

# On the mediality of ethnographic tools: from field notebook to digital ethnography, storytelling as media of exteriorized memory

## *Sobre a medialidade das ferramentas etnográficas: do caderno de campo à etnografia digital, o contador de histórias como media de memória exteriorizada*

CATARINA PATRÍCIO

Lusófona University, CICANT, Portugal  
catarina.patricio@ulusofona.pt

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### Abstract

Through fieldwork that aspires to participant observation, ethnographers immerse themselves in the life of a particular techno-geographic-human reality. An ontogenetic inquiry places media at the core of the anthropological experience of fieldwork: to observe is to record information — and within the descriptions crystallised in the field notebooks of the seminal participant observers, to the later aggregation of photographic imagery, sound, and film, and more recently the relevance of algorithms triggered by digital ethnography, memory is continuously being stored. In light of these ontological implications, this paper proposes an archaeological excavation of the medial nature of the ethnographic tools to find storytelling as a continuous media of exteriorised memory. Whether in craftsmanship, in maritime life, in rural labour, or at the workshop, stories were told as a retention medium that assesses the validity of experience over time.

However, transfers of knowledge are vulnerable passages precisely because structural information can be lost. Hyper-industrial grammatisation is, as Stiegler demonstrates (2007), the culmination of a long process of hypomnesia, which is why technical educability has to take into account the loss of knowledge and memory that occurs when knowledge is transferred. Hence the importance of the storyteller, who functions as medium of exteriorized memory in the stories being told. In conclusion, we argue that an ethnohistory can be perceived as a means of retaining techniques and work experience, which is relevant to the constitution of a broader technical encyclopaedism.

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### Keywords

media archaeology | participant observation | storytelling | knowledge retention | hyper-industrial grammatisation | mnemotechniques

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**Resumo**

Através de um trabalho de campo que aspire à observação participante, os etnógrafos mergulham na vida de uma realidade tecno-geográfico-humana particular. Uma investigação ontogénica coloca os *media* no centro da experiência antropológica do trabalho de campo: observar é registar informação — e das descrições cristalizadas nos cadernos de campo dos primeiros observadores participantes, à posterior agregação de imagens fotográficas, som e filme, e mais recentemente com a relevância dos algoritmos desencadeados pela etnografia digital, a memória é continuamente armazenada. À luz destas implicações ontológicas, este artigo propõe uma escavação arqueológica à natureza medial das ferramentas etnográficas para encontrar os contadores de histórias enquanto *media* de memória exteriorizada. Seja no artesanato, na vida marítima, no trabalho rural ou na oficina, as histórias eram contadas como um meio de retenção de saberes que avaliava a validade da experiência ao longo do tempo.

Porém, as transferências de conhecimento são passagens vulneráveis à perda de informação estrutural. A gramatização híper-industrial é, como demonstra Stiegler (2007), o culminar de um longo processo de hipomnése, daí que a educabilidade técnica tenha de considerar a perda de conhecimento e de memória que ocorre aquando da transferência de conhecimento. Daí a importância do contador de histórias, que funciona como *media* de memória exteriorizada nas histórias que estão a ser contadas. Como conclusão, defendemos que uma etno-história possa ser percebida como um meio retenção de técnicas e experiência de trabalho, o que é relevante para a constituição de um enciclopedismo técnico mais alargado.

arqueologia dos media | observação participante | narração de histórias | retenção de conhecimentos | gramatização híper-industrial | mnemotécnicas

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**Palavras-chave**

## 1. On the Mediality of Ethnographic Tools

There will always be an insurmountable gap between life and memory — but this is precisely the field in which ethnography continually positions itself. Telling ethno-stories prevents life from fading in time. Here lies the significance of storytelling in its capacity to retain memory. Ethnography, as a qualitative research method, involves the in-depth, immersive study of a cultural group, with the core practice being the process of “ethno-graphing” — writing, transcribing, recording, and therefore exteriorising human memory and lived experience.<sup>1</sup>

A common ground bounds identity construction to a collective memory, which is simultaneously inherited and transmitted. This bond, the *fantasy* of belonging, looms

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1 The focus on “ethno-graphy” as writing and managing of human information and memory would warrant further elaboration but limitations in the length of the chapter preclude a full exploration of this dimension.

within storytelling. The storyteller is a “mediumistic being”<sup>2</sup> who intertwines the indigenous creative fantasy at the origin of the anthropological foundation of place — the constructive fantasy that unites differences. And the fantasy of the ethnographer,<sup>3</sup> tempted to identify as second nature the techno-human reality encountered in the stories told, is a combination of real and imaginary cartographies, one which has led many artists to aspire to an ethnographic approach.<sup>4</sup>

Ethnography, with its focus on retaining action, language, and gestures, has long involved recording technologies<sup>5</sup> that translate life into information. From the detailed descriptions fossilized in the field notebooks of early participant observers to the later aggregation of photographic imagery, sound recordings, and film, and more recently to the relevance of algorithms triggered by the digital turn, an ontogenetic inquiry places media at the core of the ethnographer’s experience of fieldwork. As a fundamental condition of ethnographic practice, these *mediations* bind lived experience to its subsequent interpretation.

