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HIGH FIDELITY: ADAPTING NARCISSISM TO FILM

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
English Literature

by
Kristina Lyn Smolenski

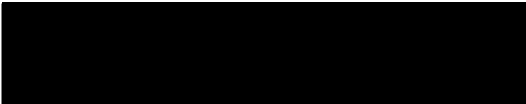
June 2002

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ABSTRACT

High Fidelity successfully adapted from a novel to a film because of the narcissistic portrayal of Rob Gordon in the film. In order to examine how Rob Gordon's character is adapted to the screen in the film *High Fidelity*, one must first examine his narcissism. Chapter one will introduce and demonstrate examples of how Rob became stuck in his narcissistic pattern and how the film successfully demonstrates this narcissism through the use of both Christopher Lasch's theories and the use of other psychologists who have expanded on Lasch's theories. Chapter two will discuss how the use of the film's point of view and Director Stephen Frears' talking-into-the-camera technique helps to reflect both on Rob's narcissism and Rob's growth as a character. By looking at the development of Rob's character as the story progresses, one can see how Rob outgrows his narcissism. Chapter three will discuss how the film music further expresses Rob's narcissism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER ONE: IDENTIFYING WITH ROB.	1
CHAPTER TWO: TALKING INTO THE CAMERA	22
CHAPTER THREE: ADAPTING ROB THROUGH MUSIC.	47
REFERENCES	63

CHAPTER ONE

IDENTIFYING WITH ROB

Narcissism is a personality trait that features an exaggerated sense of the person's own importance and abilities. People with this trait believe themselves to be uniquely gifted and commonly engage in fantasies of fabulous success, power, or fame. Arrogant and egotistical, narcissists are often snobs, defining themselves by their ability to associate with (or purchase the services of) the "best" people. They expect special treatment and concessions from others. Paradoxically, these individuals are generally insecure and have low self-esteem. They require considerable admiration from others and find it difficult to cope with criticism. Adversity or criticism may cause the narcissistic person either to counterattack in anger or withdraw socially. Because narcissistic individuals cannot cope with setbacks or failure, they often avoid risks and situations in which defeat is a possibility.

Another common characteristic of narcissistic individuals is envy and the expectation that others are envious as well. The self-aggrandizement and self-absorption of narcissistic individuals is accompanied by a pronounced lack of interest in and empathy for others. They expect people to be devoted to them but have no impulse to reciprocate, being unable to identify with the feelings of others or anticipate their needs. Narcissistic people often enter into relationships based on what other people can do for them. (The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology 1).

Twenty years ago, the social historian Christopher Lasch memorably lamented that American culture was turning its children into self-absorbed consumers who relished their self-preoccupation. Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) bewailed the prevalence of what he called "the banality of pseudo-self-awareness" (45). In a crowded field, his chief examples were the trivialization of politics and art as forms of celebrity spectacle. He observed that capitalism commodifies everything that it touches. Commercial society bombards its customers with images of consumer goods and convinces them that exchange value is the only value that really matters. Increasingly the standards and ethos of commercial advertising pervade the rest of culture: "We live in a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion" (35).

The recent cult of ironic detachment struck Lasch as especially notable. He attributed this phenomenon to the degradation of work:

As more and more people find themselves working at jobs that are in fact beneath their abilities, as leisure and sociability

themselves take on the qualities of work, the posture of cynical detachment becomes the dominant style (32).

People coped with lousy jobs by affecting knowing superiority over them. Popular culture increasingly deflected their boredom and despair by adopting the same trope of ironic detachment:

Many forms of popular art appeal to this sense of knowingness and thereby reinforce it. They parody familiar roles and themes, inviting the audience to consider itself superior to its surroundings. (32)

The next step in this cultural process was self-parody. For example, commercials began to spoof commercials; Westerns made fun of westerns; in the late seventies, soap operas especially demonstrated the use of self-parody. Some of the most popular shows on television were soap opera parodies:

Fernwood, Soap, and, above all, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. Shows assured soap opera viewers of their own sophistication by mocking the conventions of soap operas. Lasch shook his head:

The disparity between romance and reality, the world of the beautiful people and the workaday world, gives rise to an ironic detachment that dulls pain but also cripples

the will to change social conditions, to make even modest improvements in work and play, and to restore meaning and dignity to everyday life (62).

In 1979, Lasch could view this disparity as a recent trend; today we are awash in it. Commercials and web sites alike are laced with self-referential spin; Hollywood cranks out buck-raking movie sequels that make fun of buck-raking movie sequels. The ending of *Seinfeld*, "a show about nothing," was a major cultural event rating the front page of the *New York Times*. MTV's bottom-feeding *Beavis and Butthead*, with a wink and a nod, features two vulgar adolescents who spend their time watching overheated MTV videos.

Since 1979, when Lasch published *The Culture of Narcissism*, it has become clear that the world is narcissistic. The main character in *High Fidelity*, Rob Gordon, finds himself trapped by narcissism. In my thesis, I will demonstrate how the film *High Fidelity* successfully adapts the book through both point of view and songs used on the sound track to reveal Rob's narcissism, and cause the audience to empathize with it.

In order to examine how Rob's character is adapted to the screen, one must first examine Rob's narcissism. Chapter one will introduce and demonstrate examples of how Rob became stuck in his narcissistic pattern and how the film successfully demonstrates this narcissism through the use of both Lasch's theories and the use of other psychologists who have expanded on Lasch's theories. Chapter two will discuss how the use of the film's point of view and Stephen Frears' talking-into-the-camera technique helps to reflect both on Rob's narcissism and Rob's growth as a character. By looking at the development of Rob's character as the story progresses, one can see how Rob outgrows his narcissism. Chapter three will discuss how the film music further expresses Rob's narcissism. Chapter three will also touch on how the film music creates polarization in the audience, thus transferring Rob's moods and changes of attitude onto the audience.

Lasch's theories, as well as other theories (most of whom primarily reflect Lasch's thoughts) seem to have worked their way into literature. Nick Hornby's

novel *High Fidelity* has often been praised as a book that effectively reflects today's ironic detachment. Hornby's main character, Rob Gordon, has been defined and described by several book reviewers to be the epitome of today's sympathetic narcissist. Take, for example, the way critics at *Audiofile* describe Rob:

Author Hornby gives us a sympathetic look at a flawed young hero fumbling toward manliness. The narrator/protagonist--a callow young record-store owner obsessed with the politics of his disappointing sex life--admits to being "self-centered, blind and stupid. At times, Rob seems excruciatingly dull and dense; at other times, to have dug deeper into his character's angst than the author has. He also misses much of the humor in the story (1).

Robert Cook gives another account, proposing that readers relate to and sympathize with Hornby's Rob:

Rob owns a small record shop in London, his girlfriend has not long left him, and he's feeling a little unsure about his past. So begins an adventure in discovering the more uncertain part of our minds. I say our minds because the focus is very much on realizing just how much of Rob is in most of us. Chances are, you'll find yourself relating to more of *High Fidelity* than you'd admit amongst your friends (2).

According to these critics, readers of Hornby's *High Fidelity* find themselves enjoying the novel

because they can relate to Rob. Much has been written on the novel in this fashion, and most critics agree that Hornby's depiction of Rob is so successful because Rob is a reflection of today's society, thus allowing readers to identify with him.

