (Link 2001: 36). Hence, the lo-fi-ness must be flaunted with a degree of assertiveness, the audio must be *crafted* just that way. As Supper rightly notes, lo-fi is effectively linked «to the aesthetics of imperfection and malfunction common in some electronic and experimental music scenes» (Supper 2018: 254). The systematic pursuit of manifest imperfection, of the flawed-by-design, is a treacherous path sliding towards the paradox of the "skillfully badly crafted." In what sense, then, can lo-fi works be considered authentic given that they are no less of a fabrication than their hi-fi counterparts?

There may be valid arguments for the inclusion of authenticity in discussions on lo-fi. But I think we need to look beyond the sense in which the term is commonly understood in discussions on popular music, especially rock music. When that notion of authenticity is imported into lo-fi discourse, the ontological problem emerges, as both artists and writers try to assign specific ideological values to specific procedures, bringing into question the origin and cause of the sounds in a work. Such connections are based on loose metaphors, often entailing a mystification of the technological processes. I will touch on some of these pitfalls before providing an alternative view of authenticity in lo-fi discourse.

In the article quoted above, Supper echoes Kromhout's concerns regarding the recording studio as an anonymous space. «By keeping to these [hi-fi] standards» writes Kromhout, «the studio itself has become a non-place, a place of transience like a parking place or an airport» (Kromhout, 2012). In response to this problem, Supper explains, artists have opted for recording at home with a view of infusing their music with the specific character of a "homely" space and a sense of "intimacy." As she writes, «Through a strategy of site-specificity, in which the performance is grounded "in an identifiable time and space" (Kromhout 2012), lo-fi musicians seek to infuse their recordings with authenticity» (Supper 2018: 261). But to talk of infusing the music with the specificity of a "homely space" and the associated sense of "intimacy" is to invoke a *hi-fi* concept, in that the notion of conveying the specific space of a recording session presupposes a transparent channel, a perfect reproduction – is that not precisely the myth that the lo-fi aesthetics is supposedly trying to debunk? As Kromhout rightly observes, «The implicit ideal of hi-fidelity is something like an ultimate accurate recording: one that sounds exactly like the actual event. Lo-fi, or lo-fidelity, is the opposite of this ideal: a recording that does not sound at all like the original event, for its lack of accuracy, often most poignantly defined by a low signal-to-noise ratio» (Kromhout, 2012). In

fact, consider works like Beatnik Filmstars' *Shenaniganism*, as one that does indeed claim on its liner notes "Recorded in houses in Bristol England": how can the specific character of the space in which the album has been recorded ever be discerned in a finished product that has been studiously overcompressed and overprocessed to generate a dense, harmonically distorted audio band? Any sense of the recording setting can only be obliterated by the heavy processing; the resultant audio might as well have been recorded anywhere, including a "sterile" recording studio. Which is precisely what Kromhout's eventually concedes: «It is not necessarily a matter of recording in- or outside a studio; a lo-fi production can also be realized in a "proper" studio, using creative recording methodology» (Kromhout, 2012). There may be other arguments for favoring home settings, e.g. the informality of the situation, the freedom from time constraints, etc.; but those remain anecdotal details of production, rather than an audible feature of the processed audio.

Talking about *Shenaniganism*, Supper writes: «Beatnik Filmstars' proclamation that "no computers!" were used in recording the album contains an interesting appeal to authenticity, as this might be read as reassurance that all the "imperfections" on the album are in fact true artefacts of the recording process, rather than affectations that were added after the fact» (Supper 2018: 260). Supper's distinction between artefacts that are part of the recording process, which are deemed "true," versus artefacts "added after the fact," which must be false, is problematic. First, we could start by noting that the claim that "no computers" were used does not make the artefacts automatically part of the recording process: audio works have been *constructed* long before the computer became a regular fixture of the production studio. Besides, how are we to understand "the recording process," anyway? Is it a single take and that's it, no further processing allowed? That would be a rather reductive conceptualization of the technology, a quaint notion harking back to the heydays of recording. As soon as the hypothesis of the single, unedited take is discarded, we have to acknowledge multitracking, overdubbing, layering, processing. On the album in question, editing could have been done on tape or digital multitrack recorders; for processing, there are scores of analogue *and* digital processing units that can be found in any musician's bedroom studio, and a digital mixer would itself have onboard FX processors – all tools that can be used to "mangle" the incoming signal. Thus, not only we simply do not know at what stage these artefacts have entered the work, but also we can never distinguish between "true artefacts of the recording process" and any further (over)processing. But more to the point – there is neither perceptual nor semantic difference between the two. As Stan Link rightly observes, transduction noise «emancipates the perception of authenticity from the authority of any original» and the consequence is that «Ironically, it follows that the types of authenticity and realism turned

commodity by Opcode and Digidesign[3] are not as entirely faked as they might at first seem» (Link 2001: 39).