The field notebook was one initial medium, with notes and drawings capturing the essence of the observed world.<sup>6</sup> This was later extended to photography and sound

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2 This idea is derived from Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the artist, presented in the 1957 conference “The Creative Act”: “the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.” (Duchamp 1975, 138)

3 For Marc Augé, the invention of place presupposes a fantasy, which will be common to both ethnologists and indigenous people: “A reality certainly lies at the origin of this double invention, and provides its raw material and its object. But it may also give rise to fantasies and illusions: the indigenous fantasy of a society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil outside which nothing is really understandable; the ethnologist’s illusion of a society so transparent to itself that it is fully expressed in the most trivial of its usages, in any one of its institutions, and in the total personality of each of its members. Knowledge of the systematic mapping of nature carried out by all societies, even nomadic ones, extends the fantasy and feeds the illusion.” (Augé 2008, 36)

4 The ethnographic turn is the tendency in Contemporary Art towards ethnographic methods. It was noted in the 90’s of the twentieth century. As acknowledged by Hal Foster: “If anthropologists wanted to exploit the textual model in cultural interpretation, these artists and critics aspire to fieldwork in which theory and practice seem to be reconciled. Often they draw indirectly on basic principles of the participant-observer tradition, among which Clifford notes a critical focus on a particular institution and a narrative tense that favors ‘the ethnographic present.’ Yet these borrowings are only signs of the ethnographic turn in contemporary art and criticism.” (Foster 1996, 181)

5 A first clarification is needed concerning the recurrent terms technics, technique, and technology. Technics refers to the technical domain or practice as a system. Technique refers to the specialized skill or method of one or more individuals. Technology refers to the specific assemblage or configuration of apparatuses in the modern period, as well as the study of the nature and logic of technics. Bernard Stiegler’s work *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* provides a detailed philosophical examination of these concepts and their relationship.

6 It is the case of the drawings of human types and their customs and traditions, as well as of fauna and flora, along with topographical drawings, which Roberto Ivens recorded in his field notebook of the Expedition undertaken with Hermenegildo Capelo from Angola to the Indian Ocean Contra-Costa, in 1884-85. The Cartography Division of the Hydrographic Institute of Lisbon published the notebook, a heritage of the Portuguese Geographic Society in 1989 for the Cultural Editions of the Portuguese Navy.

recordings with the tape recorder. Then came film. As Jean Rouch<sup>7</sup> noted, the film camera, turned into a participant in the action, became “naturalized” within the fieldwork. Contrary to what was demanded by his professor, Marcel Griaule, a “non-participant” medium of registration is already impossible in itself. In Rouch’s ethno-fiction, the informants knowingly and freely participate in the filmmaking process and fictionalize their own roles for the camera. By embodying this role-play of storytelling, the informants revealed their most authentic realities. Turning the film camera into a legitimate participant through storytelling allowed Rouch to make the medium “disappear,” i.e. immerse it into life — analogous to Malinowski’s strategy of immersive fieldwork.

Participant observation emerges as an extraordinary and highly medial tool. Bronisław Malinowski, who had the originality to conceive it as a method for the study of the social life of the Omarakana in the Trobriand Islands, considered that to understand the social functions of the group, one had to immerse in the life of the village. And it was as an immersed ethnographer that Malinowski perceived the *Kula*, the system of ritual exchange at the basis of the social organisation of the Trobriand. It so happens that in North America Marcel Mauss noted an identical ceremonial structure of gift distribution called the *Potlatch*. In *The Gift, Forms and Functions of Exchange en Archaic Societies* (1925), Mauss perceives the anthropological motivation of symbolic exchanges as the basis of social bonds. Accordingly, “the *kula* is a sort of grand *Potlatch*”, and it is “the vehicle for busy intertribal trade” (Mauss 1990, 27). Furthermore, it is possible to draw analogies with the legitimation principles of government discussed years earlier in Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762). Despite the differences, common to these schemes is both the *debt*<sup>8</sup> and the *gift*,<sup>9</sup> which launched the social through the reciprocity of bonds, the intersubjective field of recognition, and the cooperation towards a common goal. Collective identity and common memory are thus *magic* constructs that sustain the transindividual. As Malinowski writes in a note:

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- 7 In the words of Jean Rouch, the boundary between documentary and the fiction of the story being told is blurred, and becomes a method of acceding to the *real*, of understanding it, of fossilising gestures, expressions, clothes and techniques: “For me, as a filmmaker and ethnographer, there is practically no boundary between the documentary and the fiction film. Cinema, the art of the double, is already the passage from the world of reality to the world of the imaginary; and ethnography, the science of others’ thought systems, is a permanent crossing from one conceptual universe to another, acrobatic gymnastics where losing one’s own footing is the least of the risks.” (Jean Rouch apud. Gauthier 2002, 184)
- 8 See David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), in which, through archaeological anthropology, it is argued that debt arose historically before money, its medial correlate. His analysis goes back to Sumerian civilisation and its recorded debt inscriptions.
- 9 “This is therefore what one may have found at the conclusion of this research. Societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly, the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return.” (Mauss 1990, 105)

There can be no better expression to denote the mutual relation of all these ideas than that used by Frazer to describe one of the typical forms of magic thought, the ‘contagion of ideas.’ The subjective, psychological process leads the natives to the belief in magical contagion of things. (Malinowski 2014, 572)

