The self-aware audiobook

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INTRODUCTION

As far as I remember, I always had — at least one — tape recorder laying around me. And I always enjoyed making use of it. Many different uses. The model I’m looking at now is a SONY® CASSETTE-CORDER TCM-939.

The CASSETTE-CORDER TCM-939 offers the regular possibilities of a tape recorder, which are, following our strict right-left rule: TAPE COUNTER, new paragraph, MIC, REC, PLAY, REW/REVIEW, FF/CUE, STOP/EJECT, PAUSE.

During the October break, I was visited my mother in Biarritz — which is a pretty fancy seaside town located on the Atlantic coast of southwestern France. Since she moved out from Paris, approximatively one year and a half ago, my mother has been keeping a lot of belongings of mine, which have been archived in boxes and stored in her cellar. The weather in Biarritz was not so good during the October break, which led me to go down to my mother’s cellar and help her with sorting out these boxes. This slightly annoying activity turned out to be much more exciting when I encountered some old tapes of mine. Luckily, I was traveling with one of my SONY® CASSETTE-CORDER. So I went back up to her apartment with the tapes and started to play them.

PAUSE

Magnetic tape was invented for recording sound by German-Austrian engineer Fritz Pfleumer in 1928. Due to the escalating political tensions and the outbreak of World War II, these developments were kept secret. Although the Allies knew that the Germans had came up with some new form of sound recording technology, the nature of it was not discovered until they captured nazi recording equipment as they invaded Europe in the closing of the war. It was then only after the war that Americans were able to bring this technology out of Germany and to start commercializing it as the tape format we are now familiar with:

The Compact Cassette or Musicassette, also commonly called cassette tape, audio cassette, or simply tape or cassette, is a magnetic-tape recording format for audio recording and playback. Compact cassettes come in two forms, either already containing content as a pre-recorded cassette, or as fully recordable «blank» cassette. Its uses ranged from home recording to portable audio.¹

PLAY

I can play a tape using my tape recorder. But tape recorders aren’t actual toys. Yet, I frequently played with it, and therefore learned. Playing with a tape recorder, I learned how to listen to things in a better way. To my own voice, the sounds that surrounded me, the stories I was reading, the songs I was singing. I also learned how to read stories out loud, how to perform it.

¹. Definition of a compact cassette, WikipediA
I learned that I like to tell stories. Even that, somehow, I was obsessed with it. Or it might have been that I was obsessed with my own voice, in a childish, contemplative and self-absorbed way. I later understood that recording was not only a technology for me. But a particular form of translation, from a voice or a sound into a material force, into a new representation of language. I realized that the recording act is actually more than a support for audio informations. Recording is a medium in itself.

I would like to look at examples of tapes that I recorded with the CASSETTE-CORDER TCM-939. The older example I have is from, approximatively, 1997, the most recent one is from August 2014. What I intend to do here is to relate these tapes to uses, practices, that I’ve been — consciously or not — applying to it. I am as interested in the practical uses of a tape recorder as in its misuses. I am also interested in the tape as a vector of experiences, as a process of becoming. Even though my reflexion always starts from a specific recording, I don’t quite consider one medium as more relevant than another. So you might expect some varied types of complementary references. It can be a book, it can be a movie, it can be a lecture, it can be a conversation, well it can be anything. What really matters to me, besides analyzing actions, are the narrative strategies that derives from it. The different approaches you’re about to come across are all bound to my recording practice, and the narrative possibilities I see in it. It is about this triple obsession of mine: recording, playing back and telling stories.
Memorizing literature, 
*the unofficial Harry Potter™ audiobook*

Memory is an omnipresent topic. It is also as banal as it is universally resonant. Working with memory and archives is perhaps predictable. However, this is partly what I'm dealing with, when recording on my SONY® CASSETTE-CORDER TCM-939. I actually have a precise example in mind, which is a recording I did around 2000. During childhood, I've been very much hooked, like many other young readers, with the British author J.K. Rowling's book series Harry Potter™. This enthusiasm of mine for the young orphan wizard led me not only to read each of the seven books a couple of times, but also to invest my pocket money in the four french audiobooks ever released.

The audiobooks were recorded by French actor Bernard Giraudseau. Since 2000, cancer forced Giraudseau to change his life radically. He interrupted his acting career and started to record relaxation CDs, before turning himself towards children literature audiobooks. He died in 2010 – three years after recording the fourth volume "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" – and so the audiobook series stopped, remaining incomplete.

Listening to the Harry Potter™ audiobooks, I was experiencing a double fascination. One was about the story itself, the other one about the actual voice of the actor. With his voice, Giraudseau embodied more than hundred characters from the books. He performed them all, by himself. I remember that this impressed me quite a lot. Listening to the malleable voice of that man, all his different voices. Many nights, this voice put me to sleep. But despite owning the actual printed Harry Potter™ books, and four audiobooks versions of it, I still came up with this tape:

![unofficial Harry Potter™ audiobook](image1)

![official Harry Potter™ audiobook](image2)

On this tape, I recorded my own version of a Harry Potter™ audiobook: a younger voice of mine reading the first book of the series, "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone". This action actually resulted in knowing by heart the very beginning of that book. I think what pushed me to do such an – a priori – unnecessary thing was a certain desire of making this story, which was back then important to me, mine. In the most evident way, by reading it out loud. Recording it was a way to memorize and immortalize this story, to keep it for myself.

The other day, I was discussing this need of making a piece of writing yours with British designer and writer Phil Baber. He then advised me to listen to some of Georges Steiner's lectures, which I did. Here are some excerpts from a lecture program called "Ma bibliothèque personnelle", hosted at the "Bibliothèque Nationale de France" and led by writer and journalist Pierre Assouline. As a guest of that program, every writer is required to bring a selection of texts, which will then be read

2. «Ma bibliothèque personnelle», Georges Steiner interviewed by Pierre Assouline at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 01/06/2005
out loud by a comedian, throughout the lecture. Yet, Steiner explains at the beginning of his talk that he is going to read the texts he chose himself.

Pierre Assouline: Do you like to read?

George Steiner: I like to read writings. I even sometimes read bad writings, to demonstrate that it is so. Reading can also be a critical act. But what one really likes, one learns it by heart. To say thank you to the great texts. It means: no one can take this text away from me, neither censorship, nor the police, nor boredom, I have it in me and it grows in me. And secondly, one must read it aloud. Consider that during Victorian times, in England, parents read great literature to their children before bedtime. And certainly mothers read, and they read classics to their children. Because there are so many texts, which are texts to be heard. Much less to the eye than for the ear.

PAUSE

This idea of reacting, in a personal way, to a writing is also expressed in this quote by Jean-Luc Godard, taken from his film series "Histoire(s) du Cinéma" ³:

Jean-Luc Godard: Here you have a narrative. Do not behave towards it as you would do towards other historical narratives. Give it a very difference place in your life.

PLAY

Pierre Assouline: Do you still think that poetry is the music of thoughts?

George Steiner: Absolutely, and I am convinced that it is so. What is really difficult is to learn good prose by heart.

Pierre Assouline: What's the difference?

George Steiner: There is no cadence, no rhyme, no internal structure, so to speak. Because it is very possible that some neurophysiological impulses respond to music and verses. But there are, God knows, cadences in prose too. They are much more hidden. They are more difficult.

The writer will actually conclude his lecture saying: "One who knows a book by heart is invulnerable. It's more than a life insurance, it's an assurance on death!".

In François Truffaut's movie "Farhenheit 451" ⁴, the action of learning a book by heart is essential to the story. In this movie, firemen no longer put out fires, they burn books. The number 451 they are wearing on their uniforms stands for a specific temperature. The one at which paper burns and consumes itself.

Julie: Why do you burn books?

Montag: It's a job just like any other. And it is varied. On Monday we burn Miller, Tuesday is Tolstoi, Wednesday Walt Whitman, Friday Faulkner; Saturday and Sunday Schopenhauer and Sartre. "Reduce into ashes and burn the ashes." Our slogan!

Julie: Don't you like books?

Montag: Do you like rain?

³. «Histoire(s) du Cinéma», Jean-Luc Godard, Collection Blanche, Gallimard, 09/10/1998
4. «Farhenheit 451», François Truffaut, 1966
Julie: *I love it!*

Montag: *Books, what a joke! It's not interesting.*

Julie: *Why do people read, even though it's dangerous?*

Montag: *Because it's forbidden.*

Julie: *And why is it forbidden?*

Montag: *Books make people unhappy.*

Julie: *Do you think so?*

Montag: *Of course! Books confuse people. It makes them antisocial.*

About this movie, Truffaut will say: "Literary censorship appeared together with the invention of printing. And it will most likely disappear together with it too. The largest protest that we could raise against this censorship, wouldn't it be to learn all the books by heart? This is the action program that Fahrenheit 451 suggests to us. Its story doesn't necessarily develops in the future, but 'when you want' and 'where you want.'" 5. To preserve their personal relationships to literature, a group of people, called the "Book-Men", gather and learn books by heart. They embody narratives.