In effect, to conceive of a recorded work as a conveyor of "true artefacts" seems to fall back on a twisted version of the hi-fidelity myth, even though here the truth is defined not by transparency but by opacity; both cases are construed as accurate reproductions of an original event. And in fact, precisely this equivalence emerges from Kromhout's analysis: «Hi-fi and lo-fi are different strategies to attain the same goal: approximating a supposed original performance event. Although the methods differ (…) there is no intrinsic difference between the two strategies» (Kromhout, 2012). In short, as long as we hold on to ontological distinctions and regard specific processes and working practices as marks of "authenticity" we can only incur in logical inconsistencies and technological mystifications. Conversely, as soon as we realize and accept the inescapable fact that «the listener cannot hear the event, but only its representation, and cannot hear the document, but rather only its transduction» (Link 2001: 37), we can evaluate the lo-fi phenomenon in more dispassionate terms, and possibly achieve a better understanding of the means by which lo-fi works acquire an aura of authenticity.

In this regard, Link (2001) provides a more sophisticated account of the authenticating potential of a lo-fi sound print. According to Link, «noise lies not as much in the properties of a sound, but in their functions and the effects they engender» (Link 2001: 47). On that basis, Link draws a useful distinction between «noise as noise» and «noise as signal» (Link 2001: 41). Noise as signal is what a modernist aesthetics harnesses as a sonic resource, noise divested of its referential content through its integration into a musical structure and thus, to an extent, domesticated for artistic ends. Conversely, noise as noise is that which retains its potential as disruption, disturbance – intrusion rather than integration. Transduction noise tends to function in this latter sense.

As an audible sign of the materiality of the production process, transduction noise engenders a perception of the recorded event as a "real" occurrence *anchored* in a physical time and space. This perceived space is not some accurate aural image of the actual space of the recording (the "homely," "intimate" setting we saw above) but simply a constructed image of a world made familiar by the inclusion of certain acoustic indices that serve to orient the listener towards an imagined source – as opposed to a "transparent" work in which the music (when played on a high specs system) seems to envelope the listener, lacking explicit reference to a point of origin. As Link explains, «by palpably undermining the transparency of its medium, noise foregrounds a sensation of provenance in recorded sound. We hear an origin, even if not an original one» Link 2001: 40).

[3] Link is talking about the following plug-ins: «Digidesign, for example, offers a "D-Fi Plug-Ins Package" which it describes as "specifically designed for creating grungy, warped, and other weird sounds." Opcode similarly offered "fusion: Vinyl." According to the company, this software "applies flawlessly realistic DSP models of turntable characteristics like platter motor rumble, fidelity and speed (33/45/78), vinyl record surface properties like wear, dust, static, warp, and dirt, and other vintage audio playback system artifacts to individual tracks or entire mixes." We now have some very high-tech means to achieve "lo-fi" ends» (Link 2001: 35).

Through its own materiality and presence, transduction noise mitigates the schizophonic effect that necessarily arises whenever a sound is severed from its original source – as is always the case in sound reproduction. In Link's own words, «by evoking inception, noise provides a less ambiguous causality for recorded sound» (Link 2001: 40).

In establishing a located audition, the lo-fi work, by implication, constructs a place for the listener as its addressee. In other words, by posing as a real event the lo-fi work invites a kind of auditory voyeurism. This process is analogous to the model outlined by enunciation theories in film studies (Heath, 1981; Casetti, 1998), which interpret specific visual cues of space organization as implying a spectator. In fact, Link borrows the concept of *suture* from film theory to define this phenomenon: «Transduction noise can thus function as a "suture" in film theory, stitching our subjectivity into the recording» (Link 2001: 38). This strategy of implying a listener is made explicit in many artists' liner notes, which often adopt the second-person address as a rhetorical device, as can be seen in Colin Clary's liner notes for *Sweater Weather or Not, These Are the Songs I Got* (2005): «Any imperfections are the result of Colin's willingness to allow for imperfections within the context of an authentic home-recorded revolutionary master plan and should only serve to remind you that actual human beings just like you played the music on this album» (in Supper 2018: 259).