Similar to Hornby's novel, the character of Rob Gordon presented in Stephen Frears' film *High Fidelity* reflects both present day culture and ironic stance. While Frears does not depict every episode from Hornby's novel that demonstrates Rob's character, Frears reveals enough of Rob's character to present Rob convincingly as a narcissist. It can be demonstrated that this successful depiction is what allows audience members to relate to Rob. For example, after seeing the film, people have responded that they relate to Rob: "It's not surprising my number one movie of the year would be a film that's about a guy who's a lot like me who has a lot of the same philosophies and ideas as me, acts like me and is unlucky in love like me" (Chad Polenz 3). People who do not directly identify with Rob admit that they still sympathize with him. Joe Leydon describes the

film's Rob as "an overgrown adolescent who's too narcissistic and self-indulgent to be easily liked, but too willing to admit his more unpleasant qualities to be wholly unsympathetic" (45).

John Cusack, who plays Rob in Frears' film, describes Rob as a "guy who ought to know better." According to Cusack, Rob is "slovenly, lazy, self-delusional, insecure, vain jerk who does all these despicable things" (*High Fidelity* DVD). Cusack's Rob fits Lasch's descriptions almost too perfectly. For example, Lasch attributes the development of cynical detachment to an individual being forced to work at a job far beneath his or her ability. In the film, as in the novel, Rob, who is very knowledgeable about pop music, owns a failing record store. He complains: "I'm so sick of the sight of this place" (*High Fidelity* DVD). Obviously Rob could be exploiting his vast knowledge of music elsewhere. He admits in both the film and the novel that he used to be a talented DJ:

I was a good DJ, I think. At any rate, people seemed happy; they danced, stayed late, asked me where they could buy some of the records I played, and came back week after wee. And I loved, loved doing it. To

look down on a roomful of heads all bobbing away to the music you have chosen is an uplifting thing, and for that six-month period when the club was popular, I was as happy as I have ever been. It was the only time I have ever really had a sense of momentum (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Not only was Rob a successful DJ, he also enjoyed the job. However, he lost the gig and wound up using his pop music knowledge to start his struggling record store. His complaints make it obvious that he is not fully satisfied with his job. Rob believes that he has a talent when it comes to music, and he fantasizes about all the wonderful things he could have been:

"Cerebral narcissists are obsessed with fantasies of unlimited success, fame, fearsome power or omnipotence, and unequalled brilliance. They feel grandiose and self-important, exaggerating achievements and talents to the point of lying, and demand to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements" (Sam Vaknin, 1). Rob definitely fantasizes about his possible success and feels he deserves a piece of this success. For example, in the film, when Rob lists his "top five dream jobs," his list demonstrates that he feels he

has a broad knowledge of popular music. His first three preferences all reveal his musical expertise:

1. Journalist for *Rolling Stone* magazine, 1976 to 1979. Get to meet the Clash, Chrissy Hynde, Sex Pistols, David Byrne. Get tons of free records.
2. Producer, Atlantic Records, 1964 to 1971. Get to meet Aretha, Wilson Pickett, Solomon Burke. More free records and a shitload of money.
3. Any kind of musician besides classical or rap. Settle for being one of the Memphis Horns or something. Not asking to be Jagger or Hendrix or Otis Redding.
4. Film director. Any kind except for German or silent.
5. Architect (*High Fidelity* DVD).

However, Rob feels that this expertise goes unrecognized and unappreciated as a record-store owner. He doesn't get the fame or rewards he would earn if he were a journalist, producer, musician, or even a DJ. Without this recognition, Rob feels his job is beneath him.

When males in today's culture feel trapped by a job beneath their abilities, their responses are usually exaggerated self-appreciation. Michael Bader, a longtime follower and believer in Lasch's theories, states:

Sometimes a person reacts against the prohibition of his or her narcissistic needs by exaggerating them. In other words, if you won't acknowledge how special I am, I'll rub your face in it. I'll force you to acknowledge something that experience tells me won't be given reality. I probably won't enjoy it because it's extorted and not freely given--besides, it's forbidden to begin with--and so I'll have to redouble my efforts to get more. This defensive solution is more available to men in our society because men hold positions of social power more frequently. Men can forcibly extract narcissistic supplies from others--or believe that they can--more readily than women. Their socialization and role-based learning interacts with their internal psychological conflicts over selfishness in ways that can often lead to this kind of coercive solution. On a psychological level, then, the man becomes a pathological narcissist not because of selfishness but because of a prohibition against a certain kind of selfishness (2).

Rob closely fits Bader's description of a person who has fallen into the rut of demanding recognition for how special he is. For example, in one scene of the film, a customer comes into the store and asks for a particular record. Rob and his two clerks decide not to sell the record to the customer, claiming that it's not for sale this week, although they had told the customer the same thing last week. After the

customer leaves, a second customer in the store,

Lewis, asks to buy it.

Lewis (Customer Two): I don't have that record. I'll buy it from you.

Rob: Sold.

Lewis (Customer Two): Why would you sell it to me and not to him?

Barry (Sales Clerk): Because you're not a geek, Lewis.

Lewis (Customer Two): You guys are such snobs.

Dick (Sales Clerk): No we're not.

Lewis (Customer Two): No, seriously, you're totally elitists. You feel like the unappreciated scholars, so you shit on the people who know less than you.

Rob and Clerks: No.

Lewis (Customer Two): Which is everybody.

Rob and Clerks: Yes (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob likes Lewis because Lewis acknowledges that Rob knows more about music than he does and probably most people; therefore, in Rob's eyes, Lewis is not a "geek" and Rob can sell him the record. Lewis describes Rob and his friends as people who feel like the "unappreciated scholars." People who do not appreciate or even know about Rob's knowledge of music, like the first customer, are snubbed totally in Rob's store. The first customer, however, cannot be blamed for not recognizing Rob's brilliance, as most people simply walk into stores and purchase the items

they ask for without praising the salesclerk. Rob fails to see things this way, though. Rob needs to be recognized for his musical knowledge.

Furthermore, Lasch describes popular art as an item that appeals to and reinforces ironic detachment. Rob loves music, which is depicted in both the film and the novel. Rob asks:

What came first—the music or the misery?
Did I listen to music because I was
miserable? Or was I miserable because I
listened to music? People worry about kids
playing with guns, and teenagers watching
violent videos; we are scared that some sort
of culture of violence will take them over.
Nobody worries about kids listening to
thousands—literally thousands—of songs about
broken hearts and rejection and pain and
misery and loss. The unhappiest people I
know, romantically speaking, are the ones
who like pop music the most; and I don't
know whether pop music has caused this
unhappiness, but I do know that they've been
listening to the sad songs longer than
they've been living their unhappy lives
(*High Fidelity* DVD).

In both the film and the novel, Rob ponders the influence of music on his life, and admits that it does have some sort of effect. In Lasch's eyes, pop music, by furthering pain, would give one the fuel to further detach oneself from the world in order to

avoid misery. Obviously, Rob's passion for music has contributed to Rob's ironic detachment. Frears depicts how music has affected Rob by having Rob talk into the camera about music, and showing that Rob's responses to the music that surrounds him has created in him a sense of detachment.