A young girl: *I am "The Republic" by Plato, I will recite myself when you will want me to!*

Book-Men leader: *Here is "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Brontë. And that's "The Corsair" by Byron. Her husband was a police chief. There, "Alice in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll. I can't see "Through the Looking-Glass"… "Waiting for Godot" by Beckett… Look at that young blonde girl who's about to blush …*

A young blonde girl: *I am "Anti-Semite and Jew" by Jean-Paul Sartre.*

A young man: *I am "The Martian Chronicles" by Ray Bradbury.*

Book-Men leader: *Right now, we are about thirty. But thousands of us live here and there. In abandoned train stations, lost paths. Bums on the outside, libraries inside. Nothing premeditated. Each of us liked a book and wanted to preserve its memory. And we gathered. A minority of unwanted screaming in the desert. But the time will come when we will recite what we know, and we will reprint books. Until the day it will have to start all over again.*

Montag: *I got one!*

Julie: *Let's see... "Extraordinary Stories" by Edgar Allan Poe.*

5. Press conference by François Truffaut about «Farhenheit 451», 1966
Book-Men leader: Learn it, we will burn it!

Montag: Burn it?

Julie: Otherwise, they could take it away from us.

Book-Men leader: Yes, we burn books too. But we keep it where they will not go looking for it.

PAUSE

Actually, Godard also said, "Movies are commodities. We must burn movies. I told Langlois about it. But be careful, with the inner fire, a fire of matter and memory. Art is like a fire, it arises from what it burns".  

PLAY

Memory is a fire, a nice, warm, reassuring fire which can consume anything. There is something extremely comfortable about knowing something by heart. About certainty. Italo Calvino puts words on this feeling in his tale "A King Listens", telling us the story of a king, immobilized on his throne, because he is terrified about leaving it and therefore loosing his power. And so the king spends his days and his nights seating on that throne. His stillness makes him particularly aware of any sounds that surround him, the daily sounds of his kingdom, which he ends up knowing all by heart.  

Sunk on your throne, you raise your hand to your ear, you shift the draperies of the baldaquin so that they will not muffle the slightest murmur, the faintest echo. For you the days are a succession of sounds, some distinct, some almost imperceptible; you have learned to distinguish them, to evaluate their provenance and their distance; you know their order, you know how long the pauses last; you are already awaiting every resonance or creak or clink that is about to reach your tympa-num; you anticipate it in your imagination; if it is late in being produced, you grow impatient.

REW

Going a little back to Truffaut. Learning books by heart, processing it with a brain, and letting it out through a mouth, somehow makes me think about books, stories, or words as nourishment. Aren't novels food for worms, after all? Anyway, Ezekiel did eat the scrolls of the Word of God. By eating it, he first assimilated it, in order to let God communicate through him, through his own mouth. Of course this is nothing like physical food for his body, but for his mind and spirit. In order to be able to bring the Word of God to the people, he must first consume that Word by himself. Ezekiel must fill himself with that Word, and then when he opens his mouth, he will speak the Word accurately, to the house of Israel.  

3:1 Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel.
3:2 So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that roll.
3:3 And he said unto me, Son of man, cause thy belly to eat, and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then did I eat [it]; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness.
3:4 And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them.

3. «Histoire(s) du Cinéma», Jean-Luc Godard, Collection Blanche, Gallimard, 09/10/1998
7. «Book of Ezekiel», in the «Old Testament», approximatively 571 B.C.
The words of God were sweet as honey to the young prophet. But can one actually become hungry for words? At least, I know about a man who was hungry for stories. He is the innkeeper of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales".  

"Everyone, on the road to Canterbury, will tell a tale. I will be both judge and guide, on the road to Canterbury that I would at my own expense." In this book, stories become valuables for the greedy innkeeper, a means of paying a pilgrimage to Canterbury. He wants to hear, and memorize them all. He is willing to exchange consumable food and drinks in exchange of narratives.

But another thing I'm actually curious about is this necessity as a reader, or rather as a person, to reappropriate a book, or a story. I do see reappropriation as a form of reaction. Let's for example, consider the practice of American artist Paul Chan. I'm thinking about his work "My Own Private Alexandria", which is a compilation of readings of existing writings. In that case, Chan explains this gesture as a reaction to an oppressing political climate: "I'm so tired of this war and numb from the fear of the slightest sound and shadow. I just want to leave. Escape. So I read. So I start to record myself reading. And I realize how little I know the reading I'm reading. It gets better. I can't pronounce German, French, Russian, Chinese, Brazilian, Latin, not even English sometimes. I don't care. A task is what I want: to measure the time spent escaping into words that string together sentences that become essays about potatoes and trousers and aesthetic revolutions." Chan's project is constituted of 44 audiobooks recordings, which he defines as "free DIY MP3 audio-essays". The recordings gather more than 16 hours of readings of a wide range of authors such as Rancière, Colette, Beckett, Adorno, or Benjamin. The sound is pretty lo-fi, for being recorded on GarageBand®; the readings sound quite amateur too: fumbling and mis-pronunciations are kept thoroughly intact. But the citations are accurate and genuine, even providing ISBNs, which makes this collection resembling a library.

After absorbing that much textual informations, one can expect to experience a certain influence from it. There's a scene in Truffaut's "400 Blows" that deals with this idea. It is about good intentions, misunderstandings and fatality. It is about young Antoine Doinel, main character of the story, wishing to make his harsh mother proud of him, but also to earn pocket money by getting a good grade in French literature class. Antoine is a great admirer of Honoré de Balzac. During a writing test, he plagiarizes the end of his novel "La Recherche de l'Absolu". The theft is not quite voluntary, since the young Antoine recently read this book. After the test, confident about an upcoming success, he doubles his chances and dedicates an altar to Balzac. He comes up with an installation of a candle lighting up a portrait of the writer, behind a curtain. The dreamy, but unlucky boy quickly forgets about the candle and ends up putting his parent's flat on fire. About the test, his teacher gets terribly mad at him, accusing him of stealing Balzac's work, and therefore gives him

9. «My Own Private Alexandria», Paul Chan, 2006  
10. «400 Blows», François Truffaut, 1959
the worst possible grade (zero).

PAUSE

Just like his character Antoine Doinel, François Truffaut was fetishizing his masters. Which were, in his case, mainly directors. There is currently, at La Cinémathèque française, an exhibition about Truffaut's work. In the beginning of the show, you can seen a whole collection of notebooks he used to fill as a kid, while going to the cinema. The notes are mostly dialogs, that he was not only transcribing but also learning by heart. The dialogs are taken from movies such as "Le Corbeau", "Roman d'un tricheur", or "Les Visiteurs du soir"... He was only eight years old. All these dialogs Truffaut internalized as a kid later turned out to be tools, when he started to write his own ones.

PLAY

If Ryan Gander would have known about Antoine Doinel's misadventure, the artist would have most likely told him: «This is a song I really like by Owada, which is the artist Martin Creed’s band. It's a song I listen to when I get scared about making work. It just goes on and on in a circle, and that's what I like about it. It reminds me that repeating things is okay sometimes… Everyone reproduces things from the world… And the art world is within the actual world, so there’s no need to get uptight about repeating.»

By necessity, by ease and by delight, we all quote. Yet, it seems that it is as difficult to appropriate the thoughts of others as it is to invent.

11. facsimile of Honoré de Balzac’s portrait, visible in Truffaut’s «400 Blows», that I designed, silkscreened, and burnt, as a tribute to the literature test scene, 2013
Mirroring my voice

the (simplistic) metafictional Émilie Jolie tape

Reading a story out loud, recording it, without changing a single word of it, is somehow equivalent to the action of mirroring it. The comparison with the mirror becomes even more obvious when thinking about the recorded voice itself.

One of the possibilities that offers a tape recorder is to listen to my own voice. Again. And again. And again, as much as I want to. This tape that I play over and over, indeed becomes the mirror of my own voice. Only difference is my eyes are replaced by my ears. In the same way that my image will always look different in a mirror, my voice changes too. Yet, listening to old recordings of my voice is different than looking at an old photograph of myself. It feels stronger.

FF

Antoine Doinel has now grown up. In the movie «Stolen Kisses»¹, which follows «400 Blows», he is performing this scene in front of a mirror: «An-toine Doi-nel, An-toine Doi-nel, An-toine Doi-nel, An-toine Doi-nel, Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel»,...» The young man is now reflecting both him as a physical person, but also his voice, while keeping on repeating his own name. He is experiencing a full awareness of who he is, and what he is doing. There is something slightly humoristic about this scene. Yet, it isn’t an easy thing to let an inner, personal voice out.

REW

Back to Calvino and his king:⁶

You are wise to listen, not to let your attention lapse even for an instant; but you must be convinced of this: it is yourself you hear, it is within you that the ghosts acquire voices. Something you are incapable of saying even to yourself is trying painfully to make itself heard. . . . You are not convinced? You want absolute proof that what you hear comes from within you, not from outside?

PLAY

The mirror of the tape reflects my voice back to me. It circulates between my body and the machine that reproduces it. Reflexivity in recording happens on different levels: First, by the construction of a system to produce sounds, that simultaneously reproduces the performance of the process. The feedback dimension of the tape recorder operates as an endless «mirror-effect». The process of simultaneous production and reproduction distinguishes a home made tape from a pre-recorded, commercialized one, in which the content is carefully edited and hierarchized.