Furthermore, by situating the recording in a "real" (fictional) time and space, the work acquires a documentarist quality, inscribing a time past into the audio and thereby "authenticating" itself. In Link's own words, «For through noise, the very destroyer of objective accuracy, the signal becomes "authenticated" through its embodiment of time's passage (…) Apart from either its accuracy or vividness, then, a signal can be taken as authentic for a very simple reason. It "was" » (Link 2001: 39). As a perceived document of a past event, and scarred by its own process, the recording acquires a patina, a history, while also telling the story of its own production. As Link observes, «Retro filtering allows us to hear the recording as a type of narrative world» (Link 2001: 37-38). This desire to inscribe the work with a narrative layer can be clearly seen in many artists' liner notes; here is an excerpt from Englishman's notes to their homonymous album, *Englishman* (2010):

> Cut to 2-inch tape in a converted barn the band helped to build in rural Ohio, it feels at once familiar and haunted. Ten snowy days of recording were punctuated by family style meals of summer's vegetables and winter's hot toddies. It's likely to be the coziest new album for the coming cold, and any stormy weather thereafter.

Here perhaps we could borrow again from film theory and invoke Stephen Heath's concept of *narrativization* (Heath 1981), as the process by which raw audiovisual materials are turned into a narrative through their specific organization based on temporal and causal relationships. In a similar way, the constructed event-ness of lo-fi works narrativizes their audition, rendered as the unfolding of an event that has occurred in a real space at some time past.

We may also note that this particular power to authenticate a recording is not an exclusive prerogative of transduction noise: a hi-fi recording of a classical guitarist in which fret noise is captured by a dedicated microphone and emphasized in the mix would produce the same result. Or again: a hi-fi recording that includes the noises of page turning, audience coughing, or Keith Jarrett moaning and groaning while playing the piano[4]. These are all noises that can function to ground the recording in a specific (imagined) space and in a past time and thus lend an aura of authenticity to the work.

In summary, it is possible to interpret authenticity in lo-fi works as a self-referential semiotic process centered on the immanent work, rather than by reference to the details of production and the specific techniques and technologies employed. As Link puts it, «As heard through noise, recordings isolate and contain their own authenticity that does not require verification from another source» (Link 2001: 39). Of course, there is nothing wrong with artists favoring particular tools and working methods; indeed, creativity and originality often depend on the individual's idiosyncratic approach. And like many practitioners, I too believe that there is still a lot of usability left in "obsolete" technologies. But ultimately we need to be clear that any procedural idiosyncrasy remains an anecdotal detail of production: the reproduction channel is The Great Leveler. If the usage of specific tools and working methods is fetishized as a mark of authenticity, not only we rely on elements that cannot possibly be unambiguously recognized in audition, but also we would be adopting a reductionist and restrictive view of the production process by which certain practices are regarded as more authentic than others. This would mean embracing a naïve understanding of artistic practice as bound by realistic laws, rather than by the laws of performance. A low-fi aesthetics cannot roll back advances in reproduction technology, it can only simulate the signs of its imperfections. As Kromhout puts it, «Lo-fi replaces hi-fi's illusion of proximity-through-total-transparency with the illusion of proximity-through-conscious-artificiality. (…) In the end, both strategies are a fiction» (Kromhout, 2012).

TRANSCRIPTION: FROM SIGNAL TO WORDS

Given the inherent ambiguity affecting lo-fi content in a work, it is not surprising that artists resort to elaborate liner notes to contextualize their works. Indeed, Supper's analysis focuses specifically on the illuminating function of liner notes in lo-fi releases, stating that: «Liner notes such as these, I argue, help to draw the listener's attention to the deliberately lo-fi quality of the music, to certain flaws in the recordings that might otherwise go unnoticed or be interpreted as accidents rather than aesthetic strategies» (Supper 2018: 253). In other words, by divulging the details of production liner notes provide the listener with information that cannot be heard in "the work itself," since the work itself, as we saw, is just audio purged of any procedural baggage. This is not necessarily a

[4] An interesting account of the "embodied" function of Keith Jarrett's vocalizations can be seen in Moreno (1999).

problem; after all, the idea of an "absolute music" has been debunked by several musicologists. As Nicholas Cook put it, «Pure music, it seems, is an aesthetician's (and music theorist's) fiction; the real thing unites itself promiscuously with any other media that are available» (Cook 1998: 92). Cook understands «musical culture as irreducibly multimedia in nature» (Cook 1998: 23), and advocates that programme notes and record sleeves be included in analyses of musical works. We can therefore consider lo-fi works as a kind of multimedia, in the broad sense theorized by Cook, and accept liner notes as an integral part of them.