Lasch's theories revolve around the idea that pain ultimately detaches people from society. This notion can be further examined in Rob's case by focusing on the ordeals Rob faces in his failing romantic relationship. The conflicts and conditions of his situation with Laura cause Rob's narcissism to become more evident. When Rob first receives the news that his live-in girlfriend is leaving him, he goes into an angry demonstration of denial:

And then I met you, Laura, and we lived together, and now you've moved out. But, you know, you're not offering me anything new here; if you want to force yourself onto the list, you'll have to do better than this. I'm not as vulnerable as I was when Alison or Charlie dumped me; you haven't changed the whole structure of my daily life like Jackie did, you haven't made me feel bad about myself like Penny did (and there's no way you can humiliate me, like Chris Thomson did), and I'm more robust than I was when Sarah went—I know, despite all the

gloom and self-doubt that bubbles up from the deep when you get dumped, that you did not represent my last and best chance of a relationship. So, you know. Nice try. Close but no cigar. See you around (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob's tone, especially as he raises his voice, yelling down at his former girlfriend, reveals the depth of his anger. Furthermore, Rob's outburst demonstrates his state of denial. Rob actually believes that Laura is leaving him because she is trying to make it to his infamous "top-five break-up list." He does not see that Laura could be leaving him for other reasons; for example, his selfishness or his inability to grow up. Rob is in denial about his own personal flaws and does not want to admit that Laura has any sort of power over him. Other writers agree that anger and denial are two common symptoms found in a narcissist who is about to be left by a romantic partner: "[Narcissists display] arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes coupled with rage when frustrated, contradicted, or confronted" (*Narcissistic Personality* 2). Along the same lines, Sam Vaknin states:

The narcissist is devoid of empathy and incapable of intimacy with others as well as with himself. To him, lying has become a second nature. An alter (False) Ego soon takes over. He begins to believe his own lies. He makes himself to be what he wants to be and not what he is. So, he measures life by events, difficulties, negative externalities and predictions and projections related to them. The narcissist is so afraid of the pool of negative feelings inside him—that he would rather deny them and thus refrain from being intimate with himself (4).

Subsequent scenes between Rob and Laura also help to demonstrate Rob's narcissism. Many narcissists have the fantasy that if they try hard, "do it right," be reasonable, logical, and have goodwill, these factors will generate a positive outcome in interpersonal relationships. Rob believes this fantasy, and this is as about as deep a fantasy as one could possibly have, as it is not based in reality. It is realistic because a narcissist's survival depends upon having control or the perception of control. When a narcissist's sense of control is challenged, he feels threatened, and responds as if his survival is at stake. For example, Rob can't grasp what he has done to chase Laura away: "I mean,

what the hell, did I beat you? Did I tell you you were a bad person?" (*High Fidelity* DVD) From Rob's standpoint, he must have been the perfect boyfriend because he never did either of the two things that would, in his own mind, make him disreputable. His personality has not changed since he's been with Laura. She initially loves him, so if nothing about him ever changes, she can never fall out of love with him, or so Rob thinks. However, Rob's limited insight fails to take into consideration the fact that Laura may change. Laura even cites this fact: "You have to give people room to grow... You haven't changed so much as a pair of socks since I've met you" (*High Fidelity* DVD). Obviously, Rob's ability to control situations is being endangered here; Laura has changed and has already moved in with another man, Ian, giving Rob no indication that she might behave as he wants and reunite with him. Rob's obsessive focus on Laura's relationship with Ian demonstrates how threatened he feels. "Is it better?" he asks Laura, referring to the sex he thinks she is having with Ian. According

to *Narcissistic Personality*, narcissists are "constantly envious of others" (1).

Several of the novel's readers and film viewers respond to Rob's character by saying that they relate to Rob. Both the novel and the film have been called "male confessionals," or works that reveal huge amounts about the male psyche.

High Fidelity has mastered the male confessional. It reveals a fascination with the sheer voodoo of what so often passes for masculinity: the weird ritual facts. The useless objects, the losing clubs and teams... Many men—and certainly, all addictive personalities—will find in [Rob] shadows of themselves (*The New Yorker* 56).

Along the same lines, *Mirabella* calls this work "an all-too true guy's tale" (21) and *Details* warns men to "keep this [information] away from your girlfriend—it contains too many of your secrets to let it fall into the wrong hands" (34). Women as well as men seem to understand Rob's character because women recognize Rob's "male" characteristics. Therefore, women who are already well-acquainted with narcissistic men like Rob, feel that they have seen

Rob's personality traits in other men. According to

John Cusack:

We thought when we made the movie that women would just stone the screen. We just revealed too much of our dark secrets. But women love the film. They like it even more than men. They just say, 'well, finally, at least they admit it' (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Women as well as men are able to relate Rob to aspects in their lives. According to film scholar Barys Gaut, defining exactly how an audience relates to a character can be a tricky thing. However, Gaut describes different ways one can identify with a character. Gaut explains that people do not necessarily identify with a character on every occasion; perhaps the individual relates to the character in one specific way. However, identifying with a character in any aspect still means that the viewer is somehow connecting with the character.

The first step in the process of identification occurs when the audience member recognizes something about the character. After recognition, the process of identification can branch off in one of two ways. The audience member's identification may stop at

recognition, or proceed to either affective identification or empathy. The film may successfully create what Gaut calls "affective identification," which requires a viewer to imagine feeling what a character feels. Imagination, then, is the key to this stage. An audience member does not have to actually do or say everything Rob does in order to identify with Rob. However, if that audience member can imagine himself or herself doing or saying things similar to Rob, then he or she is experiencing affective identification.

Besides affective identification, Gaut points out that a viewer can relate to a character through empathy. In order to empathize with a character, one must actually feel what the character is feeling:

Consider the idea of empathy, which is naturally thought of as a kind of identification, and a very important one at that. If someone has a parent die, identifying with the bereaved person characteristically takes the form of taking on her feelings, sharing them. ('I feel your pain.' 'I know what it's like to undergo that loss.') But note that this is different from the notion of affective identification as we have characterized it. That required the viewer to imagine feeling what a person or character fictionally

feels; empathy requires the viewer actually to feel what a person or a character fictionally feels (206).

Whether the audience member has to imagine feeling what Rob feels, actually feels what Rob feels, or links Rob with somebody he or she already knows, it is clear that today's film audience is able to relate with Rob because of Rob's narcissism. Like people in today's society, Rob is trapped in a narcissistic world, and because Rob feels imprisoned, audiences of *High Fidelity* are able to identify with him. This identification process continues through the application of the talking-into-the-camera technique.

CHAPTER TWO

TALKING INTO THE CAMERA

One problem faced when adapting a novel like *High Fidelity* for the screen is point of view. Nick Hornby's novel is in first person, which helps readers to crawl into Rob's narcissistic mind. By experiencing Rob Gordon through the first person point of view, readers of the novel are able to see how often he thinks about only himself, and how selfish his character actually is. By reading Rob's thoughts, readers are able to recognize, affectively identify or empathize with him, which helped make the book a success (Cook 2). Crawling into a character's mind does wonders for allowing readers to identify with that character. According to Brian McFarlane, it is difficult to transfer first-person point of view to film:

In a sense, all films are omniscient: even when they employ a voice-over technique as a means of simulating the first-person novelistic approach, the viewer is aware... of a level of objectivity in what is shown, which may include what the protagonist sees but cannot help including a great deal else as well (18).