James Frazer,<sup>10</sup> an influence in Malinowski’s anthropology, was not in the field. Malinowski was pursuing a new methodology and this required new “medial” strategies: he had to become deeply entangled in the ethnographic landscape of Melanesia to understand its modes of functioning, as accounted in the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Malinowski’s depiction of the daily life at Omarakana, in the Trobriand Islands, is clear about the immersive process at stake within his new method, that of participant observation:

Soon after I had established myself in Omarakana, I began to take part, in a way, in the village life, to look forward to the important or festive events, to take personal interest in the gossip and the developments of the small village occurrences; to wake up every morning to a day, presenting itself to me more or less as it does to the native. I would get out from under my mosquito net, to find around me the village life beginning to stir, or the people well advanced in their working day according to the hour and also to the season, for they get up and begin their labours early or late, as work presses. As I went on my morning walk through the village, I could see intimate details of family life, of toilet, cooking, taking of meals; I could see the arrangements for the day’s work, people starting on their errands, or groups of men and women busy at some manufacturing tasks. Quarrels, jokes, family scenes, events usually trivial, sometimes dramatic but always significant, formed the atmosphere of my daily life, as well as of theirs. It must be remembered that as the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed, or made self-conscious by my presence, and I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life which I was to study [...]. (Malinowski 2014, 37-38)

Through participant observation, ethnographers immerse themselves in the life of a particular techno-geographic-human reality. If *ethno-graph* means to write, transcript, record, and crystallise human memory, this has required — and requires still — highly medial tools made to store memory.

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10 In *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890), Sir James Frazer uses the concept of “Sympathetic Magic” to describe the ritualistic invocation where one thing/person/animal can allegorically acquire the properties of another. It is still a highly influential concept, also in arts and literature. In *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Francis Ford Coppola’s adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* was highlighted in the readings of the totemic Colonel Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando.

Digital media have updated the ethnographic approach. The obsession with the archive has led to the emergence of structures and platforms that house the stories, and some are being told interactively. However, the archive is more of a place of *consignation*<sup>11</sup> than a medium of transmission — and this implication lingers still within the digital transition.

“The archive does not tell stories; only secondary narratives give meaningful coherence to its discontinuous elements” (Ernst 2004, 48). This paper argues that a new chance for the storyteller arises in the archive as a *medium of memory*. Stories *store* — and are at the basis of the logic of identity production, the political, the economic, the psychosocial organisation of the group. We find this *art (qua technics)* of storytelling as a constant within the ever-evolving technical milieu of ethnographic tools.<sup>12</sup>

Anthropologist Paul Stoller, underlying the importance of storytelling in the ethnographic practice, recalls his conversations with Jean Rouch and the significance of the “valorisation of the ethnographic past in order to think about the ethnographic future.” As Stoller remarks, stories are “the narrative thread that connects past, present and future” (2017). In the case of the Kula, old stories were to be told prior to the ceremony. To activate memory means to activate action:

As is usual in such cases, months before the approximate date of sailing, plans and forecasts were made, stories of previous voyages were recounted, old men dwelt on their own reminiscences and reported what they had been told by their elders of the days when iron was unknown and everyone had to sail to the East in order to get the green stone quarried in Suloga on Woodlark Island. (Malinowski 2014, 269-270)

Life fades, but stories remain. This notion points to a fundamental political attitude — that action, whether technical action or a gesture that extends the activity of invention “produces stories,” as Hannah Arendt argued. An essential figure emerges: it is the storyteller “who understands and ‘makes’ the story.”<sup>13</sup>

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11 Cf. Jacques Derrida. 1996. *Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne*. Paris: Galilée

12 And a chance too for digital ethnography, functioning as a timekeeper of *récits de vie* in a ready-at-screen memory. Even the notion of *being present* can be radically different: ethnographers can be physically in *co-presence*, or *remotely* via Skype or any other channel, *virtually* in a 3D real-time game or even *imaginatively* through shared found-stories (Pink et al. 2016, 134).

13 “All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian’s hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness. What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story” (Arendt 1998, 192).

Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. (Arendt 1998, 192)

As we will see next, this medial character resides not only in the ethnographic tools, i.e., the medial objects that grant access to human “documents”, but also in the storyteller, who functions as *medium of exteriorized memory* of the stories that are being told.

## 2. Storytelling as Media of Exteriorized Memory

Through storytelling, we access a chain of time. It is the terrain where myths, allegories, parables, and other stories are told. The stories become knowledge when they are repeated and transmitted, these stories become knowledge. As described by Malinowski, one could almost listen old Ibena, the *storyteller*, he who is the medium that chains experiences, linking past to present:

Another hero of the occasion was old Ibena [...]. He has spent a long time on the island of Iwa, and knew the myths and magic of the Eastern archipelago very well. He would sit down and tell for hours various stories of famous Kula expeditions, of mythological incidents, and of the peculiar customs of the Eastern islands. [...], he would speak as if he had been there himself. At this time, he was specially loquacious about the Kula, and associated customs, inspired as he was by the hope of re-visiting his old haunts, and by the admiration and reverence shown to him by his listeners, myself included. (Malinowski 2014, 779)

For the delight of the listener, proverbs, parables, and other moral allegories function as media that chain time — or *heavy media*,<sup>14</sup> to use the terminology of Innis — and assemble a ruin “*which stands on the site of an old story and in which moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall.*” (Benjamin 2007, 108)