In the case of an amateur recording, the modulations of the signal in the output of sounds also become part of the «content» of the recording. There is always the recording, plus the disrup-

¹ «Stolen Kisses», François Truffaut, 1968
tive sounds that can be heard during this recording. Because these disruptive sounds appear as noises, they create an additional aural content which distracts the recording and reflects the ambivalence between content and context. (In the same way that when looking at your own image in a mirror, and even though the main focus will be on this one image, the mirror will still reflect back everything that surrounds it.) Tape recording has moved from technology to medium, with a set of languages that are specific to it. Tape recorders not only reproduce sounds but also transform it, compress it, bend it, just like some mirrors do.

**PAUSE**

In the mirror of my tape recorder, my voice reflects itself. It is indeed the voice of Émilie that I hear. But which one exactly? Before reading wizard teenager’s stories, I used to be into stories that I could sing. The musical tale «Émilie Jolie» was one of them. This tale, which is in France quite a children classic, tells the story of a little girl called Émilie, who, one night, gets lost in a picture book. As she wanders, she encounters many different characters and interacts with them. She becomes part of the story herself. Besides singing a lot, Émilie is also pretty («jolie»). That was interesting enough to me. I quickly learned the songs and recorded some on a tape. One of the song of the musical is called «The Hedgehog song» («La Chanson du Hérisson»). Looking back at it, I’d say that the lyrics of this song are rather intriguing.

And so I sing:
Émilie Jolie: *Me, I see only myself, there’s only myself, in this picture book. (X2)*

And at the end of the song:
Émilie Jolie: *It is no longer sad, this story. I caressed the hedgehog.*
Chorus: *It is no longer sad, this hedgehog. She caressed the story.*
The storyteller: *No, no, the hedgehog.*

What is happening here is actually a sort of simplistic version of the 602nd Night of the «One Thousand and One Nights», «the most magical of all» according to Jorge Luis Borges. This night during which the king Shahryar hears, through the mouth of the princess Shéhérazade, his own story. Émilie Jolie formulates and accepts her condition of character within her own story. My children’s voice, trapped in the tape, and repeating this story also participates to this metafiction.

**PAUSE**

14. «Émilie Jolie», a musical tale by Philippe Chatel, 1979
15. «Conférences», Jorge Luis Borges, Gallimard/Folio, 1985
Ninetto Davoli (About Pasolini’s «One Thousand and One Nights»): 16
In this movie, I could become a character from the «Arabian Nights». A real character, who would have my own face. And that was something that made me truly happy.

PLAY
In this tape, I could also become a character from «Émilie Jolie». A fictional character, who would have my own name and voice. And that was something that made me truly happy.

But sure, there is something very self-centered, quite obsessive about recording yourself. Yet, if forgetting about the misleading self-mythologist aspect of it, there is something very pure about recording your own voice and playing it back. According to Italian philosopher Paolo Virno17, an activity is virtuous when it finds its own fulfillment, in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product, or into an object that would necessarily survive the performance. Of course the «Émilie Jolie» tape might appear as «finished product», for being a physical object filled with an actual content. Yet, while recording it as a child, without any clear intentions behind it, this was a spontaneous personal investment. An attempt of participating into this musical that I enjoyed and felt connected to. An experience of the pure enjoyment of singing, for myself only.

REW
Let's go back to Calvino, who actually formulates here the idea that the act of singing can possibly reveal the true identity of his king, reflect his true nature back to him: 6

Once, to be happy, you had only to sketch a tararatata with your lips, or with your mind, imitating the tune you had caught, in a simple little song or in a complex symphony. Now you try going tararatata, but nothing happens: no tune comes into your mind.
Too bad you cannot sing. If you had known how to sing, perhaps your life would have been different, happier; or sad with a different sadness, a harmonious melancholy. Perhaps you would not have felt the need to become king. Now you would not find yourself here, on this creaking throne, peering at shadows.

Buried deep within yourself perhaps your true voice exists, the song that cannot break free of your clenched throat, from your lips parched and taut. Or else your voice wanders, scattered, through the city, timbres and tones disseminated in the buzzing. The man you are or have been or could be, the you that no one knows, would be revealed in that voice.

FF
Recording the lively voice is certainly not only a free gesture. A voice, just like anything, ages and, inevitably, dies. In that sense, a recording of my voice can become a potential obituary. The are different types of obituaries out there. The most intriguing one is probably the self-obituary, prepared by the subject himself. Alistair Cooke was a BBC radio correspondent on the weekly radio show «Letter from America». The journalist prepared his own obituary, to be played on the show which would follow his death, and which happened to be on the 30th March, 2004. It went like this: «I am sure you expect me to say I am sorry not to be with you. Well, on the whole, I am not sorry. I believe that Radio broadcasters should be heard and not seen. I don’t want to disturb any pleasing image any of you may have of me. So you see why I am not overanxious to be with you.» There is something strangely amazing about this recording. About Cooke’s voice, the voice of the longest-running speech radio program in history, that is to say a iconic, legendary voice, announcing his own death on BBC Radio 4. But also of course about Alistair Cooke being able to make use of humor doing such an exercise.

Disrupting temporality

*recording on another recording*

The temporality dimension of the voice is undeniable. Same goes with the tape, which temporality can be expressed in many ways. First of all, by looking at the both sided, reversible object itself. There is, within a tape, a sort of «two in one» feeling. Tapes consist of two miniature spools, between which a magnetically coated plastic tape is passed and wound. These spools and their attendant parts are held inside a protective plastic shell. Two monaural analog audio tracks (side A/ side B) are available on the tape; one track is played or recorded when the tape is moving in one direction and the second one when moving in the other direction. This reversal, which is achieved either by manually flipping the cassette, or by having the machine itself change the direction of tape movement and head respectively («auto-reverse»), can also relate to a narrative principle.

And so Ryan Gander comes back: «I’m currently working on a new book of one hundred essays on the phenomena of the everyday. It is split in two halves similar to the playing cards, insofar as it’s verso-verso, so it’s two books in one. When you turn the book upside down there’s another beginning to it, there are two front pages. There are fifty essays that are optimistic and fifty essays that are pessimistic.»

Another aspect of tape’s temporality, is of course, its actual death. Over years, magnetic tape can suffer from deterioration called «sticky-shed syndrome». This is caused by absorption of moisture into the binder of the tape, it can render the tape unusable. Luckily, before this happens, some tapes simply offer the ultimate performance, a sort of eternal flow: These are the «endless loop cassettes», which play a continuous loop of sounds without ever stopping. (Most of the time, they are used in situations where a short message or musical jingle needs to be repeated over and over.) A tape recording is essentially a flow: it constitutes its temporality as running. While it is being played, the tape’s flow coincides with the flow of the listener’s consciousness. A tape teaches us to be patient; we have to wait for the magnetic band to run and stop. Unless we decide to interrupt its flow, the tape will decide for us. For it is a object subjected to the rule of flowing time, but which doesn’t allow any random access. This idea of endless stream is also a particularity of sound itself, as formulated here by Calvino:

*The hours are slow to pass, in the throne room, the lamplight is always the same. You listen to time flowing by: a buzz like a wind, the wind blows along the corridors of the palace, or is it in the depths of your ear. Kings do not have watches: it is assumed that they are the ones who govern the flow of time; submission to the rules of a mechanical device would be incompatible with regal majesty. The minutes’ uniform expanse threatens to bury you like an avalanche of sand: but you know how to elude it. You have only to prick up your ears in order to recognize the sounds of the palace, which change from hour to hour.*

A loop implies that, whatever sound disturbing this cadency will become abnormal, and therefore needs to be explained:

*The palace is a weft of regular sounds, always the same, like the heart’s beat, from which other sounds stand out, discordant, unexpected. A door slams. Where? Someone runs down steps, a stifled cry is heard. Long, tense minutes pass. A prolonged, shrill whistle resounds, perhaps from a window in the tower. Another whistle replies, from below. Then silence. Does some story link one*

sound to another? You cannot help looking for a meaning, concealed perhaps not in single, isolated noises but between all of them. But hopefully, the hypnotizing loop goes on and on…

**PAUSE**

Once again, Gander: *Next book is «Tales from One Thousand and One Nights», which as you probably all know is based on the recursive narrative of a lady who is taken to the king to entertain him and be executed in the morning, then discovers she’s a good storyteller and if she can tell the king an interesting enough story every day he’ll want to keep her one more night with him so he can hear another… So the story continues and continues and continues, and is therefore actually a book of lots of short stories, narrated and linked together by a story of a king with a prostitute. The stories are okay, but the narrative instrument is far more interesting, to me, anyway.*

I briefly evoked earlier Borges’s obsession with the 602nd Night. According to him, this specific night represents «the paradigm of infinite literature» 15, but also the best possible illustration of this concept. The concept of a book which never truly stopped, throughout centuries, to expand, to modify, to complete itself. «An essentially unfinished book, not finished, infinite».

In his preface to the «Tales from One Thousand and One Nights», writer André Miquel specifies «neither this corpus nor any other can claim to be the text, the true and perfect text, of the Nights […]. It is so because the Nights are not just a set of stories, but also all around it, an infinite number of blooms, written, played, dreamed, filmed …»

And of course, about the title itself, Borges said: It’s one of the most beautiful titles in the world. I think that its beauty lies in the fact that for us, the word «thousand» stands for infinity. To say one thousand nights, is equivalent to saying endless nights, many nights, countless nights. But to say «One Thousand and One Nights» is adding one night to infinity. The story of the book itself becomes an obstacle, or rather a great trick, to go back to its sources, determine the genealogy of the fiction. The Arabs say that nobody can read the «Tales from One Thousand and One Nights». Not because the book is boring, but because one can feel that the book never ends.