In the film, Stephen Frears does not often use the common voice-over technique. Instead, he employs the lesser-used technique of having Rob talk directly to the camera, which obviously reveals his narcissism. He admits that having Rob talk into the camera gives the film a certain sense of directness. He liked this result; one of the reasons he enjoyed the novel was because "it was direct" (High Fidelity DVD). While the film still cannot be presented entirely in the first person, a good deal about Rob's thoughts and feelings are revealed when he talks into the camera. Although the audience does not see what Rob sees as he expresses his thoughts, what the audience is given is a clear shot of his face while he talks. Thus, his attention, and the attention of the audience, is entirely focused on him, and the audience is able to see his facial gestures while Rob expresses his thoughts. According to Frears:

When I read [the screen play], it was written in voice over so it always had the character at the center, but we very soon invented the device of talking into the camera. Once you did that, then you could get at all the good stuff because the good

passages of the book were really his thoughts. So once you invented the device of the character talking to the audience, you stopped having to figure out how to get the good bits in. You could take the good bits and say, "Let's just shoot them. It made us create a much more interesting narrative (*High Fidelity* DVD).

What Frears refers to as "the good bits" of the novel, or the passages that keep the focus on the character, are the passages where Rob reveals his thoughts. Thus, by having Rob talk into the camera, he is able to reveal his thoughts in the film, giving a faithful adaptation and creating an effective means by which to show Rob's character.

Frears' use of the talking-into-the-camera technique effectively adapts Hornby's point-of-view because like Hornby's first person narration, the talking-into-the-camera elicits emotions in the audience. By having Rob talk into the camera so often, the audience is forced to constantly focus on his face. Showing Rob's face actually helps the audience to empathize, recognize, or identify with the character. According to Carl Plantinga:

A central way the visual aspect of film is significant is in the use of the human face

in the scene of empathy. For as film theorist Bela Belazs wrote years ago, the close-up of the human face occupies a central place in the cinema because it hearkens back to prelinguistic communication, 'the expressive movement, the gesture, that is the aboriginal mother-tongue of the human race.' In this kind of scene, which I call the scene of empathy, we see a character's face, typically in close-up, either for a single shot of long duration or as an element of a point-of-view structure alternating between shots of the character's face and shots of what she or he sees. In either case, the prolonged concentration on the character's face is not warranted by the simple communication of information about character emotion. Such scenes are also intended to elicit empathetic emotions in the spectator (239).

In order to elicit recognition, and perhaps evoke affective identification and empathy in an audience through the use of a character's face, the face must be shown for a certain duration. The shot's duration must be sufficient to allow for the intended response. Many short quickly seen close-ups and other shots of the face are designed only to communicate information. Camera shots designed to create empathy are often of much longer duration. For example, the typical talking-into-the-camera shot-length in *High Fidelity* is about 20 to 25 seconds, in comparison to the

action-packed movie *The Crow*, where shots directed at the characters' faces averaged 3.5 seconds (Plantiga, 231).

Empathy, affective identification, and recognition are processes that occur in time, and emotions take time to take hold. Therefore, the faces are either left on the screen for sufficient duration, or else we continually return to them within the point-of-view structure. Emotions also have a residual effect. Once they are caught, they are not quickly overcome.

As persons skilled, to lesser or greater degrees, in social discourse, we implicitly recognize facial expressions. In public situations, the face is as likely to be used to hide emotions or to facilitate conversation as it is to reveal genuine interior states. In scenes of empathy, however, the face expresses the interiority of the character. For this reason, such scenes place characters in situations in which their facial expressions will not be understood as misleading.

Everyday experience tells people that they are most comfortable being honest in private settings, where they feel safe and secure. Filmmakers understand this concept. One means of creating honesty in a character is to make the situation private or, in other words, to put the emoting character in a situation where she or he believes no one but the audience is observing. In such situations, social display rules are irrelevant and the face becomes an accurate sign of emotion.

Whether a facial expression is a public or private display is one sense in which narrative context is important. In another sense, narrative context must justify the spectator's empathy, recognition, or affective identification in moral terms. We do not extend our emotions easily or without conditions, and are wary of attempts to elicit unearned or misplaced emotion or what is called sentimentality.

To avoid sentimentality and to justify sufficiently the spectator's empathy, recognition, or affective identification, scenes of empathy must be

put in a moral context that assumes a good deal of information about the character in question. Frears effectively does this in *High Fidelity* because in almost every instance when the audience gets a long shot of Rob's face, Rob is talking into the camera. Thus, by talking about his thoughts, Rob is privately revealing a good deal about himself almost every time a scene of empathy occurs. Rob uses this aside technique most often to address the audience privately, thus making the honesty behind what Rob says much more intense. Also, Rob, by revealing his thoughts to the audience, disarms himself and willingly reveals his character to the audience.

Because Rob is giving speeches directly into the camera, the audience sees his face for a prolonged period of time; viewers can therefore classify the times when he talks into the camera as scenes of empathy. By discussing and timing scenes in which Rob talks into the camera, viewers can see how his addresses to the audience can be considered scenes of empathy. It should be noted that scenes of empathy

are used to not only create empathy, but affective identification and recognition as well.

One example of Rob talking into the camera occurs at the beginning of the film, right before the audience sees that Laura is leaving him. The camera is focused specifically on Rob while he talks into the camera:

What came first, the music or the misery?
People worry about kids playing with guns,
or watching violent videos that some sort of
culture of violence will take them over.
Nobody worries about kids listening to
thousands, literally thousands of songs
about heartbreak, rejection, pain, misery,
and loss. Did I listen to pop music because
I was miserable? Or was I miserable because
I listened to pop music? (*High Fidelity*
DVD).

This scene takes almost forty seconds for Cusack to complete. The audience watches Rob express himself while he, with a headset on, listens to a record. Rob looks depressed while he gazes into his camera. His thoughts also sound melancholic and contemplative. The scene evokes sympathy from the viewer because the camera stays focused on Rob's face for a long period of time while the audience relates and identifies with him. Keeping the camera on Rob's face allows the

audience to see that he is being honest when he expresses his thoughts because his facial features match his frustration. Because the audience both sees and hears the expression of Rob's emotions, the audience is able to first recognize that he's depressed. After the audience experiences this act of recognition, their feelings or relation to the character either remain at this stage or progress to affective identification or empathy. If they affectively identify with the character, they will imagine feeling the depression Rob is feeling. If they empathize with Rob, they will feel the depression Rob is feeling.

After Laura has left Rob, the audience is provided the opportunity to experience his bitterness towards women and girlfriends. He performs two short talking-into-the-camera scenes before his next encounter with Laura, and both scenes demonstrate Rob's cynical emotions toward women. Each scene gives the audience a twenty-second look at his face while Rob talks into the camera. Because the camera is focused on him for an extended period of time in both

scenes, both scenes can be classified as scenes of empathy. The first scene takes place in his apartment:

Look at these. I used to dream I'd be surrounded by exotic women's underwear forever and ever. Now I know they just save their best pairs for the nights they know they're gonna sleep with somebody (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob's comment reflects his embittered thoughts about relationships. He communicates here that relationships are not nearly what he expected they would be, and that living with a woman destroys the fantasies he holds about females in general. Rob reveals that initially, he thought living with a woman would allow him to see her in lingerie every night. However, the truth of the matter is that this would never happen. Rob is frustrated because Laura has ruined part of his fantasy about relationships.