This notion of storytelling as a means of preventing life from fading in time is further explored through Walter Benjamin’s conception of the storyteller as a medium that connects the present to past experiences. In the essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov,” first published in 1936 in the magazine “Orient und Okzident”, Walter Benjamin recovers the figure of the storyteller as the link that connects the present to past experiences. The distinction between experience (*Erfahrung*) and lived experience (*Erlebnis*) is in the ability of the storyteller to bring a lived past into the present, however seeking the future applicability as a way to attain a group

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14 *Heavy media*, biased towards time, durable media, such as stone, clay, parchment, and the oral tradition that inscribed parables and myths, differ from *Light media*, non-durable, such as papyrus, paper, and electronics (Innis 2008).

transindividuation, a continuity consummated in the imaginary and through work:

What distinguishes long experience from immediate experience is that the former is inseparable from the representation of a continuity, a sequence. The accent that falls on immediate experience will be the more weighty in proportion as its substrate is remote from the work of the one having the experience — from the work distinguished by the fact that it draws on long experience precisely where, for an outsider, it is at most an immediate experience that arises. (Benjamin 2002, m 2a, 4)

This has been the way through which, originally, experiences were condensed into ideas, formulas, and objects that ought to be read hermeneutically as monuments — and “[a]ll religious, metaphysical, historical ideas are, in the last analysis, merely preparations derived from the great experiences of the past—representations of the experience.”<sup>15</sup>

Whether in craftsmanship, in maritime life, in rural labour, or at the workshop, “[e]xperience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn.” (Benjamin 2007, 84) This is all the more important when considering storytelling as the passage of technics — hence the importance that Benjamin ascribes to the storyteller, he who is not only a retrospective figure but also a *prospective one*. The storyteller, functions prospectively as a *medium of exteriorized memory*, allowing experience, both moral and technical experience, to be passed on to the future.

Stories are told to store memory. To illustrate this, we now turn to Benjamin’s essay “Experience and Poverty” (*Erfahrung und Armut*, from 1933). Sensing that the transmission of experience through storytelling is being lost, Benjamin begins telling a well-known parable from the schoolbooks of his time to underline the importance of the moral (and technical) legacy within stories:

Our childhood anthologies used to contain the fable of the old man who on his deathbed fooled his sons into believing that there was treasure buried in the vineyard. They would only have to dig. They dug, but found no treasure. When autumn came, however, the vineyard bore fruit like no other in the whole land. They then perceived that their father had passed on valuable piece of experience: the blessing lies in hard work and not in gold. Such lessons in experience were passed on to us, either as threats or as kindly pieces of advice, all the while we were growing up [...]. (Benjamin 1999a, 731)

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15 Benjamin cites this fragment extracted from *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* from Wilhelm Dilthey (Benjamin 2002, [m 3, 2]) Known for the “Quarrel of Methods” (*Methodenstreit*), Dilthey rejected the application of the epistemological model of the Natural Sciences, (*Naturwissenschaften*), dedicated to explain phenomena, to the Sciences of the Spirit (*Geisteswissenschaften*) at the basis of Humanities and Social Sciences, which advocates a hermeneutic reading that aims instead to understand (*verstehen*) the expressions (*Ausdruck*) that human experiences (*Erlebnis*) have crystallised into monuments — myths and parables included.



One key argument of Bernard Stiegler, steaming from Leroi-Gourhan's *Le geste et la parole* (1964-1965), is that human memory is technical since it is a process of exteriorization, moulding, and being reciprocally moulded, by an *associative milieu*<sup>16</sup> — or collective memory — that constantly establishes relations between individuals and their collective individuation. Being epiphylogenetic means that human memory is externalised and stored. Our hypotheses see in storytelling the combination of both anamnestic knowledge and hypomnesic retentions.

The ideas of philosopher Gilbert Simondon on transindividuation and Hannah Arendt's concept of action are particularly relevant in understanding the political implications of storytelling as a means of transmitting knowledge across generations.

Arendt's notion of work (*œuvre*) corresponds to Simondon's notion of technical objects (Loeve 2011, 2) — *œuvres* that are more "material" like architecture or more elusive like poems and stories.<sup>17</sup> The world is built around objects that are more durable than individual human lives. These objects, which include myths, proverbs, and allegories, provide access to immemorial stories that are themselves durable and measurable. This means that it is both "the product of epigenetic individual experience and the phylogenetic support of the accumulation of knowledge, constituting the intergenerational cultural phylum" (Stiegler 2007) — we comprehend how it refers to a knowledge operated in time, expressing itself in a state between generations, and how one era bequeaths material testimonies to the next in the form of objects (also gestures and practices materialised in objects, that may burst in storytelling). At stake is the political relevance of knowledge transmission as a process of technical individuation:

In this process of psychic and collective individuation, one can understand that its condition is that the linguistic milieu is that of permanent interlocution, that is, of the participation of all in the becoming of the linguistic milieu. This process is in its essence both psychical and collective: the speaker individuates herself, that is, transforms herself and becomes what she is, by the statements made, but these statements themselves contribute to the transformation of the language in which they are pronounced, precisely following the degree of individuation of the speaker herself. The psychic individuation of the speaker