**PAUSE WITHIN THE PAUSE**

If you run out of cassettes, but still, want to record on it, there is this simple trick that I did so many times and which consists in tape both extremities of the bottom of another prerecorded cassette. This allows you to record other sounds, other stories, within an existing one. The outcome can sometimes become quite exciting, bringing together recordings that are time wise very far away from each other. Let’s take this simple example: The side A of this tape contains a recording of one of my sciences lesson. I’m reading practical informations about flower’s reproduction systems. By judging the sound of my voice, I’d say that I was about twelve or thirteen years when recording it. Coincidentally, on the side B, is a recording I did during a cigarette break at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie two years ago. In that sense, the side A is approximatively ten years away from the side B, creating an awkward encased souvenir.

This encased system is of course, essential to metafiction, to the «Tales from One Thousand and One Nights», to the «Tales of Canterbury», and so on. Metafiction is specifically fiction about fiction, that is to say, fiction that consciously reflects on itself.

19. «Curating the Library», a lecture by Ryan Gander, initiated by Moritz Küng, at the International Arts Centre deSingel in Antwerp, Belgium, 12/2006
15. «Conférences», Jorge Luis Borges, Gallimard/Folio, 1985
Ryan Gander: 19

Which brings us to Italo Calvino’s «If On A Winter’s Night A Traveller», which is also concerned with crossnarratives ormeta-narratives. In the contents page, chapter one starts on page three. Chapter one is called «One», and then the second chapter starts on page ten and is called «If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller». Chapter three is called «Two» and starts on page twenty-five. Chapter four is called «Outside the Town of Malbork» and it starts on page thirty-four, and so on. Every odd chapter is a number and every other chapter has a title because, again, it is actually two books in one, and actually more. [...] To cut a long, complex story short, the protagonist – which is essentially you, the reader – is continuously thwarted in his attempt to continue reading the previous chapter.

PLAY

Recordings are constituted of multiple juxtaposed sounds, and the resulting constellations of its disruptive narratives establish a multiple sense of time. In that sense, tape recorders offer new possibilities of delivering a story. For recording with it is always slightly imprecise, in terms of temporality, despite the presence of a tape counter. Recording over a tape already containing another material banalizes encased stories, altered narratives, anarchist storytelling. Because of these – sometimes unintentional – tricks, the recording becomes puzzle like.

Writing, reading, and even language itself is scripted. Time is too. Recording your own voice, somebody else’s voice, a piece of writing, or even a conversation, is somehow working against these scripts. There’s no right-left rule, in a tape. There is of course, a beginning and an end. But when you flip the tape the end becomes the beginning and the beginning the end. And then any sense of logic is lost. Letters and words have their order in a sentence. Hours have too. But does a story actually need one?

There is a lecture by John Cage called «Indeterminacy: New Aspect of Form in Instrumental and Electronic Music». 20 The lecture consisted of a collection of short stories, originally thirty, later expanded to ninety in the second version. The stories are told by Cage at the rate of one per minute. Because of this time restriction, the speed of Cage’s delivery varied enormously, the shortest were spread out and the longest were rapidly delivered, working against a scripted flow, temporality.

There is also this movie by Alain Resnais called «Smoking / No Smoking». 21 Resnais’s movie is actually an adaptation of the play «Intimate Exchanges» by Alan Ayckbourn. The plot of «Intimate Exchanges» revolves around six major characters and four minor characters. All of whom are played by just two actors (In Resnais’s movie, Sabine Azéma and Pierre Arditi).

Narrator: We are in England, in the heart of Yorkshire, in the village of Hutton Buscel. As in all villages, there is a church, a cemetery, an Indian restaurant and a school. Here is its headmaster, Toby Teasdale; his wife, Celia Teasdale; Toby Teasdale’s best friend, Miles Combes; his wife Rowena Coombes, the whole village talks about her; Lionel Hepplewick, the school caretaker; his father, Joe Hepplewick, official poet of the village; Sylvie Bell, she works for the Teasdale; Josephine Hamilton, Celia Teasdale’s mother, she’s very discrete; and Irene Pridworthy, deputy director of the school.

Both the play and the movie, follow a specific narrative structure: *How it began; 5 seconds later; 5 days later; 5 weeks later; 5 years later.* It all begins in the garden of Celia and Toby Teasdale. After an unusually harsh winter, it is perhaps the first sunny day of the year. Inside the house, Celia and her «help», Sylvie Bell are busily spring cleaning. Celia emerges to fetch a step ladder from the garden shed but spies a packet of cigarettes on the table. Then Celia can either «Have a sneaky cigarette» or «Carry on with the spring cleaning». Wether, she is going to have this cigarette, or not, is going to influence radically the following scenes of the story. This very simple gesture of smoking, or not smoking, will have different consequences on her life and the the life of Hutton Buscel’s people.

This principle of building and deconstructing, or modifying a story or content — but still, in a very casual, simple way — is tightly connected to the act of tape recording. Thanks to its different functions, the tape recorder allows its user to apply certain actions on the recording that directly influence its temporal dimension.
Still wandering

sound recording of waves in Biarritz

In «Smoking / No Smoking», the different stories always develop in this unique context of the village of Hutton Buscel. This added to the fact that «Intimate Exchanges» is, to start with, a play, creates a certain in camera feeling. This in camera feeling is also activated when using the tape recorder. Most likely because it is an activity that I perceive as very solitary, therefore happening in a private sphere, but also thinking about the voice getting trapped on the magnetic band, inside the tape recorder.

REW

Let’s go back to the similarities between a tape and a mirror, this time from the perspective of spatiality. French philosopher Michel Foucault thinks about the mirror as an heterotopia - an «other place». And also, potentially, a utopia.²² He wrote: «I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place.»

Indeed, the spatiality of the mirror and tape seem to be undefined, for being reflexive objects. Yet, both mirror and tape are first of all two materialized objects. That’s why they would rather be utopias that would have contradicted itself, as it has taken place somewhere: «Mirror is also a heterotopia in so far as it does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy.» The spatiality of the tape doesn’t quite feel like a heterotopia so to speak, for being a tangible object, in a physical location, but rather like an in-between place, one of Foucault’s utopia/heterotopia hybrids.

FF

By repeating what is being recorded, the tape can also be considered as echo. We can say that echo is a specific kind of repetition. Repetition returns to its source by diffracting in space and time. An echo can also be multiplied if it encounters a new obstacle on its way back.

PAUSE

The idea of space and echo is a very central topic of «A King Listens»: ⁶

If you call your own voice, it reverberates... Where? «Ohooo... Ohooo...» You might have been led into a cave: an endless cave, an underground gallery...

Here, Calvino even mentions a spatiality of the ear, which he compares to the king’s palace:

Vestibules, stairways, loggias, corridors of the palace have high, vaulted ceilings; every footstep, every click of a lock, every sneeze echoes, rebounds, is propagated horizontally along a suite of communicating rooms, halls, colonnades, service entries, and also vertically, through stairwells, cavities, skylights, conduits, flues, the shafts of dumbwaiters; and all the acoustical routes converge on the throne room. Into the great lake of silence where you are floating rivers of air empty, stirred by intermittent vibrations. Alert, intent, you intercept them and decipher them. The palace is all whorls, lobes: it is a great ear, whose anatomy and architecture trade names and functions: pavilions, ducts, shells, labyrinths. You are crouched at the bottom, in the innermost zone of the palace-ear, of your own ear; the palace is the ear of the king.

²². «Of other spaces», Michel Foucault, 1967
Sound is materialized spatially by the «waves of sound», and because of this fact, sound exists in space and time. One can easily see that there could be no sound without materialized space. Another recording that I made directly connects to the notion of spatiality. It is from summer 2013, and has been made on a beach, in Biarritz. For about 20 minutes, I recorded the simple action of me walking in the sea, facing the waves. It is a late summer afternoon, the tourists have left «La Grande Plage», the only disruptive elements that can be heard are the seagulls singing.

By playing back the sounds of the waves in the closed space of my Amsterdam apartment, I potentially allow in intruders. Spaces which don’t belong to the space where I’m now standing. Materials that have been recorded outside those walls. This process is, for me, comparable to a magical still wandering.

A still wandering that could be similar to what Godard evokes here: 3

*Television made Léon Gaumont’s dream come true. Bring entertainment from all around the world in the most miserable bedroom.*

But also similar to Calvino’s advice to his king: 6

*Do not become obsessed with the noises of the palace, unless you wish to be snared in them as in a trap. Go out! Run away! Rove! Outside the palace spreads the city, the capital of the realm, your realm! You have become king not to possess this sad, dark palace, but the city, various and pied, clamorous, with its thousand voices!*

situationist theorist Guy Debord’s idea of «dérive» consists in a collection of historically and socially significant objects, signs, extending from the outside world, the city. In psychogeography, a dérive is an unplanned journey through a landscape, usually urban, on which the subtle aesthetic contours of the surrounding architecture and geography subconsciously direct the travelers, with the ultimate goal of encountering an entirely new and authentic experience. Italo’s king experiencing his outside kingdom, while remaining immobile on his throne, is one aspect of this derive. His sharp memories of the lively streets allow him to access a particular still journey.