Another scene that reflects Rob's bitterness occurs outside a movie theater in Chicago. Rob turns to the audience and says:

John Dillinger was shot dead behind that theater in a hail of F.B.I. gunfire. You know who tipped him off? His fucking

girlfriend. He just wanted to go to the movies (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Again, the audience witnesses Rob's bitter attitude toward women. Here, Rob is implying that girlfriends are not to be trusted; they would betray their boyfriends if given the opportunity. These two scenes, because they are performed through the talking-into-the-camera technique, force the audience to recognize Rob's honesty. Furthermore, after realizing Rob is being honest, the audience is able to recognize Rob's frustration. Once Rob's frustration is recognized, the audience is able to move into affective identification or empathy. Quite possibly, if an audience member can remember experiencing the same sort of frustration as Rob, he or she will probably enter the realm of affective identification or empathy.

After Rob finishes discussing his bitterness and his top-five break-ups, his attention is forced to a new focal point: he discovers that Laura is living with somebody named Ian. Rob finds himself in an obsessive frenzy, trying to discover who this "Ian

guy" is. Rob talks into the camera while he ponders about Ian. Thus, the camera focuses on Rob's face for about thirty-five seconds, inviting the viewers' empathy.

Laura doesn't know anybody called Ian. There's no Ian at her office. She has no friends named Ian. She has never met anyone called Ian in her whole life. She lives in an Ian-less universe... [Picks up a letter at the mail table]. I. Raymond. Ray. 'I'. Ian. Mr. I Raymond. "Ray" to his friends, and more importantly, to his neighbors. The guy who up until about six weeks ago lived upstairs. I start to remember things now: his stupid clothing, his music--Latin, Bulgarian, whatever world music was trendy that week--stupid laugh, awful cooking smells. I never liked him much then, and I fucking hate him now (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob's honesty is established yet again by talking into the camera. The audience feels how strongly Rob hates Ian; after all, Ian has what Rob has lost: Laura. Also, like the scene discussed before this one, it is quite possible that audience members have experienced this same sort of occurrence, or witnessed a friend or relative experiencing something similar. Who wouldn't despise the person living with a still desired ex-mate?

For all his bitterness toward women and hatred toward Ian, Rob finally allows himself to admit that he has done things to contribute to the problems in his relationship with Laura. Rob's revelation occurs after Liz arrives in his store and calls him an "asshole." Because Rob is so willing to admit his faults to the audience in this scene, Rob creates a special bond with them. He admits several faults about himself, which makes all of his talking-into-the-camera scenes both before and after this scene appear all that much more honest and reliable. Rob says:

She's right, of course. I am a fucking asshole. First of all, the money. She had it and I didn't, and she wanted to give it to me. I've never paid her back because I've never been able to, and just because she's took off and moved in with some Supertramp fan doesn't make me five grand richer.

Okay, Number two: the stuff I told her about being unhappy in the relationship, about half looking around for someone else: She tricked me into saying it. We were having this state of the union type conversation and she said, quite matter-of-factly, that we were pretty unhappy at the moment, and did I agree, and I said yes, and she asked whether I ever thought about meeting someone else. So I asked her if she ever thought about it, and she said of

course, so I admitted that I daydream about it from time to time. Now I see that what we were really talking about was her and Ian, and she suckered me into absolving her. It was a sneaky lawyer's trick, and I fell for it, because she's much smarter than me. "And number three: The Pregnancy. I didn't know she was pregnant. Of course I didn't. She hadn't told me because I had told her I was sort of seeing somebody else. So--I didn't find out about it 'til way later. We were going through a good period and I made a crack about having kids and she burst into tears. I made her tell me what it was all about, and she did. Then I went into this brief and ill-advised bout of self-righteousness, you know, 'What right do you have? My child too,' blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah... That pretty much brings us up to date. Who needs a drink? (*High Fidelity* DVD).

This talking-into-the-camera speech occurs in three different locations: a bar, a subway station, and inside a subway car, in order of Rob's narration. Each sequence is about thirty seconds long, and because Rob stares into the camera for a prolonged period time, these scenes produce empathy from the audience. Because Rob admits so many terrible things about himself, and appears to feel regret and remorse while he reflects on the past, the audience sympathizes with him and believes that he is a reliable narrator. This reliability allows the

audience to recognize and believe that Rob is experiencing guilt. Furthermore, because several audience members have probably also expressed guilt as a result of things that they have done in their romantic relationships, some will be able to experience affective identification or empathy. Furthermore, this scene demonstrates Rob's development as a character. This is one of the few times of the movie that Rob looks back on his past actions and admits that he was wrong. Hence, because of this willingness to admit, Rob is growing and admitting to his mistakes.

Even though his character has developed self-awareness which we recognize through the revelation of his flaws and his guilty feelings, Rob still displays narcissistic tendencies. However, he starts fusing those tendencies with non-narcissistic thoughts. Rob may be growing up in the film, but he still experiences narcissistic lapses. For example, after Rob discovers that Alison Ashworth married Kevin Bannister, he shakes off one trait of narcissism only to replace it with another. He talks into the camera

for twenty seconds about revising his past relationships and then for about forty seconds has an imaginary conversation with Bruce Springstein.

This is fate. This is destiny. It is beyond my control. Beyond my fault. I love this! I want more. I want to see the others in the big top five. I want to see Penny and Charlie and Sarah--all of them! You know, just see 'em and talk to 'em. Like a Bruce Springstein song (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob goes into a fantasy where Bruce Springstein is giving him advice, while he continues to talk into the camera with his responses to Bruce.

Bruce: You call, you ask 'em how they are, and you see if they've forgiven you.
Rob: Yeah, and then, and then I'd feel good. And they'd feel good.
Bruce: No, they'd feel good maybe, but you'd feel better.
Rob: I'd feel clean and calm.
Bruce: That's what you're looking for. You want to start again. That'd be good for you.
Rob: Great, even.
Bruce: You'd give that final good luck and good-bye to your all-time top-five and just move on down the road.
Rob: Good luck, good-bye. Thanks, boss (*High Fidelity* DVD).

In this scene, it looks as if Rob shakes off the narcissistic tendency of believing that he can control everything that happens to him. Rob recognizes that

he cannot control his life and that fate will happen no matter what he does; thus, Rob grows up a little in this scene. However, Rob falls right back into his narcissistic trend. First, Rob's imaginary conversation with Bruce Springstein, shows he is fantasizing narcissistically. Second, Rob seems appeased that talking to his top-five will make him feel better, without really caring about how the women on Rob's list will feel after he talks to them. Thus, Rob is still focusing on his own thoughts and feelings rather than the women's. Rob appears to be happy in this scene; he laughs, he smiles, and enjoys his recent discovery.

While Rob gets back in touch with his top-five, he continues to demonstrate his narcissism. First, Rob talks to Penny. They have a great date and everything seems to be going well when Rob asks Penny why she wanted to "sleep with Chris Thompson and not [Rob]." Penny angrily tells Rob that she was crazy about him and that Rob rejected her, then storms out of the restaurant they're at. After Penny has left,

Rob turns to talk into the camera. For about twenty seconds, the audience sees a shot of Rob's face.