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16 "There is no interiority that precedes exteriorisation, but to the contrary exteriorisation constitutes the interior as such, that is to say, distinguishes and configures it in the very course of what Leroi-Gourhan describes as a process of exteriorisation where this configuring distinction, which is constantly displacing itself, each time setting up new relations between the psychical individuals and the collective ones — new processes of the formation of psychical and social individuation, in the sense Gilbert Simondon confers to this expression while stipulating that memory is the "associated milieu" of this individuation." (Stiegler 2007)

17 "These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material." (Arendt 1998, 184)

is in the same movement the collective individuation constituting the shared language of the speakers, who constitute themselves in speaking. (Stiegler 2007)

As a symbolic exchange<sup>18</sup>, oral tradition, which emphasizes memory and training,<sup>19</sup> is a retention medium that assesses the validity of moral and technical experience over time. The notion of the transindividual extends beyond individuals who are contemporary with each other. It operates across time, influencing and connecting people across different historical periods. Preserving the memory of storytellers, ethnography undertakes an ontological inquiry not only on the nature of the linguistic exchange<sup>20</sup> but also on technical knowledge within works or *œuvres* — being it the texts, objects, instructions, and acts of invention.

Strong affinities are to be found between G. Simondon’s transindividual and Hannah Arendt’s action — both of their major works were published in 1958. Transindividuation will function as transgenerational retention of knowledge. As we will see next, this is the condition for its political relevance as it implies considering the stories, and its medium — the storyteller — as *œuvre*.

### 3. The Political Relevance of Storytelling as Knowledge Retention

Technologies are politically relevant; even foundational media such as the spoken word within stories is a *medium* of political action: how many political regimes have not cancelled words that, despite such efforts, resisted erasure. through mnemotechniques such as stories, music, and poetry? A real resistance is to be found in the mnemotechniques, as a function of culture acting through time. Jim Morrison, singer, songwriter, and poet, explains in these brief remarks how music and poetry function as media of exteriorized memory:

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- 18 “Language is in this respect consubstantially dialogical: speech is a symbolic exchange. This exchange constitutes a circuit wherein those who receive, in the form of words, a symbolic address, render what they have received in the form of other words, and to other receivers. In the same stroke, they participate in the transformation of language itself: in speaking they produce a process of individuation.” (Stiegler 2007)
- 19 “The oral tradition emphasized memory and training. We have no history of conversation or of the oral tradition except as they are revealed darkly through the written or the printed word”. (Innis 2008, 9)
- 20 Since the linguistic exchange is “enciphering and deciphering” it is “also an economic exchange which is established within a particular symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or a market), and which is capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit”. (Bourdieu 1991, 28)

As long as there are people, they can remember words and combinations of words. Nothing else can survive a holocaust but poetry and songs. No one can remember an entire novel. No one can describe a film, a piece of sculpture, a painting, but so long as there are human beings, songs and poetry can continue.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, with the collaboration of mnemotechniques such as sung words, a concert can be converted into a *political meeting*.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, no political regime has ever functioned without sequences of words, either in the form of commands, laws, or the management of bodies; but the technologies used by controlling apparatuses can be turned against them and serve to undermine their power as well. William Burroughs, an influential figure of the counterculture movement, demonstrated how recording, mixing, and transmitting — the core media components of *The Electronic Revolution* — function as open systems. In these systems, continuity can be disrupted by any interruption. The task resides, therefore, in the *Umfunktionierung*<sup>23</sup> of technologies. And thus, by providing a DIY technique, the cut/up,<sup>24</sup> Burroughs has shown how the human voice, once *duplicating the effects of a tape recorder*, is a weapon.<sup>25</sup> This happens because exteriorised memory is eminently political.

**21** Cf. Jim Morrison, [1969-1971] Self-interview, in *Wilderness: the lost poems of Jim Morrison*. Vol.1., New York: Vintage Books. 1989. P. 2.

**22** Walter Benjamin, in “The Author as Producer,” recalls Eisler’s Kampf Musik and the political capacity of media recombination enclosed in the sung word: The task, therefore, consisted of an *Umfunktionierung* of the form of the concert that had to fulfil two conditions: it had to eliminate the antithesis, first, between performers and listeners and, second, between technique and content. On this, Eisler makes the following illuminating observation: ‘One must beware of overestimating orchestral music and considering it the only high art. Music without words attained its great importance and its full extent only under capitalism’. This means that the task of changing the concert is impossible without the collaboration of the word. It alone can effect the transformation, as Eisler formulates it, **of a concert into a political meeting**. But that such a transformation does indeed represent a peak of musical and literary technique, Brecht and Eisler prove with their didactic play *Die Massnahme* [The Measures Taken].” (Benjamin 1999b, 776. Emphasis added)

**23** See previous note.

**24** DIY at its purest: “I suggest that the underground press could perform this function much more effectively by the use of cut/up techniques. For example, prepare cut/ups of the ugliest reactionary statements you can find and surround them with the ugliest pictures. Now give it the drool, slobber, animal noise treatment and put it out on the mutter line with recorders. Run a scramble page in every issue of a transcribed tape recorded cut/up of news, radio and TV. Put the recordings out on the mutter line before the paper hits the stand. It gives you a funny feeling to see a headline that’s been going round and round inside your head. The underground press could add a mutter line to their adverts and provide a unique advertising service. Cut the product in with pop tunes, cut the product in with advertising slogans and jingles of other products and siphon off the sales. Anybody that doubts that these techniques work has only to put them to the test.” (Burroughs 2005, 14-15)