In a detailed study of liner notes, Dean Biron (2011) characterizes the relationship between works and words as a case of "polytextuality." Biron identifies five broad varieties of liner notes: literary, tangential, expository, propagandist and retrospective. None of these, in my view, seems to fit the narratives that pervade lo-fi liner notes. I would therefore add a sixth variety, which I would call "certifying" liner notes, given that their purpose seems to revolve around the notion of establishing the authenticity of the proceedings. To that end, the notes indulge in detailing the specific equipment utilized (with an emphasis on analogue vintage gear and tape recorders), the place of recording, often emphasized as a "homely" setting, and a plethora of other anecdotal details of production.

A significant emphasis is placed on specifying the equipment utilized in recordings as a way to certify the work's authenticity on the basis of the artists' approach to production, an approach committed to «the avoidance of state-of-the art recording technology and professional production techniques in the name of authenticity» (Supper 2018: 267). In the meantime, such listings also function to validate the artists' credentials as retro-techno savvy (they may be posing as inept in terms of their production skills and playing abilities, but they certainly know their vintage gear). And in addition, they function as a wink at their audience, the implication being that their audience, of course, know about these (often legendary) vintage machines and understand technical details, and can therefore celebrate their own connoisseurship in this field. This latter aspect is vividly brought out in this excerpt from The Mountain Goats' album *All Hail West Texas:*

> Of course the original signal is never actually anywhere near any recordings anywhere, but you already knew that. You have been sure of it for quite some time now. You see the proof everywhere. It is the reason you started reading these lines in the first place.

Again, note the direct, second-person address (as we have already encountered in the Colin Clary's liner notes given in the previous section). This rhetorical device, to borrow again from enunciation theories, constitutes an "interpellation," defined in film as «The recognition by the film of someone outside the text to whom the film makes a direct appeal» (Casetti 1998: 138). A typical form of interpellation in film is the look into the camera. Thus, this type of liner notes performs the same *suturing* function highlighted in the previous section.

The propensity at relating a plethora of anecdotal details about the production process is another distinct feature of lo-fi liner notes. We have already encountered a good example in the previous section, from the Englishman's album. Here is another example from Paul Westerberg's 2002 album *Stereo*, which, in addition, brings out the association between "unprofessional" standard and authenticity:

> What you have here are songs written and recorded at home over a two-year period that followed a much longer period of performing, traveling, and explaining. Cut mostly live in the middle of the night, no effort was made to fix what some may deem as mistakes: tape running out, fluffed lyrics, flat notes, extraneous noises, etc. Many were written (or born if you will) as the tape rolled. Unprofessional? Perhaps. Real? Unquestionably.

The details of time and place are often specified to a meticulous degree. This may include the exact date for each track, precise address of the home-studio, which rooms have been used, and even photographs of the house in question. As Supper notes, «*Bulk* by John Logan specifies the dates and places of recordings for each of its 42 tracks, usually identified by street name, including photos of three suburban-looking residential houses that featured prominently» (Supper 2018: 262). Incidentally, the practice of overdetailing and the inclusion of apparently irrelevant or trivial details is a well-known narrative strategy for achieving a high degree of realism in fiction. A good example can be seen in the prologue section of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) in which, for a whole seven minutes, the gang members, gathered at breakfast in a diner, engage in a prolonged discussion touching on raunchy interpretations of Madonna's *Like a Virgin*, and on the arguments for and against tipping restaurant staff.

In summary, we can see that both liner notes and their audio counterpart articulate the same strategy, defined by a clear intent at narrativizing and historicizing the work, and thereby authenticate it. By staging the production process as a real event, scarred by its own materiality and certified by its liner notes, the lo-fi work constructs and articulates an aura of "pastness[5]." In fact, the lo-fi work articulates two overlapping and interacting levels of pastness: one is the pastness arising from the construction of an imaginary original event that took place at some time past, as inscribed in its material traces; the other is the "culturally situated" pastness that identifies the lo-fi sound print as characteristic of the pre-digital age, the mythologized analogue age, the "vintage," a pastness with connotations of nostalgia.