My God, she's right. I broke up with her. I rejected her. That's another one I don't have to worry about. I should have done this years ago (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob not only isn't flustered by the fact that he took a verbal beating from Penny, he doesn't even acknowledge the fact that Penny has just yelled at him, or that Penny is correct. Instead, Rob focuses narcissistically on himself; the word "I" pops up four times in this speech. Another example of a "top-five" woman in a scene of empathy occurs when Rob contacts Sarah. As Rob ends the date and drops Sarah off at her apartment, he turns to talk into the camera for about twenty-five seconds and discusses his status with Sarah.

I could have wound up having sex back there. And what better way to exorcise rejection demons than to screw the person who rejected you, right? But you wouldn't be sleeping with a person. You' be sleeping with the whole sad single-person culture. It would be like sleeping with Talia Shire in *Rocky* if you weren't Rocky. I feel guilty enough as it is (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Again, Rob appears narcissistically overconfident. Does the audience know for a fact that Sarah would have had sex with Rob, or is Rob trying to demonstrate how great he thinks he is to the audience? This is not a case of Rob being dishonest; it is a case of Rob having the narcissistic fantasy that a woman may want to have sex with him; the audience does not know for sure if Sarah really does want Rob. The focus on "I" again in this speech, like the speech before it, demonstrates that Rob is centered on himself.

Although Rob continues to lapse occasionally, his character continues to experience growth. For example, when Liz asks Rob in the bar, "Why do you want Laura back so badly?" (*High Fidelity* DVD), both the audience and Rob are forced to ponder about Rob's motives. Is Rob only seeking Laura out because of his selfishness? Has he lost something that belongs to him and he wants it back? Or, does Rob seek to regain Laura's love because he truly values her as a person? Rob answers this question for the audience. One talking-into-the-camera scene that demonstrates Rob's

evolving character is a forty-five second scene of empathy in which Rob stares into the camera and talks about the things he likes about Laura. Rob's narcissism seems to be waning a bit because he is focused solely on another person in this scene:

Top five things I miss about Laura. One: sense of humor. Very dry, but it can also be warm and forgiving. And she's got one of the best all-time laughs in the history of all-time laughs. She laughs with her entire body. Two: she's got character. Or at least she had character before the whole Ian nightmare. She's loyal and honest and she doesn't even take it out on people when she's having a bad day. That's character. Three: I miss her smell and the way she tastes. It's a mystery of human chemistry, and I don't understand it. Some people, as far as your senses are concerned, just feel like home. Four: I really dig how she walks around. It's like she doesn't care how she looks or what she projects. And it's not that she doesn't care, it's just—she's not affected, I guess. And that gives her grace. And five: She does this thing in bed when she can't get to sleep. She kind of half-moans and rubs her feet together an equal number of times. It just kills me. Believe me, I could do a top-five-things about her that drive me crazy but it's just your garden-variety women, you know, schizo stuff. And that's the kind of thinking that got me here (*High Fidelity* DVD).

For about forty-five seconds, Rob is focused solely on Laura. Rob also admits another one of his

faults: his tendency to complain about typical womanly behaviors that all women possess. This scene is critical because it is the first scene of the movie where Rob is focused solely on Laura, and it is also the first scene in which Rob does not reflect narcissistic traits. Rob projects a sort of melancholic mood as he talks about the woman he misses so much. While this scene becomes another one of Rob's "lists," this list has a very different effect than previous top-five lists Rob has discussed with the audience. Rob is much more serious in this scene than in prior list scenes, and much more focused on Laura.

After Rob has gotten back together with Laura, he meets a reporter called Caroline. His narcissism threatens to bloom again, but the world he inhabits remains the same. He begins having thoughts about leaving Laura for Caroline. However, a few scenes later, Rob once more delivers an address to the audience. Rob again demonstrates his growing self-awareness because he acknowledges the faults of his past actions, and recognizes that in order for him to grow up and keep Laura, he needs to quit repeating his

previous errors. The camera is focused completely on him and his face as he talks about the situation:

So what am I gonna do now? Just keep jumping from rock to rock for the rest of my life until there aren't any rocks left? Should I bolt every time I get that feeling in my gut when I meet someone new? I've been thinking with my gut since I was 14 years old and, frankly speaking, I've come to the conclusion that my guts have shit for brains (*High Fidelity* DVD).

This particular scene when Rob talks into the camera takes a twenty-five-second look at Rob's face while Rob communicates his feelings. The audience is able to look at Rob's face for a long enough period of time and while they watch Rob's face, the audience also hears him describe his exact feelings and thoughts. Having the audience both see and hear Rob's emotions allows them to respond with empathy, recognition, or affective identification. Furthermore, by seeing and hearing Rob's thoughts simultaneously, the audience recognizes Rob's feeling of frustration.

The final example of a scene when Rob talks into the camera occurs at the end of the film. Before this scene, Rob has decided that Laura is the person he

wants to spend the rest of his life with. He has started to think more and more about her thoughts and feelings. In the last scene, Rob tells the audience about his current attempt to make Laura a good compilation tape:

The making of a great compilation tape like breaking up, is hard to do and you gotta kick it off with a killer to grab attention. Then you gotta take it up a notch, but you don't want to blow your wad. So then you gotta cool it off a notch. There are a lot of rules. Anyway, I've started to make a tape in my head, for Laura. Full of stuff she'd like. Full of stuff that'd make her happy. For the first time, I can see how that's done (*High Fidelity* DVD).

This particular talking-into-the-camera scene, the last scene of the film, is fifty seconds long. For fifty seconds, the audience sees Rob's face talking into the camera. Again, Rob's reliability is maintained because the audience is able to both see and hear Rob's emotions, and this correspondence makes him appear honest. This honesty again paves the way for the audience to recognize that Rob is experiencing joy finally as a result of the thought of making Laura happy. Furthermore, the fact that the longest shot on

Rob's face occurs at the end of the film fits another pattern described by Plantinga, who writes of the

. . .placement of scenes of compassionate empathy at the end of many films, where an emotional response can serve as a release, and where it will not interfere with comprehension of succeeding narrative developments (250).

High Fidelity concludes with Rob feeling that he has finally figured out his relationship with Laura. He is beginning to see, finally, that he needs to consider what someone besides himself desires and needs instead of only considering what he likes and wants. Thus, the audience is left with a hopeful feeling at the end of the picture.

Rob's talking-into-the camera scenes seem to have a two-fold effect. Not only does the audience hear Rob's thoughts; they also see Rob's face while he expresses his feelings. By having Rob talk into the camera, Frears does manage to bring to life many of the passages in the book that help to define Rob's character. Thus, Frears manages to stay true to Hornby's character while at the same time employing an identification technique. By using the talking-into-

the-camera technique, Frears also utilizes a cinematic technique that conveys in film what Hornby does in prose. Frears has selected passages from Hornby's book for Rob to recite in order to demonstrate Rob's narcissistic character. Rob's habit of talking into the camera reflects on his character, demonstrating that Rob needs to make sure everyone, including the audience, is on his side, and that he is the center of his world, to the exclusion of everyone else. By presenting Rob so directly and disarmingly, at the same time as the character is obviously in need of validation and sympathy, the film convincingly dramatizes this narcissistic character who talks to himself while addressing the audience directly. The audience, who is also part of a narcissistic culture, becomes Rob's reflection. Thus, the audience is able to empathize, recognize, or affectively identify with Rob because they are also a part of a narcissistic culture. This tactic of associating the character with the audience continues with the film's music and the polarization the audience feels when experiencing the film's music.