**25** Consider now the human voice as a weapon. To what extent can the unaided human voice duplicate effects that can be done with a tape recorder? [...] Is it possible to actually scramble speech? A far-reaching biologic weapon can be forged from a new language. (Burroughs 2005, 33)

“Restrictions on political writing hastened the development of other types of literature such as the novel and children’s books and the establishment of circulating libraries,” as remarked by Harold Innis (2008, 56). Bertolt Brecht, in the context of his political engagement, took an interest in traditional literary genres such as stories. This is the case of the *Kalendergeschichten*, or almanac stories, which combine events with lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Johannes Hebel’s “Unexpected Reunion” is one such example that Walter Benjamin, under Brecht’s influence, references in his essay “The Storyteller”. Storytellers have a pedagogical impact — and the politically engaged Brecht was interested in the liberation of a particular class: the proletariat. He saw the potential of traditional storytelling forms to reach and educate the working class.

“The technical objects that produce the greatest alienation are those meant for ignorant users” — states Simondon in the conclusion of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (2017, 255). The cause of alienation is rendered clear at the factory where the “break between technical knowledge and the exercise of the conditions of use”<sup>26</sup> happens. But this thrives not only in the factory; the rationalisation<sup>27</sup> and specialization fostered by science and industry, and the consequent instrumentalisation of humans, is at stake in the clerk, in the tertiary service sectors and, as its extension, the consumer. This represents, as Stiegler puts it, *structural knowledge loss and structural memory loss*<sup>28</sup> — which facilitates the control of monopolies of knowledge (Innis 2008).

The problem of technical educability is deeply rooted in the loss of both knowledge and memory. Hyper-industrial grammatisation is, as Stiegler demonstrates (2007), the culmination of a long process of hypomnesia. Simondon was already aiming for the inadequate relationship of the operator because he operates without his technical gesture, i.e., without being a technical individual.<sup>29</sup> This happens because, at the basis of proletarianization, is the grammatisation of the technical gesture, which has split the roles of technical individual and auxiliary operator. Our question now becomes clear:

**26** “The fundamental alienation resides in the break occurring between ontogenesis of the technical object and the existence of this technical object. The genesis of the technical object must contain this attention to the continued genesis of the technical object.” (Simondon 2017, 255)

**27** In the “iron cage” (*Stahlhartes Gehäuse*), the rationalisation and secularisation of knowledge which has turned work and consumption into a psychopolitics of habituation — or the domestication of individuals in a teleological system constituted by the discourse of efficiency. Cf. Weber, Max. 2005. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Translated by Talcott Parsons. London & NY: Routledge. (Original work published in 1930)

**28** “And here one must ask if the industrial and massive development of mnemotechnologies does not represent a structural loss of memory. Just as the producer — whose gesture is reproduced, and whose know-how passes into the machine, which turns him or her into what is called a proletarian —, the consumer is divested of his *savoir-vivre*. (Stiegler 2007)

**29** “The definition of industry as technical objects bearing tools was identified as casting a malaise between humans and machines in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (2017). Henceforth, technical individuals such as machines were mistakenly perceived as threats or slaves. However, for Simondon, both of these antagonistic attitudes are deeply biased.

the task of the automated operator or clerk becomes incompatible with their role as storytellers. The impact of this loss of knowledge is felt not only in symbolic systems but also in technical ones.

To be transmitted, knowledge had to be retained — and one of the effects of industrialisation is precisely the limited access of the operator to technical knowledge. As Simondon explains, “a change that is too abrupt is contrary to technical progress, because it prevents the transmission, in the form of technical elements, of what an age has acquired to the one that follows” (2017, 71). The problem resides, therefore, in the passage of knowledge that was abruptly disregarded. This is a vulnerable passage because structural information can be lost — technical elements or tools require an exteriorised memory of technical knowledge in humans. The implications of the shifts of knowledge should therefore be the concern of an axiology.

For the craftsman to recognise his equivalent in the industrial modality, the same human being must be inventor, constructor and operator,” states Simondon in “Technical Mentality” (2012, 7). In the specialised and grammatised gesture, enclosed in fragmented and repetitive tasks, the human being at work is isolated from nature and from himself (Simondon 2012, 8) — and, thus, his role as a source of information has been suspended. This is how humans become isolated from memory:

And this not only generally and superficially but also by means of what, within the industrial organization of the production, has pushed to its extreme limits the specialized fragmentation of human information contribution: the rationalization of work through a series of methods of which Taylorism was the first. (Simondon 2012, 8)

Thus, performing “a weaker part of the total capacities of the human being” (Simondon 2012, 7), how can there be knowledge retention? At the workshop, stories were told. But *where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story?*<sup>30</sup>

The factory and tertiary sectors do not favour stories. Its milieu, promoting repetition, promotes hypomnesic tasks. The *workplace* was another kind of milieu; it is anamnesic because information was contained in the human actor. It was a place of stories because it is a *human environment* (Simondon 2012, 8). Finally, our interest is to recognise how the schemes of artisanal techno-aesthetic activities support action that retains technical knowledge. And, further on, how storytelling, preserving a psycho-social network through time, is a trans-generational scheme of technics that serve the trans-individual and therefore has pedagogical importance. Storytelling functions didactically when work techniques and work experience pass on through time. Storytelling, as a

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30 “[O]lder people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside. — Where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story?” (Benjamin 1999a, 731)

mnemotechnique, assists knowledge retention, that is, the *endurance* of knowledge. As Simondon argues, humans have the responsibility to overcome the antithesis between the artisanal modality and the industrial one — this is to say by means of a deepened educability oriented to knowledge retention.