Dérive is also strongly connected to the possibility of encountering the sounds of Biarritz’s waves on a tape, while being back to my Amsterdam apartment. One can easily drift in a tape, for it being «a mode of experimental behavior, a technique of hasty passage across varied urban ambiances» 23, corresponding to the use of the different options of the tape recorder. With the tape, derive can last for a more or less long time, but still creates very unique possibilities of experiencing different spaces. A tape can contain many spaces, or a single space. Yet any of these spaces will potentially differ from the one it is being play back into.

3. «Histoire(s) du Cinéma», Jean-Luc Godard, Collection Blanche, Gallimard, 09/10/1998
23. «Théorie de la dérive», Debord Guy, 1956
Collecting sounds
_the sound abécédaire_

I see the attitude behind the urban wandering described by Debord, as motivated by curiosity. The tape wanderer becomes a collector of signs/sounds, filling up his mental and aural personal encyclopedia. He constitutes his encyclopedia by himself, while recording sounds and playing it back on a tape recorder. Tape has this capacity to resurrect the same sounds, voices, stories, events time after time. Its very nature is, so to speak, nostalgic. Towards my tapes, I do feel like a collector. When I take the decision to record something, it is, at least by intention, once and for all time. I’m hoping to keep the tape and its content safe, to archive it.

Recording and archiving sounds corresponds to a certain methodology, dealing with a certain type of material. Whether it is found or self-produced, this material might actually become quite familiar or simply make sense to any other person listening to it. Recordings can be happy encounters, rather than random material, and in that sense connect to the idea of collection.

Still, there is somehow, something strange about collecting sounds and stories. It goes against a prominent materialist attitude and refers back to the notion of memory I evoked earlier. When I lived in London in 2011, I was frequently visiting a place called The Film Shop. The Film Shop had (it closed down this year, 2014) a fantastic selection of movies you could rent out for cheap (or for free, if you were lucky enough to be familiar enough with its owner, Sebastian Fieril.) When the shop opened on Broadway Market ten years ago, Sebastian came up with the idea that he would establish a list of movies. This list is a bit like tips one would get from a friend, but also a challenge, a collection of «classics» that one «must see». Back then, I got very excited about this list, and started to tick the boxes.

*The Film Shop’s 2004 List, completed by Maki Suzuki and Kajsa Ståhl.*
This accumulation of movie titles, enumerated on that list, creates an incoherent cinema database. In the case of homemade recordings, the content, knowledge of the tape isn’t a dialectical way of thinking either. It very simply links things with each other. The fragmentary structure of the recording, the assemblage of stories counts for me as much as the stories themselves. The action of copy/pasting allows surprising encounters. This is a quotation from the «Chants de Maldoror» by the Count of Lautréamont 24 «... above all beautiful like the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table!» What is beautiful is neither the machine nor the umbrella but their meeting, it is the surprise of an accidental relation. At the end of the 19th Century, Lautréamont, in parallel to the practice of «free association» introduced by Freud, became the precursor of a practice of collage and assemblage that spans all 20th Century art.

This is idea of mental collage and assemblage reminds me of a recording that I made in 2008. It is an abécédaire, an ABC-audiobook. In the recording, I go through the whole alphabet. I pronounce a letter, then an object or adjective starting with this letter, then a sound corresponding to this word. And so it goes from A to Z. Example: «A», «anorak», {sound of a zipper}.

Abécédaire tape

This abécédaire is a strange collection of 26 words and sounds juxtaposed and organized alphabetically. It functions like an aural encyclopedia. Etymologically, «encyclopedia» literally means «circle of knowledge.» This circle brings together a knowledge that is dispersed. The encyclopedia cuts knowledge up into a finite series of circumscribed areas, aligning closed circles of disciplines. A homemade recording such as this abécédaire is a situation of transmission of knowledge from an amateur to a potential listener, without any intention of dominant reason. The knowledge dispensed is not that of a specialist. It is subjective and non-authoritarian, and is acquired by the experience of the one who recorded it. A personal, yet, potentially universal knowledge, without hierarchies, mixing low and high informations, sounds of greater or lesser value.

24. «Chants de Maldoror», Count of Lautréamont, 1869
Desiring sounds

the (ex)boyfriend mix-tape

The idea of possession, implied by a collection, is linked to the one of desire. One not only de-
sire a tape as an object, but also the sound, the voice, the song, or story that is contained within it. In this conversation from his «Abécédaire», Gilles Deleuze \(^{25}\) notices that beyond the desire of a specific thing, there's always another type of desire which would then relate to the relationship between a person and the object of his desire, in the context of everyday life. In that sense, any desire towards a narrative is never quite random, nor abstract. It rather derives from a — more or less conscious — intention of appropriation of a discourse or story.

Gilles Deleuze's Abécédaire, Letter D:

Claire Parnet: *What do you call desire?*

Gilles Deleuze: *You speak abstractly about desire, because you extract an object that's presumed to be the object of your desire. So, one could say, «I desire a woman, I desire to leave on a trip, I desire this, that.» And we were saying something really very simple, simple, simple: You never desire someone or something. You always desire an aggregate. It's not complicated. Our question was: What is the nature of relations between elements in order for there to be desire, for these elements to become desirable? I mean, I don't desire a woman - I am ashamed to say things like that since Proust already said it, and it's beautiful in Proust.*

Marcel Proust (as a quote): *I don't desire a woman, I also desire a landscape that is enveloped in this woman. A landscape that I don't know but can feel. As long as I haven't yet unfolded the landscape that she envelops, I will not be happy, my desire will not have been attained, will remain unsatisfied.*

Gilles Deleuze: *I believe in an aggregate with two terms: woman/landscape. And it's something completely different. If a woman says, I desire a dress, or I desire something,... It's obvious that she doesn't desire this dress or that blouse in the abstract. She desires it in an entire context, a context of her own life that she is going to organize, the desire in relation not only with a land-
scape, but with people who are her friends, with people who are not her friends, with her profession, etc. I never desire some thing all by itself, I don't desire an aggregate either, I desire from within an aggregate. In other words, there is no desire that does not flow without an assemblage of the everyday life.*

An illustration of Deleuze's explanation could be the character of Shéhérazade from «One Thou-
sand and One Nights». For the king Shahryar, the young princess is already an object of desire. But he finds himself desiring the story she delivers to him just as much. Their story expresses very clearly the link between narration and desire.

Some sounds in itself can already have a certain sensual dimension. Let's take another king, the one from Italo Calvino's «A King Listens» \(^{6}\).Throughout the narration, you realize that this king, who's obsessed with sounds, is particularly fascinated by a unique voice, or song. The voice of a woman he once heard and never forgot:

*There was a voice, a song, a woman’s voice that from time to time the breeze carried all the way up here to you from some open window; there was a love song that on summer nights the air brought you in bursts, and the moment you seemed to have grasped some note of it, it was*

\(^{25}\) Gilles Deleuze’s Abécédaire, produced by Pierre-André Boutang for Arte, 1988

\(^{6}\) «A King Listens», in «Under the Jaguar Sun», Italo Calvino, Seuil, 1990
already lost, and you were never sure you had really heard it and had not simply imagined it, desired to hear it, the dream of a woman’s voice singing in the nightmare of your long insomnia. This is what you were waiting for, quiet and alert: it is no longer fear that makes you prick up your ears. You have begun to hear again this singing that reaches you with every note distinct, every timbre and color, from the city that has been abandoned by all music.

Here you can feel the tension of desire and the projection of the king in this one desire: From the immateriality of that female voice, he can start imagining the physicality of the woman he loves: That voice comes certainly from a person, unique, inimitable like every person; a voice, however, is not a person, it is something suspended in the air, detached from the solidity of things. The voice, too, is unique and inimitable, but perhaps in a different way from a person: they might not resemble each other, voice and person. Or else, they could resemble each other in a secret way, not perceptible at first: the voice could be the equivalent of the hidden and most genuine part of the person. Is it a bodiless you that listens to that bodiless voice? In that case, whether you actually hear it or merely remember it or imagine it makes no difference. A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices. A voice involves the throat, saliva, infancy, the patina of experienced life, the mind’s intentions, the pleasure of giving a personal form to sound waves. What attracts you is the pleasure this voice puts into existing: into existing as voice; but this pleasure leads you to imagine how this person might be different from every other person, as the voice is different.

It becomes clear that what seduced Calvino’s king, above all, was the fact that this woman’s voice was singing. In the same way that what seduced the king Shahryar were the stories Shéhérazade was telling. There’s obviously something very seductive about a voice, as soon as you can connect it to a dear person of yours. This reminds me of a couple of song recordings I made two years ago, gathered on a mix-tape. I no longer have that tape, since I gave it away to the boy I was in love with. As weird as it might sound, a tape can become a means of seduction. I sometimes played some songs of mine to boys I fancied, which actually happened to be successful. One of them once told me that he «fell in love with my voice».