CHAPTER THREE

ADAPTING ROB THROUGH MUSIC

One symptom of Rob's Gordon narcissism is his passion for pop music. As stated earlier, Christopher Lasch notes: "Many forms of popular art appeal to [ironic detachment] and thereby reinforce it. They parody familiar roles and themes, inviting the audience to consider itself superior to its surroundings" (32). Both the film and the novel employ pop music to expose Rob's narcissistic character. Any story with its main characters attached so strongly to forms of popular media (music, most importantly) becomes more vivid when the audience is able to hear the songs. A unique, compelling feature of the novel are the lists of rock songs that Rob Gordon, Nick Hornby's protagonist, uses to catalogue his own experiences. This is not the case with the film; people are able to hear the songs themselves and relate them to the characters. The film once again successfully reveals this symptom of Rob's character because he hears himself represented

in all the film's pop songs, which Lasch notes are usually narcissistic. Furthermore, the film allows the audience to understand how Rob feels about himself when a song is played, as they can view Rob's response to the song, and respond to what they hear. While Rob's top-five lists do not always include soundtrack songs, the soundtrack songs are important to analyze when taking into account a character's emotions. According to Jeff Smith, "music in film frequently serves to represent the emotional states of characters...and prompt an appropriate emotional response from spectators" (13). Thus, through the film's soundtrack the audience sees Rob's narcissism while recognizing that they, too, belong to a narcissistic culture.

The use of music thus becomes another way Stephen Frears successfully adapts Rob's narcissistic character to film. The musical choices in the film directly reflect on Rob's growth as a character, so that by analyzing the sequence in which we hear certain songs and examining the scenes in which the songs take place, the audience can see a progression

in Rob. As John Cusack states, music has the power to reflect biographically on people, as well as both reflecting and affecting people's moods:

We were sort of frothing at the mouth for the chance to get into all that music. I'm not a collector and I'm not that obsessive about music but all three of us writers, we all experience music autobiographically. I think a lot of people do. We all have certain songs that mark certain times in our lives, and I think we're not rare that way. I think that the autobiographical nature of music is something that the book really captured and that we tried to capture and that I love. If you can make pain just a little transcendent it means that maybe you're suffering for a reason. So I think that's why those miserable songs are so great (*High Fidelity* DVD).

The music used in the film has the ability to not only reflect biographically on Rob, but also to create a sense of a particular mood in the audience. While the audience may not necessarily be empathic with Rob when they hear the music, they are more than likely experiencing at least some kind of recognition. They would then be able to imagine or acknowledge what the character is experiencing. According to Jeff Smith:

When we ascribe sadness to a piece of music, we are not aroused to sadness, but instead are applying a set of intersubjective public criteria for particular musical conventions

that are recognized as expressive of sadness... Since spectators are able to discern emotional qualities from specific musical elements, they can then use that information to evaluate the emotional states of characters or the overall mood of a scene (153).

Film music, therefore, can affect the way the audience understands a scene. Film critics have identified an interesting idea called polarization, which can also be applied to the film *High Fidelity*. Smith defines polarization, citing an experiment that proves polarization to be an effective way of using music to reveal something about a particular character, which would then allow the audience to recognize, affectively identify, or empathize with him or her.

Polarization is an audiovisual interaction in which the affective meaning of the music moves the content of the image toward the specific character of that music... The effects of polarization have been illustrated in a number of experiments conducted by Annabel Cohen. In the first of these, Cohen tested the effects of film music on viewers' interpretations of a short abstract animated film, which depicts the interaction of three geometric figures as they move in and out of a rectangular enclosure. The film was presented with two soundtracks of contrasting music, one allegro, and one adagio. Subjects were then

asked to rate the music and film on bipolar adjective scales, which were then further subdivided into dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity. Each bipolar adjective scale consisted of a set of paired terms, such as calm/agitated, sad/cheerful, villainous/heroic, or serious/humorous. The experiment's results suggested that the music not only affected the perceptions of each figure, but that temporal congruencies between music and image may have also directed the viewers' attention to certain features of the film to produce an association between the meaning of the music and the attended film items. In doing so, the music accompanying the film nudged the meanings associated with each object toward one pole of the bipolar semantic scale (160).

Thus, film music can be shown to have an impact on the way an audience associates meanings with particular objects or characters. *High Fidelity* uses music in order to determine how the audience views and understands Rob, as well as commenting on Rob's narcissism.

The song that opens the film *High Fidelity* emphasizes how Rob responds to his situation with his girlfriend. Laura is preparing to leave Rob, and they are about to have their final conversation before she moves out. While she is packing up her car, Rob tells

the audience about his top-five all-time break-ups,
and begins to question Laura's ability to hurt him:

Can you see your name in that list, Laura?
Maybe you'd sneak into the top ten. But
there's just no room for you in the top
five. Sorry! Those places are reserved for
the kind of humiliation you're just not
capable of delivering. If you really wanted
to mess me up, you should have gotten to me
earlier! (*High Fidelity* DVD).

While witnessing this scene, the audience hears
the music of a band called the 13th Floor Elevators.
The song, entitled: "You're Gonna Miss Me," almost
perfectly reflects how the audience imagines Rob is
feeling at the moment:

You're gonna wake up one morning as the sun
greet's the dawn.
You're gonna wake up one morning as the sun
greet's the dawn.
You're gonna look around in your mind, girl,
you're gonna find that I'm gone.
You didn't realize
Oh! You're gonna miss me, baby
You're gonna wake up wonderin',
Find yourself all alone
But what's gonna stop me, baby?
I'm not comin' home (*High Fidelity* DVD).

The song suggests that Rob is thinking Laura will
be more hurt in the end by the break-up than Rob will,
even though Laura is initiating the break-up. Rob, by
stating that Laura will not make it into his top-five

list, seems to be implying that he is not hurt by Laura's decision to leave. Furthermore, the song seems to take an overall narcissistic stance by assuming that the woman leaving will miss the speaker more than the speaker will miss her. This attitude reflects Rob's own narcissism. He is searching for ways to prove that, because he is so wonderful, she will miss him. The audience soon learns that this is not the case.

"Who Loves the Sun" by Velvet Underground, is another song that reflects both on Rob's narcissism and Rob's feelings. The audience hears the song when Rob decides to call Alison Ashworth, number one on his all-time top-five break-up list. As the song is playing, Rob says: "What's wrong with me? What happened? Why am I doomed to be left? Doomed to be rejected. I need answers. Number one. Alison Ashmore." Rob's statement demonstrates his narcissistic insecurity. He obviously feels as if he's doomed to fail in relationships but he can't understand why. Rob, because he asks, "What's wrong with me?" demonstrates that he cannot recognize any of

his own faults. While the scene progresses, Rob continues to display his insecurities. He calls Alison but winds up speaking to her mother. In the course of identifying himself to her, he claims that he was Alison's first boyfriend. Alison's mother counters by explaining that Alison married her first boyfriend, Kevin Bannister. Rob's desperate need to be validated even in this petty sense causes him to argue for his own significance with Alison's mother. His narcissistic insecurity causes him to need to be recognized and acknowledged as Alison's first boyfriend.