In conclusion, we shall hypothesise that the storyteller’s knowledge is a way of accessing a technical past (of technical knowledge and of technical gestures). Storytelling, as a way of resisting the dismantling of traditional wisdom, has the political potential of deepening techniques. This endeavour presupposes a non-linear way of seeing the history of technical evolution. If technical mentality resides in what endures, the distinction between old and new technologies is misleading. Techniques can be recovered, enabling relationships between dispersed objects, aspiring to an in-depth technology, capable of inventing itself, which can “save technique by reaching the state of entelechy, of full realisation”, taking up and correcting lower stages, during which technics was still in its infancy.<sup>31</sup> As Parikka identifies in *What is Media Archaeology*, there are no dead media:

[...] a lot of dead media were actually zombie-media: living deads, that found an afterlife in new contexts, new hands, new screens and machines. In the globalized information cultures so often described in terms of speeding up and temporalities surpassing those of our human perceptual possibilities, a fascination also with the past seems to be emerging. (Parikka 2012, 3)

The criterion is openness, which Simondon recognises in the paradigmatic nature of Le Corbusier’s architecture. From *phanerotecnics* to the use of materials without a break between old and new, a technical mentality in the making can overcome the affective antinomy between craftsmanship and industry, reaching a post-industrial reticular state that can only be achieved by a voluntary impulse. Freeing the machines also means freeing them from the restraints of automatism, so that they are available to deepen their potential.

But this will require a profound cultural reform that restores the human connection to the technical object — a connection that was lost with the dissolution of position as a technical individual. This integration, still unachievable at the level of elements and individuals, is now possible at the level of technical assembles (Simondon 2017, 16-17). Simondon deals with this question with greater optimism in the third section of “Technical Mentality,” entitled “Voluntary Action: A Study of Norms,” where a technical

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31 Entelechy is a philosophical concept used by Simondon that refers to the realization or fulfillment of the inherent potential of something. The term comes from the ancient Greek word “entelecheia” (ἐντελέχεια) which means the condition of a thing having its end (telos) within itself. This consideration appears in a short essay from 1983 entitled *Trois Perspectives pour une Réflexion Sur L’Éthique et la Technique* (Simondon 2014, 340).

mentality “can be developed into schemes of action and into values, to the point of yielding a morality in human environments that are entirely dedicated to industrial production” (Simondon 2012, 8):

But in so far as these environments remain separated from the social field of the usage of products, in so far as they themselves remain fragmented into several specialized groups by their different functions of information contribution to machines — mastery, technicians, workers — they cannot elaborate a value code that is capable of becoming universal because they do not have the experience of technical reality as a whole. The technocratic attitude cannot be universalized because it consists of reinventing the world like a neutral field for the penetration of machines. (Simondon 2012, 8)

And thus, coming out of an “industrial gigantism” and into information networks,<sup>32</sup> *the factory rediscovers something of the workplace when it is transformed into a laboratory* (Simondon 2012, 9). This is a return to a “manageable dimension” — it is no longer individual as in the case of the artisanal modality, “but for the simultaneously collective and individual user — nature itself — that the laboratory anticipates a made-to-measure assemblage” (Simondon 2012, 9). And it is in this milieu, amid a workshop or laboratory, that the act of storytelling as knowledge retention might gain a deeper epistemological meaning. The networked nature of this laboratory life or milieu, aggregating all the entities that are socially embedded in the laboratory, its material and intellectual equipment, was the fieldwork of Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar in their contemporary ethnography *The Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, originally published in 1979.

The digital archive,<sup>33</sup> augmenting the space between documents, can assign *stories* to the documents it stores and an ethnographical account of technical gestures and knowledge can emerge within stories. As asserted by Simondon:

In light of this, one can establish the foundation of the analysis of the technics of a human group through the analysis of elements produced by its individuals and its ensembles: often these elements alone have the power to survive the downfall of a civilization, and remain valid witnesses of a state of technical development. In this sense, **the method of ethnologists is perfectly valid**; but one could prolong its application by equally analysing the elements produced by industrial techniques. (Simondon 2017, 76. Our emphasis)

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<sup>32</sup> But let’s not mistake information networks with communication and transport networks – Simondon says these later are “less pure” because “They do not succeed in revealing themselves in their true function.” (Simondon 2012, 10)

<sup>33</sup> Although a more comprehensive analysis of this subject would be beneficial, the constraints of this chapter required a concentrated emphasis on the political significance of narrative techniques.

Hence the importance of ethnographic tools which, due to their mediality, become retaining technologies for preserving knowledge and simultaneously making it available for the future.

The systematic use of digitalisation has promoted a networked society of “data providers” (human and non-human entities), presenting new opportunities for the aggregation, analysis, and correlation of cultural artefacts and documents. However, this also requires specialised museological, curatorial, and programming expertise to properly curate and interpret digital heritage. In the light of this, the figure of a digital curator becomes even more relevant. Embracing a different dynamic regarding the treatment of archives, digital ethnography<sup>34</sup> broadens, with newfound consistency, the stories of documents.