**PAUSE**

Jean-Luc Godard: *Images and sounds, like people who are getting to know each other on the way, and can no longer be apart.*

**PLAY**

The example of the king projecting a woman figure from a voice underlines the strong dependence that images can have towards sounds. Here, for example, Truffaut explains how, according to him, words can overtake image. He describes the great satisfaction that well written and well performed dialogues can procure: «With the images of a movie, you can reach a partial satisfaction, perhaps 70% or 80% of what you dreamed of, in the best case. With dialogues, you can reach 100%»., said François Truffaut in 1967 in a press conference. He also added, speaking of «The Soft Skin», which he was not totally satisfied with, he added: «I’m 60% happy with the images, but 100% satisfied with the spoken words. He found the dialogues with total correctness: the film «sang in tune».»

Sounds, voices or music are tightly linked to a story. They make it more memorizable, more iconic, more lovable too. I guess that film music is one of the most striking examples, horror movies scoring in particular. Try to think about a Sergio Leone spaghetti western without an Ennio Morricone melody. Well you simply can’t. Because sounds and music are necessary to a story.

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3. «Histoire(s) du Cinéma», Jean-Luc Godard, Collection Blanche, Gallimard, 09/10/1998
Creating new language possibilities
the dog’s song performed by my mother

The desire of hearing a new recorded story, and the satisfaction given by the words it contains, got me thinking about language in a broader sense. Earlier, we understood that a tape has its own specific «vocabulary». But one of the recordings that I have is even more tricky than that. It deals with the creation of a new type of language, a new way of communicating. My mother has been, for a very long time, fulfilling the goal to entertain me, performed herself the voice of my dog Noah. There was a simple song she invented for it, and used to sing to me, when the dog would be around. I was quite fond of that song, which led me to record it at some point. It goes like this:

*Satanic Noah, satanic Noah ... Mom, I’m diabolical!
Satanic Noah, satanic Noah ...
Mom, I’m crazy about you.
But who is the most beautiful, of all animals?
Noah, Noah, Noah, Noah, is the most beautiful.

(Originally in french:
Satanique Noah, satanique Noah...
Maman, je suis diabolique!
Satanique Noah, satanique Noah...
Maman, je suis fou de vous.
Mais qui c’est le plus beau, de tous les animaux?
Noah, Noah, Noah, Noah, est le plus beau.)

By giving a voice to my dog, my mother proposes a form of language for an animal which, so to speak, doesn’t have any. I don’t know, there was something strange about that song. Besides the lyrics, obviously. I’m not sure if this was due to the fact that my dog got used to this song, or if it would have reacted the same way if my mother would have sung any other song. But when she was singing it to the dog, the dog would sing along with her. My mother no longer has a dog. But she has a cat. The animal never had its own song, but my mother sometimes still speaks aloud instead of the cat. The other day I was at Post Norma, which is a squat and Sandberg Institute project space, located in Amsterdam North. My friend Victor who lives there told me that, very often, a «cat with a human face» can be seen in the neighbourhood.

British artist Liam Gillick’s writing «A Kitchen Cat Speaks» also goes into this direction of humanizing and giving a voice to an animal: 26

*There will be a cat that can speak. All the people of the town will be very proud of their speaking cat. People will come every day to hear what it has to say. It will be very cynical but never mean. It will see everything and understand it all.
During quiet times people will come and read all the newspapers to the cat or surf the Internet and find good stories about world affairs that might be of interest. One morning it will rain. Things will have been very quiet in the world and the cat will have nothing to say. You might even think that the cat will be mildly depressed.
But as we will find out, the cat will be mildly depressed, suffering from ennui and even bored by its role as the only talking cat in the whole world. The cat will want to know what is going on. Only by feeding it information will it be wise, interesting or even funny. But on this day it will have no new

26. «A Kitchen Cat Speaks», Liam Gillick, German Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2009
stories. It will hope that the children look on Google News or even Le Monde Diplomatique and feed its surprisingly agile brain.

To break the deadlock the cat will cough and shift its head. It will speak but unlike other cats, it will no longer smile.

“Well, what are you doing here?”

The cat will say. It won’t have spoken for a few days and whenever that happens it will have lost its accent and clarity and begun to speak with a cat accent. The children will hear something like, “Wheel waa aaa yew doo eng eer.”

They will move closer. Hoping to hear more clearly.

“What did it say?” the girl will say to the boy….

“Something about wheels and danger” the boy will say.

“I don’t think it did.” The girl will say…

The cat will try to smile, but it will just screw up its face into an ugly grimace.

“I don’t like it”, the boy will say…

“I don’t like it”, the girl will say

“I don’t like you”, the cat will think.

“Please come and tell me something”, the cat will say.

The breath of the children will be close. It will have learnt that human’s know that cat’s steal their breath. The cat will know that this is nonsense. It is buildings like this that steal people’s breath. Anyway. What’s wrong with borrowing some child’s breath for a while? All cats know that it smells sweet and is full of intelligence and goodness and fun.

It will take a deep surreptitious suck of the children’s breath and as they reel and swoon, glide and dream it will begin to tell them a true story about the wisdom of a kitchen cat…

Forty years before Gillick, Marcel Broodthaers also encountered a speaking cat, which he interviewed.27 Yet, Broodthaers approached language very differently. In his «Interview With A Cat», the cat still meows, but is able to participate to a conversation about art, therefore communicate:

Marcel Broodthaers: Is that one a good painting?…Does it correspond to what you expect from that very recent transformation which goes from Conceptual Art to this new version of a kind of figuration, as one might say?

Cat: Miaow.

MB: Do you think so?

Cat: Miaaw..mm..miauw..miauw.

MB: And yet this colour is very clearly redolent of the painting that was being done in the period of abstract art, isn’t it?

Cat: Miaaw..miaaw..miiaw..miaw.

MB: Are you sure it’s not a new form of academicism?

Cat: Miauw.

MB: Yes, but if it’s a daring innovation it’s still a contestable one.

Cat: Mia.

MB: It’s still…

Cat: Mia.

MB: Er…It’s still a matter of markets…

Cat: Miaauw.

MB: What will the people who bought the previous things do?

Cat: Miauw.

MB: Will they sell them?

27. «Interview With A Cat», Marcel Broodthaers, recorded at the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Düsseldorf, 1970
Cat: *Miauw..mia.*
MB: Or will they continue? What do you think?…Because, at the moment, a lot of artists are wondering about that.
Cat: *Miauw.. mmm..miauw.. maaw..miaauw.. miaaw..mm.. Miauw..miauw.. MiAUW!*
MB: In that case close the Museums!
Cat: *MIAUW!*

***
MB: *This is a pipe.*
Cat: *Miaouw.*
MB: *This is not a pipe.*
Cat: *Miaouw...*

In that case, language is less evident. It is rather a device aiming to represent the impossibility to communicate. In fact, Broodthaers’s cat, unlike Gillick’s one, cannot speak. In the interview, the cat only more or less agrees or disagrees with meows, translating among other possibilities that it does not understand the subject. Its meow is not an echo of conceptual art, but just an echo in the lack of an echo, that Broodthaers puts into perspective. Broodthaers uses conceptual art (Magritte’s «The Treachery of Images», «This is not a pipe», 1928) and its question of representation across a composed reality (the meows of the cat) or across a recomposed reality (the meows of the cat feign). He is combining the question of the performative with the one of the real.

In reality, a fictional character, or a dead person, is of course enable to speak. But a performance can actually offer this possibility. In Godard’s movie «Week-end»²⁸, the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud is wandering through a field. He is reenacting the character of the french revolutionary Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just. He is preaching politics from a book, speaking directly into the camera. In the next scene, he is performing a completely different character, a camera-unaware man in a phone booth. Roland and his wife Corrine, who are the french middle class protagonists of the movie, steal Léaud’s car, and arrive into a forest.

In the forest, Roland is trying to get directions from Tom Thumb (actor is Yves Alfonso) and Emily Bronté (actress is Blandine Jeanson), who stick to their fantasy script despite his increasingly violent demands. Finally, Roland sets Emily Bronté on fire.

**CORINNE:** It’s rotten of us, isn’t it? We’ve no right to burn even a philosopher.
**ROLAND:** Can’t you see they’re only imaginary characters?
**CORINNE:** Why is she crying, then?
**ROLAND:** No idea. Let’s go.
**CORINNE:** We’re little more than that ourselves.

²⁸. «Week-end», Jean-Luc Godard, 1967
This example allow both characters of literature and also dead writers to intrude a seemingly reality-based road movie. About literature, and awkward writers reenactment, there’s also this song called «The Booklovers» by The Divine Comedy. The song contains references to more than seventy writers from very different epochs and consists in an absurd discussion between all of them. Here is an example of how it goes:

Jane Austen: Here I am!
Leo Tolstoy: Yes!
Honoré de Balzac: Oui...
Brontë Sisters: Hellowo...?
Charles Dickens: London is so beautiful this time of year...
Emile Zola: J’accuse.
Virginia Woolf: I’m losing my mind!
Marcel Proust: Je m’en souviens plus.
Anaïs Nin: The strand of pearls.
Jean-Paul Sartre: Let’s go to the dome, Simone!
Simone de Beauvoir: C’est exact.
Albert Camus: The beach... the beach.
Franz Kafka: WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!
Jack Kerouac: My car’s broken down...
Vladimir Nabokov: Hello, little girl...
Umberto Eco: I don’t understand this either...

And so on...