During this scene, the audience hears Velvet Underground's song "Who Loves the Sun":

Who loves the sun?
Who cares that it makes plants grow?
Since you broke my heart,
Who loves the wind?
Who cares that it makes breezes?
Who cares what it does
Since you broke my heart? (*High Fidelity*
DVD).

The song reflects directly on Rob's relationship with Alison, whose rejection of him seems to have wounded him for life and made him, as Charlie

describes later in the film, not so "sunny," "sparky," and "less sure of himself" (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Furthermore, when Rob tells the audience about how his relationship with Alison ended, it becomes obvious that this woman helped cause his bitter attitude toward women:

It would be nice to think that as I've got older times have changed, relationships have become more sophisticated, females less cruel, skins thicker, reactions sharper, instincts more developed. But there seems to be an element of that evening in everything that has happened to me since; all my other romantic stories seem to be a scrambled version of that first one [Alison Ashmore] (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Furthermore, Velvet Underground's song seems to be narcissistic in itself. When the speaker of the song asks: "Who loves the sun; Who cares that it is shining; Who cares what it does; Since you broke my heart," he almost seems to be vocalizing Rob's narcissistic attitude. By using the word "who" to ask questions, the speaker seems to be implying that the entire world has been affected by his break-up with his girlfriend. For the narcissist, because he is depressed, the whole world must be depressed, too.

The next example in which a song successfully sketches Rob's character comes after the funeral of Laura's father. By this point of the movie, Rob is able to admit some of his faults. He first apologizes to Laura and then leaves the reception. The audience sees him sitting on a park bench in the rain, talking about his relationship with Laura:

I can see now I never really committed to Laura. I always had one foot out the door and that prevented me from doing a lot of things. Like thinking about my future and I guess it made more sense to commit to nothing. Keep my options open. And that's suicide by tiny, tiny increments (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob is finally able to admit that he may have done something wrong in the relationship; thus showing that he has gained some self-awareness. He is beginning to admit his faults. This is a huge step in being able to improve himself as a person and break the mold of narcissism. While Rob is talking, the audience hears Bob Dylan singing "Most of the Time."

Most of the time
I'm clear focused all around.
Most of the time
I can keep both feet on the ground.
I can follow the path; I can read the signs,
Stay right with it, when the road unwinds.

I can handle whatever I stumble upon,
I don't even notice she's gone,
Most of the time.
Most of the time,
It's well understood.
Most of the time,
I wouldn't change it if I could.
I can't make it all match up, I can hold my
own,
I can deal with the situation right down to
the bone,
I can survive; I can endure
And I don't even think about her
Most of the time (*High Fidelity* DVD).

The song very successfully describes Rob's deepening understanding of what happened with Laura. At first, he was unable to admit that Laura affected him in any way and assumed that the break-up weighed mostly on her mistake, which was leaving Rob. However, now he is well into admitting his feelings for Laura, as well as realizing that some of his own actions may have contributed to the downfall of the relationship. Dylan's song similarly presents a singer who admits he's doing well dealing with his break-up "most of the time." This phrase seems to suggest that the speaker, like Rob, usually handles himself and covers up his true feelings very well. However, sometimes the situation gets to the speaker,

and at this point in the film, with Dylan's song as an audio backdrop, Rob admits to himself some of his real feelings about the breakup.

The last song of the film demonstrates how much Rob has grown. He has finally developed the ability to think about other people, as demonstrated by the fact he is making a compilation tape for Laura.

The making of a great compilation tape like breaking up, is hard to do, and you gotta kick it off with a killer to grab attention. Then you gotta take it up a notch, but you don't want to blow your wad. So then you gotta cool it off a notch. There are a lot of rules. Anyway, I've started to make a tape in my head, for Laura. Full of stuff she'd like. Full of stuff that'd make her happy. For the first time, I can see how that's done (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob's love for Laura opens his eyes to the fact that he has the ability to care for others. As he talks to the audience, the audience hears Stevie Wonder's "I Believe when I Fall in Love it Will be Forever." Obviously, this song reflects on Rob's love for Laura and also suggests that he and Laura may get married and spend their lives together:

Shattered dreams, worthless years,
Here am I encased inside a hollow shell,
Life began, then was done,

Now I stare into a cold and empty well.
The many sounds that meet our ears, the
sights our eyes behold,
Will open up our merging hearts,
And feed our empty souls.
I believe when I fall in love with you it
will be forever (*High Fidelity* DVD).

Rob now recognizes Laura's desires and needs and understands that catering to those needs is an important part of a relationship. He has also outgrown his fantasy world, which included repressing his love for Laura. Now he admits to his true feelings about her. Stevie Wonder's song helps to reveal Rob's development by expressing his feelings during the scene. The audience is left with the feeling that they will probably remain together.

Thus music, like the ideas of empathy and identification discussed in chapter one and the idea of talking into the camera discussed in chapter two, conveys how effectively Rob's narcissism is displayed in the film. Also, music, like empathy, affective identification, and talking into the camera, allows the audience to relate to Rob's emotions during specific scenes. Not only does the audience see and hear what Rob is thinking (as he talks into the camera

during most of the scenes discussed above) the audience is also able to hear a song that expresses his state of mind.

In the film *High Fidelity*, Frears does an excellent job of creating scenes that accurately depict Rob's narcissism. Rob's actions in the film when examined in the light of theorists such as Lasch and Bader, as discussed in chapter one, prove to be narcissistic. Frears also uses the device of having Rob talk into the camera during several scenes, as discussed in chapter two, which reveals Rob to be in constant need of validation, sympathy, and understanding. While Rob talks into the camera, he seems to be staring into his own reflection, much like Narcissus did. Rob thus becomes a reflection of the audience, and Rob's growth as a character serves to trigger something in the audience as well. Frears further uses music that corresponds to Rob's emotions and feelings to show Rob's emotions and experiences to the audience, as mentioned earlier. The use of music demonstrates polarization by allowing the audience to identify with Rob, and clues the audience into the

character's feelings as the story progresses. The development of the songs and their progression give an accurate portrayal of Rob's development as a person. As the songs become more confident and less narcissistic, Rob also becomes more confident and less narcissistic.

The techniques of polarization, recognition, affective identification, and empathy as well as Frears' exploration of the effects of narcissism used throughout the film draw the audience in so close to the character of Rob, that by watching Rob grow out of his narcissism, the audience comes to realize that there is a way to free oneself from one's narcissistic traits. Watching *High Fidelity* helps viewers understand that narcissism does not have to be the focal point of their lives.

By the conclusion of the film, Rob recognizes Laura's desires and realizes the importance of catering to her. He has also outgrown his fantasy world that included repressing his love for Laura. Now he admits to his true feelings about her. Stevie Wonder's song helps to reveal Rob's development by

expressing his feelings during the scene. The audience is left with the feeling that Rob and Laura will probably remain together.

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