Yet, the digital archive functions more as a place of storage rather than transmission, and the differences among sound, image, and text become, for computers, software and algorithms, merely differences among data formats. This underscores the need for digital curation competencies to bridge the gap between the theoretical framework and the essential practical experience required to work with digitised cultural heritage. The digital transformation has profoundly impacted the Cultural Heritage sector, with the integration of digital technologies into the processes of data acquisition, management, and dissemination. This has led to the emergence of the role of the “Digital Curator.”<sup>35</sup>

We have been arguing that the storyteller is one of the basic constituents of a general organology.<sup>36</sup> Translating one’s life into a story is the *prepolitical* and *prehistorical* condition of history, as Arendt puts it.<sup>37</sup> With storytelling, narrativity becomes a model for transmitting information. But this condition of *action*, as an exercise of political

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**34** Emerging technologies and digital tools are exerting profound impacts, requiring the formulation of digital strategies and the development of new professional roles. These technological advancements, “in combination with the people who are involved in generating, documenting, and sharing a lived reality with these events and their meanings, they create a research site which is at once online and offline, and that requires different but relational forms of engagement with the stories embodied in participants and materials.” (Pink et al. 2016, 165)

**35** “The current profusion of databases, along with the convergence operated by the digital transformation, has been leading to a pervasive reformulation of the archival treatment and management, reshaping the institutional borders involved in the curatorial process. Widening the cultural authority that once guaranteed the sovereignty of both archive and of archivist to new practitioners (Collins 1995, 25), the digital transformation that changed the storability, the profusion of data and the transmission of Information in a digital heritage ecosystem, has led to the emergence of the figure of the digital curator.” (Patrício and Quattrini 2024, 2-6) This has been the aim of the DCBox Project, a research project exploring the role of the Digital Curator within the broader framework of equipping museum professionals with adaptive competencies.

**36** “A general organology, that is, a theory of the articulation of bodily organs, artificial organs and social organisations.” (Stiegler 2007)

**37** “That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end.” (Arendt 1998, 184)



freedom, can only arise in the space of common visibility that technics, as a system, open up and stabilise. Externalised memory can then function as resistance (political, economical, technical) to the dismantling of knowledge — or, to put it differently, knowledge retention has political relevance insofar as politics, defined by a group of humans defining a common destiny, is the core of transindividuation: hence the relevance of the storyteller, a singularity within an associated milieu who can introduce novelty in a network of relations.<sup>38</sup> This gains more relevance if we regard the digital transition as an opportunity for an effective technical encyclopaedism, one where the relevance of DIY becomes political, as a driving force, positive and creative, composed by many collaborators.<sup>39</sup>

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**38** “Action manifests the capacity of each human being to introduce novelty into the world in a condition of plurality. This ‘power of beginnings’ enables the revelation of the ‘who’, not to a ‘me’, but to another ‘who’. Linking appearance to speech, action is what makes a life *bios* and not just *zôe*: it can be recounted in a biography. Action consists of ‘who’ only in and through a ‘network of relations’ where ‘interests’ [*intérêts*] are made and unmade, in the etymological sense of *inter-esse* [inter- (between) + es- (to be)]: that which is between. (Loeve 2011, 3. Our translation)

**39** We follow Simondon’s understanding: “The Encyclopaedia was respectfully feared because it was moved by an enormous force, that of a technical encyclopedism, a force that had brought together powerful and enlightened protectors; this force existed by itself, because it responded to the needs of its time, more than political or financial reforms did; it was this force that was positive and creative, and which realized an equally remarkable assembly of researchers, editors, and correspondents by granting faith to this team composed of men who collaborated without being connected through social or religious communities; a great work had to be carried out. The greatness of the Encyclopaedia, its novelty, resides in the fact that its prints of schemas and models of machines, which are an homage to the trades and to the rational knowledge of technical operations, are fundamentally major.” (Simondon 2017, 110)

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**Biographical note**

Catarina Patrício (b. 1980) is a Visual Artist and Assistant Professor at ECATI, Lusófona University. She holds a Ph.D in Communication Sciences from FCSH-NOVA (2014), a MA in Anthropology of Social Movements from FCSH-NOVA (2008) and has an undergraduate degree in Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts University of Lisbon (2003). The Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) funded both her doctoral and post-doctoral research. Integrated researcher at CICANT — Center for Research in Applied Communication, Culture and New Technologies (DOI 10.54499/UIDB/05260/2020), she publishes essays and exhibits artwork regularly.

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**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**To cite this article**

Patrício, Catarina. 2024. “On the mediality of ethnographic tools: from field notebook to digital ethnography, storytelling as media of exteriorized memory.” *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* (60): 138-156. <https://doi.org/10.34619/ldxk-pyba>.

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**ORCID**

[0000-0002-1904-2775](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1904-2775)

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**CIÊNCIA ID**

[2318-6DDC-9A92](https://ciencia.id.ocp.gov.pt/2318-6DDC-9A92)

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**Institutional address**

Universidade Lusófona — Centro Universitário Lisboa. Campo Grande 376, 1749-024 Lisboa, Portugal.

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**Received** Recebido: 2024-02-05**Accepted** Aceite: 2024-07-26

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