The Divine Comedy - The Booklovers

29. «The Booklovers», The Divine Comedy, 1994
Editing reality

*it's_all_dance.mp3*

There is something very exciting about allowing impossible situations to intrude everyday life. This alteration of reality is at the chore of storytelling. Let’s now consider the reciprocity between recorded reality and experienced reality. A tape recording can, in some cases, resemble a Proustian device. This idea, of course, links back to memory and temporality. But also activates the following story: *it’s_all_dance.mp3*. I spent last August in Tallin, Estonia, where I attended the Asterisk Summer School. There, I took part in a workshop led by designer Maki Suzuki (Åbäke), called «Winona Forever»  

![Image of a tape recorder playing](image)

Winona Forever is a story about a tattoo, which belongs to Johnny Deep. He had a four years relationship with actress Winona Ryder, between 1989 and 1993. Johnny, who was crazy about Winona, decided to tattoo «Winona Forever» on his right shoulder. But inevitably, the lovers broke up, which lead him not to erase the tattoo, but modify it into «Wino Forever».

![Image of Johnny Dee with a tattoo](image)

It is also this story: 17 people met in Tallinn in the context of a summer school initiated by Laura Pappa and Elisabeth Klement. They promised to meet again during Christmas 2020, to reminisce the events, both fictitious and real, of what happened in Estonia.

**PAUSE**

In Beckett’s play «Krapp’s Last Tape» 31, the curtain rises on «a late evening in the future». It is Krapp’s 69th birthday and he hauls out his old tape recorder, listens to recordings he made in the earlier years. The tape dates from when he turned 39. His younger voice reports that he has just

30. «Winona Forever», a workshop led by Maki Suzuki (Åbäke), during Asterisk Summer School, August 2014
reviewed an older tape, from when he was in his late twenties. The amused 69 years old Krapp comments on his impressions of the person he used to be. He retreats into memories from his distant past and starts remembering stories. Many different stories he once recorded. By using a tape recorder, Beckett introduces a non-human character in the play. The presence of Krapp reanimates the recordings, he becomes one body with the machine and the tape it plays. «The spool is [his] whole life.»

**PLAY**

The workshop consisted of five days of collective wandering in Tallin. The outcome became a 17min 28s long (epic) urban tale, called «It’s all dance» that I recorded together with a young American designer called Bryce Wilner. Our two voices tell - or rather repeat - a story that has been written by seventeen persons. Team work was a very central parameter of our process. This is a scene from Truffaut’s «Day for night», where Ferrand, a director, is reflecting on the development of a movie. His thoughts are close to the one I had, while shaping «It’s all dance» together with my group: 32

FERRAND: Here we are, in the middle of the adventure. Before I start filming, I first of all want to make a film that will be beautiful. As soon as the first troubles arise, I have to reduce my ambition and I find myself simply hoping that we will finish the film. By the middle of the shoot, I think to myself, «You could have worked better, you could give more... Now, you still have the second half of the film to make it properly.» And from that moment, I try to make everything that will be shown on the screen more alive. «Je vous présente Pamela» seems to me like it’s finally on track, the actors are comfortable in their characters, the team is welded, personal problems no longer count. Cinema reigns.

From the very beginning of motion pictures, there have been two ways of making films: one that is a mere staging of something thought up and written down beforehand, the other develops more spontaneously, without any settled preparation for what happens to be available in front of the camera. Such process leaves room for a good deal of improvisation, and it is the one we experienced while performing «It’s all dance», by inventing actions and plots for ourselves.

This quote from Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky 33, comments on the importance of team work during a creative process. It also raises the question of authorship regarding an outcome which doesn’t have an obvious paternity: «It is possible to move mountains when the people working together to realize the conception of the film, all with their different characters, temperaments, ages and life-histories, are united as one family and fired by a single passion. If a genuinely creative atmosphere can be built up in the team, then it ceases to matter who is responsible for anyone idea; who thought of that way of doing a close-up, or panorama, who first devised a lighting contrast or camera-angle. And then it is not possible to say whose function is the most important - that of camera-man or director, the scene becomes a living structure, in which there is nothing forced and no hint of self-admiration.»

As we wandered as a group, our geographical movements were based on reciprocal trust. They were also very random.

**REW**

Let’s briefly go back to the «dérive». Debord sees urban wandering as a means of discovery, for a

32. «Day for night», Truffaut, 1973
33. «Scenario and shooting script» in «Sculpting in time», Andrei Tarkovsky, 1986
city becoming a narrative network and playground. The dérive is also an experience of defamiliarization of a known space by the intervention of chance. A search without methodology, without aim, deconcentrated. In Tallin, we’ve been following the loose steps of a group drifting, leaving traces behind us. The traces would become tattoos that we would draw, with permanent markers on each other, notes each of us would collect, but essentially conversations we would have throughout our walks. The trip took into account both our shared experience and individual emotions. Each participant-observer, while taking note of minor signs, was contributing to this urban narrative network.

FF

This wandering happened to be, for all of us, very close to meditation. The idea of mental trips and shared narrative is essential to Rivette’s movie «Céline and Julie Go Boating: Phantom Ladies Over Paris». 34

In Paris, Julie, librarian and witch in her spare time, meets Céline, young cabaret dancer and magician, vaguely mythomaniac. The young girl is at first difficult to approach, but with time, they become friends. Together, they will drawn into a fantastic quest around an old house, located at the number 7 bis of the street Nadir aux Pommes. This place might be the childhood house of Julie, or perhaps the set of a strange comedy, that ghosts actors seem to constantly replay... In the intervals of this enigmatic drama, Céline and Julie have a lot of fun putting together the pieces of the story. One after the other, and finally together, they intrude this story. Their way to do so it is to eat a «magic candy». As long as one of these candies will be in their mouths, they can physically be in this old house, this small theater. In this movie, Rivette explores different combinations of the theme of life as a dream, or as a play.

A narrative experience can definitely be a collective one. And a tape seems like an appropriate format to distribute and share stories. It is a small, light, cheap, and reproducible object. I was discussing this aspect of the tape with critic and curator Benjamin Thorel, which reminded him of the following anecdote: When he was traveling through America, Benjamin noticed a surpirizing omnipresence of the tape. He tried to understand why it was so and realized this was partly due to the fact that most of the cars had tape players. Tapes, for being good travel companions, are recorded, exchanged and copied largely, as «mix-tapes». They become transitive objects, between the one who produces it and the one who receives it, a material connexion between them.

34. «Céline and Julie Go Boating», Jacques Rivette, 1974
One of the triggering aspect «Winona Forever»’s workshop was to make the best use of reality, existing encounters, to elaborate an exciting narrative. In this scene from «Love on the run», 28. which is the fourth and last movie of the Truffaut’s series «Antoine Doinel», there is precisely an overlapping between Antoine Doinel’s practice as a writer and the (coincidental) literary dimension of his own life. Antoine is stuck in-between fiction and reality. The story, supposedly fictional, that he’s now telling to his friend Colette, is actually his very own story that he projects into a potential piece of writing.35

Colette: I think that you are a fairly good writer, Antoine, I do. But I’m under the impression that you could become a true novelist only if you could manage to write a story that is entirely invented. That’s it, entirely from your own imagination.
Antoine: Well, I just did so! I already found a title for it, it will be a real novel, called «The manuscript found by a brat».
Colette: Ah, that’s a good title, Antoine. Yes, a very good title, a fantastic title. So, how does the story go?
Antoine: Well, it goes like this! It’s about a guy who goes out of some bistro’s bathroom and stops at a phone booth to make a call. The booth is occupied by another guy and, despite himself, my hero perceives bits of the conversation. The guy is very lively, he’s even pretty angry, and my hero understands… Understands that he is breaking up with the woman he’s talking to on the phone. Actually, at some point, the angry guy draws a postcard size picture from his pocket, the picture of a woman… Yes, in the booth, he tears up the picture and throws the pieces on the ground before hanging up like crazy. He leaves the phone booth and goes away. So my hero, who experienced the whole scene, gets into the booth, picks up the pieces of the picture and puts them in his own pocket. He goes home, and starts reconstructing the puzzle. He sticks the back of the pieces with transparent tape. On the back of the picture, the photographer’s stamp gives him a first clue. He will begin his investigation. Ah! I forgot to tell you that as soon as the face of the photo was restored, my hero fell deeply in love with this young woman he does not know yet.
Colette: But then, what happens next, Antoine? This is so exciting! I am on tenterhooks.
Antoine: Well, by dint of patience, trickery, tenacity, my hero will trace the girl and make sure they will meet by chance, without revealing anything about his feelings for her, or the bizarre path that led him to her.
Colette: Ah, that’s fantastic! And then? Because, alright, he’s in love with her, but her, does she love him back?
Antoine: Frankly, I’m now in a dead end. Probably, he will manage to be loved by that girl. But from there, they will have a history together, and then, nothing else but deceptions, illusions, ruptures can happen. And honestly, I’m afraid of falling into the same sentimental sadness that I have already described in «The Salads».

35. «Love on the run», Truffaut, 1979
PLAY

«It's all dance» comes across as semiopaque exercises of logic by mixing elements of fiction with authentic memories from our walks in Tallinn. The listener might perceive the story as quite absurd, or even obscure. But each word of it makes complete sense to anyone who participated in it. Our starting point was to think about a story as a performative site. How does a seemingly loose wandering become a report of actions? Real actions. How can a walk become a speech? Can a collective experience be turned into a single, continuous story? These questions slowly became our major concerns.

