

English 230 Worksheet for Tuesday, October 4<sup>th</sup>  
Episode 1 (Season 1) of *Within the Wires*  
Available as an [MP3 in Brightspace](#), with a [transcript](#)

For this discussion of [Within the Wires](#), we'll focus on Season One, Episode One, "Stress, Shoulders" (2016) by Janina Matthewson, Jeffrey Cranor, Mary Epworth, and Nightvale Presents.

This dramatic podcast, now in its sixth season, begins with "Cassette #1: Stress, Shoulders." Although audiences do not listen to actual cassettes, each episode in the first season has an "A" and "B" side. The composition and style of these cassettes, from their use of ambient music (by Mary Epworth) to Janina Matthewson's vocal performance, mimic "autogenic training" and relaxation tapes from the 1980s: "One more deep breath, and exhale" (6:05). Such training is meant to reduce stress, and it's associated in some ways with (self-induced?) hypnosis.

Matthewson's "acousmatic" performance means we hear her without seeing her, and her delivery is for the most part slow, deliberate, and calm. She relies heavily on repetition (especially of the word, "you") yet also of several sentences: for example, "My shoulders are stone. My shoulders are stone. My shoulders are sod. My shoulders are sod" (6:50). Such repetition is presumably intended to help the primary character—the "you" being addressed throughout the cassette—to self-regulate. (Note how the "you" here is not "you," the listener; but it's very easy to feel *as if* Matthewson is speaking to us, the audience.) Matthewson's voice frequently acts like pure sound, where the message matters far less than the massage. That is, the voice is frequently meant to be experienced, not interpreted. Maybe it's supposed to recede into the background as we listen? (Here, compare it with the spectacle of *MOOD*.)

Yet this relaxing mood is contrasted with—or so we're told—subliminal instructions in the fiction's incidental music. There are, for example, moments of vocal and sonic interruption in the story, when the voice does anything but recede into the background. Matthewson will say the same sentence twice or more, but change her inflection across each iteration to heighten the sense of immediacy and to accentuate a point, as if she's pressing "you" for answers: "How do you know them?" followed by "How *do you know* them?" Or, "Why are you here?" followed by "Why *are* you here?" All the while, the audience (that's us!) does not know much, if anything, about what's happening in this story. The particulars of the plot are unclear, there's no exposition, and "you" have no name. You are also a bug (???) for a few minutes of the episode, first plucked by a child and later devoured by a bird (a visualization exercise, if you will). And threaded throughout it all are not so subtle indicators of indoctrination: "Before age 10, nothing can be remembered. Say all of that aloud" (8:14). What?!?!

The setting, though mostly abstract, is antiseptic, structured by themes of medicalization and surveillance. "Before continuing to Side B, please fill out the Cassette 1, Side A questionnaire and submit it to the security nurse before your dosages" (9:38). Signals mark the end of a side, and listeners may wonder whether they are witnessing, or perhaps inhabiting, some sort of dystopia. Any lingering worry or threat of doom is offset momentarily by Matthewson's poetic phrasing: "You smell its caffeine acidity, its umami and metal musk through cotton lips. You know these breaths" (5:27). The writing in this episode is simultaneously lyrical and authoritative.

We might call Season 1 of *Within the Wires* “tape vérité”: it has the aura and form of a cassette without physically being a cassette, giving it an “alternate history” vibe. The cassette tape of 1980s is remediated into an MP3 and the dramatic podcast format of the 2010s. From this, listeners may apprehend how the uses of audio for manipulation (to secure consensus) and relaxation (a relieve stress) may be entwined with intrigue and suspense, if not pleasure: not understanding what exactly is unfolding but nevertheless wanting to hear more. . . . Or did you want to hear more? Maybe this was all too much?

"Listen. Remember. Comprehend." Creepy? Intriguing? Immersive? What did you make of it?

As you listen to *Within the Wires*, I encourage you to consider the following prompts and questions:

- Describe the “grain” or physical characteristics of the audio. What or who is one of its sources? How, for example, does the episode sound like a cassette tape? Or how would you describe the effects applied to the voice? (This is called “causal listening,” or listening to identify and describe the source of a sound.)
- Describe a soundscape (ambient music, background sound, or sonic atmosphere) in the fiction. What is its mood? Its location or community? (This is often called “BG” or “background” in audio design, while music not intended for the background is called MX.)
- Describe a sound effect in the fiction. What does it mean? What triggers it? (This is called “semantic listening,” or listening for meaning or messages. Also, sound effects are often called SFX or FX in audio design.)
- Describe the voice in the fiction. How does it contribute to the story? Whom does it represent or speak for? (Voice-over is called VO in sound design, and dialogue is called DX.)
- Describe an interesting or unique sound in the fiction. Why did it attract your attention? Make up a word to associate with it. (This is called “reduced listening,” or listening to sounds without regard for their message or source; listening to sound for the sake of sound.)
- Describe a habit of listening that the fiction encourages you to develop. What’s repeated, or what are the patterns? How does the voice “train” you to listen to the speaker? (This sort of listening underscores how we learn or we’re disciplined to perceive the world: how perception is part of education, for instance.)
- Describe a writing convention the story adopts, rejects, or tests. For example, how does the episode follow the conventions of a relaxation exercise? Or how does it experiment with the conventions of a personal letter or even loudspeaker announcements you might hear in a hospital or school?
- Which genre of fiction best describes this episode? What would you file it under?
- Finally, would you say any sounds in this fiction are “non-diegetic”? A diegetic sound occurs in the world of the story (it’s heard by characters, for instance), while a non-diegetic sound occurs outside the world of the story (music or voice-over narration, for example).