To what extent the concept of authenticity can be meaningfully applied to this strategy remains, in my view, an open question. Here I am reminded of Baudrillard's remark: «When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of

[5] In discussing the aura of authenticity in archaeological objects, Cornelius Holtorf invokes the notion of "perceived pastness" to define authenticity «not in relation to the age of an object but to its age-value» (Holtorf 2013: 427). Pastness, Holtorf explains, «is experienced as a consequence of perceptible material clues indicating wear and tear, decay, and disintegration, among other factors. Intriguingly, these clues appear to fulfil their function even when they are entirely created in the present (or the very recent past) » (Holtorf 2013: 430).

origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. (…) Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential» (Baudrillard 1994: 6-7). Indeed, given its nostalgic undertones, lo-fi's determination at foregrounding its own production process could plausibly be seen as a practice engaged in the "Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential," which is especially problematic in view of lo-fi's flirtation with imperfection, with the studiously flawed, with the authentically amateurish. With specific reference to music, Baudrillard, in a more recent interview, remarked: «They've even felt the need to reintroduce noise and static to give it a natural effect, or an effect of the hyper-simulacrum of the natural» (Baudrillard 2004: 66). This does not seem very far from the sort of authenticity we may ascribe to items of contemporary retro-chic, like scuffed leather jackets and stonewashed or ripped jeans, whose "imperfections" have been specifically manufactured to give the garment an aura of pastness, effectively «substituting the signs of the real for the real» (Baudrillard 1994: 2) to suggest a "history" that never was. I have therefore to concur with Kromhout's analysis, and restate his reservations regarding the simplistic dichotomy that casts lo-fi practices as authentic and hi-fi practices as artificial. In Kromhout's own words, «The distinction between the artificiality, the illusion, of hi-fi and the supposed sincerity and directness of lo-fi blurs up to the point where we, at least as far as the sonic end result goes, are unable to point to intrinsic differences between the two» (Kromhout, 2012).

As for the amateur playing style, which constitutes another aspect of lo-fi aesthetics that invites claims of authenticity. I very much appreciate and admire the charm and virtues of simple material and artless execution. But I find the logic (or rather, the ideology) that by default casts low playing abilities as authentic, which means that higher playing standards must be inauthentic, rather dubious. Typically, skilled playing is simply the result of cultivating a long and steadfast relationship with an instrument, thus achieving a high degree of intimacy by which the instrument becomes almost an extension of the player's body. This does not need to be construed as "elitist": virtuoso playing is an important aspect in many musics of the world, regardless of social status. One does not need the academy or conservatoire to train as a skilled musician; simple passion and dedication can go a long way – as demonstrated by the many (mainly Black) jazz musicians who have achieved legendary status despite their lack of formal training. In what sense, then, is skilled playing inauthentic? Of course, skilled playing *can* be inauthentic, empty virtuosity, but this is not a logical necessity; mannerism and artificiality can infect any standard of playing – especially, I should think, the contrived amateur playing. Ineptitude as an ideological stance is a relatively recent, and very Western, phenomenon. In music we can observe a declared focus on unskilled playing in Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra, starting in the late 1960s. But it was punk, especially, that most emphatically took the stance into popular music, as an overt anti-establishment posture. In writing about the place of ineptitude in punk ideology, Paul Hegarty states: «Ineptitude is a strong,

fundamentally noisy anti-cultural statement» (Hegarty 2007: 89). Maybe in the 1970s that particular aesthetics had the power of unsettling the sensibilities of the establishment. But half-a-century later, I think it may be time to re-examine the notion. And given that punk models have ended up gracing London postcards as local folklore and tourist attraction, I think it should be quite clear by now that it takes rather more than amateur playing to disturb the elites. I am therefore rather wary of ideologies that regard skills – the product of dedicated physical and intellectual activity – as the exclusive province of the bourgeois. Again, I have no problem with amateur playing *per se*, but I question its automatic association with authenticity – or, for that matter, with radicalism, subversion, resistance, etc.

All things considered, lo-fi authenticity seems rather like a mirage in the desert of the real, ever receding or altogether dissolving as we try to approach it. We can acknowledge, as a theoretical possibility, the authenticating effect (or the illusion of authenticity) produced by transduction noise, given that this latter possesses an inherent potential for evoking event-ness, pastness, history, origin, etc. However, when transduction noise is systematically deployed as a rhetorical device to make a point about the work's own production and aesthetics, thus pursuing a strategy of imperfection, the result can appear just as contrived and no less artificial than the practices of hi-fi production. This does not mean that lo-fi works are necessarily inauthentic (though some of them may well be). It only means that notions of authenticity and truth do not seem to apply in any substantial sense to artworks whose very existence is predicated on technological mediation. Perhaps all that we can ever aspire to achieve through technologically reproduced sound is an authentic *trompe l'oreille*.

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