Bryce: Are you in an audiobook or in reality?
Émilie: In an audiobook.
Bryce: In an audiobook? Liar.

This is the very end of «it's_all_dance.mp3». Here, the recording becomes self-aware. This dialog is actually a sample one of Godard's «Week-end» scene. Another self-aware movie. 28

The act of overlapping fiction and reality, can be quite fantasist, or metaphorical. But it can also be a very conscious strategy of reshaping reality, in order to create a more pleasing, augmented reality. This idealization of the everyday is expressed here by Truffaut, in «Day for night». According to his character Ferrand, fiction resembles life but necessarily overcomes it: 32

FERRAND: Listen Alphonse, come here. You’re going to go back to your room… You’re going to read the script one more… You’re going to work a little bit and then try to sleep. Tomorrow is work, and work is the most important thing. You’re a very good actor, you’re doing well… I know, there’s your private life… But private life is clumsy for everyone. Movies are more harmonious that life, Alphonse. There are no traffic jams in movies, there are no holds. Movies progress as trains, you understand, like trains in the night. People like you, like me, you know, are meant to be happy at work … in our cinema work. Bye, Alphonse, I’m counting on you.

REW

If stories are more harmonious than life, it is of course, very tempting to tell some. That shift between what is real and what isn’t is after all not so far from little or bigger lies. And so young Antoine Doinel comes back, in another scene from «400 Blows»:10

Psychologist: Your parents told me that you’re lying all the time.
Antoine Doinel: Well, I’m lying, I’m lying occasionally, you know… Sometimes, I would say things that would be the true, and they wouldn’t believe me. So I’d rather tell lies.

And he even keeps on lying in «Bed and Board» 36. In this scene, Antoine is pretending to read out loud a newspaper article to his wife Christine. But he’s actually transforming it, simply by modifying a few words in a sentence, therefore altering completely its meaning. Again, he’s tricking her.

Antoine Doinel: They are really exaggerating, publishing such an article in «Le Monde»! Listen: «The session continued at eight o’clock and around midnight, the delegates from European Agriculture were allowed to go back to their bedrooms where a horny call girl was waiting.»

28. «Week-end», Jean-Luc Godard, 1967
32. «Day for night», Truffaut, 1973
10. «400 Blows», François Truffaut, 1959
36. «Bed and Board», Truffaut, 1970
(Originally: «The session continued at eight o’clock and around midnight, the delegates from European Agriculture were allowed to go back to their bedrooms where a tasty snack was waiting.»)

{The play on words is more evident in French: «call-girl bien excitée» replaces «collation bien méritée»}

**PLAY**

The act of telling stories, has, in French («raconter des histoires») different values. It can relate to someone delivering a narrative in its traditional sense, but also refer, if used with negative connotations, to the act of tricking. The role of a story-teller can quickly switch to the one of a liar. Godard said: «When I was a little boy, people would teach me not to tell stories (referring to the act of lying). Nowadays, people are reproaching me not to tell any.» He also said, in his «Histoire(s) du Cinéma» ³: «Beautifull stories. Beauty, makeup. In fact, cinema is not part of the communication industry, nor that of the entertainment, but the cosmetics one. It is part of the mask industry, which is itself a thin branch of that of the lie.»

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³. «Histoire(s) du Cinéma», Jean-Luc Godard, Collection Blanche, Gallimard, 09/10/1998
Conclusion

We’ve been looking at examples of tape recording practices, and from there noticing different narrative strategies. That was probably quite a lot to hear. But all this I wanted to tell. The French verb «dire» (to tell) derives from Latin «dicere»: to express through speech, but also, naming, narrating. In English, one of the meaning of the adjective «dire» relates to the idea of emergency, of hopeless abyss, deriving from Greek «deos»: the fright. Through this game of associative homograms, I want to stress the urge of speech, which can also become a motivation behind narrating a story.

I’m dealing with that urge through objects, a tape recorder and blank tapes. By using, overusing, misusing these objects, this technology, I’m questioning a certain «practice of everyday life». 39 This is a quote from French philosopher Michel de Certeau that is quite significant to me: «The technician Reason thinks it understands how to organize things and people better, assigning to everyone a certain place, role, and products to consume. But the ordinary man withdraws himself in silence to this conformation. He invents the everyday through the art of subtle tricks, tactics of resistance, with which he diverts the objects and the codes, he reclaims the space and use in very own way.»

An example of these tricks could be this one, which is, in French, called «la perruque» (the wig). Working «en perruque» mostly relates to factory workers and consists in an employee using his working time or his working tools to achieve a goal which doesn’t correspond to what he’s getting payed for. (Take a worker busy, let’s say, with manufacturing toothbrushes but who, at the end of his day spend at the factory, would produce a few more toothbrushes, for his own use.) This activity fulfills a personal goal, and is sometimes known and even accepted by the employer. Working «en perruque» is working for yourself, while participating to a reality-based, economical hijack.

I’m interested in such marginal practices, deriving directly from an consumable object. It is said that some think, while others take actions. But isn’t the true human genius to think through his hands? Tricks, strange tips, new narratives, made-up words, there are probably one thousand and one inventive practices that prove that, within the crowd, one can be disobedient and make, secretly, a different use of the products imposed on him.

«The old adage was never so true as now, that saying a thing is so don’t make it so.» 38 I’m particularly interested in this anonymous art of tricks, marginal knowledge, this edgy attitude, in reaction to consumerism. A homemade tape is a significant tool to turn these thoughts into practice. For being such a perishable and seemingly outdated object, it reveals a certain beauty of decay and nostalgia, standing against consumption improvement.

But tapes are also activating the idea of thinking through an object. Of this reciprocal process of making things, thinking through things, and seeing things differently through thoughts. First, there is the recording, second, its impression, or what one thinks of it. Later, it becomes a sensation, an experience. Because the action of recording implies a reaction. A reaction coming from the mind of the listener, a reaction of thoughts.

The article «Vinyl Reckoning» 39 by American rock music critic Richard Meltzer, also reflects on vinyl records as a means to «physical thinking». In this article, Meltzer underlines our desperate attachment to objects — here, records — our obsession of preserving it. Throughout his writing, he constantly links back records he bought with some personal memories. He’s narrating his life in a very lively way, through his music collection. This will give you an idea of how this text feels:

37. «The Practice of Everyday Life», Michel de Certeau, 1990
38 «Statement on Intermedia», Dick Higgins, New York, 03/08/1966
«Things we’ve saved and saved and SAVED. For all the stupid reasons you or I or anybody saves things. You can’t take them «with you», not all, not any, but chances are what’s left is but a micro-fraction of the total heap o’ shit that in the course of a life has passed through your prehensile puppy paws. Gone is that copy of Zap Comix number three, and gone is the radium-dial Howdy Doody watch, and the actual puck Frank Mahovlich scored goal number 489 with against Toronto; and gone gone GONE are all the silly goddamn STAMPS you once fervidly «collected,» only a fool would hold on to that shit, and you’re no fool, neither am I.»

A tape is an object, and at the same time a story. If using it in a certain way, it becomes a secret tool for telling stories. But also a language tool for telling secrets. In that sense, it appears a potential «transitional object» 40, an object inbetween us, that we use to communicate our internal and external realities. British psychologist Donald Winnicott has a theory about this «transitional object». He came up with the idea that the teddy bear or the blanket, which is the first object of possession, is an object that exists in order to be a transition between the baby and the mother. When the baby is very young, it does not see a difference between itself and the mother. The mother’s breast is its breast. And at a certain point, he starts to notice that the mother is a separate being. And at this moment, the transitional object is found. This object exists as the transition between the internal world of the child and the external world of the mother.

**PAUSE**

Truffaut also admits that a practice, in his case movie-making, can be a direct extension from childhood:

«I belong to this family of filmmakers for who cinema is an extension of youth, the one of children that have been sent in a corner to have fun, and reinvented the world with toys and still continue playing these games at adulthood through films. This is what I call the «cinema of the back room», with a rejection of life as it is, of the world in its actual state, and in response to that, the need to recreate something that resembles a little bit to fairy tales, a little bit of this American cinema that made us dream at a younger age.» 41

**PLAY**

In the case of the tape, the idea of transitional object should also be interpreted in a broader sense, moving away from childhood. When producing a recording, I accept the eventuality of a listener, which could be anyone, really. The stories on my tapes, my recorded voice, exist as a reflection of the relationship between you and I, it is not just the medium between us, it is a product of our potential exchange. It is a third being, that speaks our third language. By creating a processable sound content, I am forming a bridge. I am providing a specific aural material to a category of listeners, who are willing to consume information in a certain way. In a way. A tape recording is a container in which you can pour anything. It is based on a individual or collective experience, but still keeps a distance with that experience, through the medium of the tape recorder which codifies it, blurs it, flattens it, so as to temper its emotional power. Tape narratives are the results of non-hierarchical fragments put together, and usually don’t provide the listener with a single explanation. But rather with an open significance. Instead of searching for a coherent discourse, a recording seems to leave its content open, so that it not only allows, but also demands to the listener to project his own experience onto it.

**STOP**

**EJECT**