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THE PHONOGRAPH AS A NON- PHILOSOPHICAL MACHINE

From Representation to the Reproduction of the *Unimaginable Real*

ABSTRACT

By addressing the sound recording technology's capabilities in catching its objects, this article presents a materialist theoretical ground, connecting François Laruelle's understanding of immanence in his non-philosophy to Friedrich Kittler's technomaterialism that employs three fundamental recording technologies. As Kittler inquires in his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* in depth, the phonograph is the only recording technology that is able to catch its object as it is, without transferring it into any semiotic system that is essentially different from it. It is the sound recording technology's ability that distinguishes it from the other two recording

technologies and the very reason to design a materialist approach to sonic thinking. Ultimately, the theoretical inquiries given by a non-philosopher and a media theorist will give us a new base for sonic thinking and pave the way for various possibilities to approach the reality of sounds and their relationship with technology. The article suggests that non-philosophy finds its very performance in the practice of the phonograph.

KEY WORDS: François Laruelle, Friedrich Kittler, media archeology, non-philosophy, recording technology

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INTRODUCTION

A screaming comes across the sky.

—Thomas Pynchon

Whatever the reason, while listening “through” the acoustical stereoscope, we are confronted by the “real thing,” by the real Tristan music or the real Bruckner symphony. Not providing us with an “ersatz,” our acoustic arrangement has a far higher art value, than the optical device.

—Gunther Anders

Let there be light, said the Western God after the void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. It is this very light with the claim of enlightening all corners of the world, and the ‘eye’ from the West, that illuminated the universe and determined the principles of the world; and yet, in the beginning was the vibration, and the vibration was with the God. Is that which was enlightened by God’s light in the world that we are after? Are we left with any other possible way to sense the vibration of the world? “No light has ever seen the black universe,”² Laruelle announces; then which way can the things abandoned in the “shadows” reach? It may be plausible to suggest that putting an end to the hierarchy of the ‘vision’ can pave the way for producing a new kind of knowledge. The silence of the invisible reveals itself in sound, and contemporary thinkers, concerned with comprehensiveness, must eventually pay attention to the *word as soundful*.³

To suggest a robust approach within sound studies, I will firstly discuss and criticize the supremacy of the sense of seeing in the history of ideas, and introduce a number of sound studies theories as an opposition to the hierarchical visualist tradition. Then, I will attempt to construct a certain ‘sonic thinking,’ suggesting that François Laruelle’s non-philosophy that tries to expand philosophy’s boundaries beyond philosophical knowledge, and Friedrich Kittler’s techno-deterministic media archeology which draws on the Lacanian structure, can provide a theoretical ground for such thinking. I will attempt to claim that Kittler’s phonograph performs as a machine in the same way in which Laruelle’s non-philosophy operates.

² Laruelle François, and Robin Mackay, *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 404.

³ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University Of New York Press, Cop., 2007), 3-4.

VISUALISM AND THE ACOUSTIC TURN

Theoretical frameworks grounded in visualism⁴ demand careful scrutiny in contemporary scholarship. The optic-centric way of thinking that prevails in historical analyses places seeing in a privileged position above all other senses. The deep-rooted tradition of visualism in Ancient Greece, which was at the center of the Greek experience of reality, is one of the main influences behind the continuity of this idea in human history.⁵ In the etymology of Greek language, the word *eidomai* was used to express both ‘seeing’ and ‘knowing,’ just as the Greek verb for ‘to live’ also means ‘to behold light.’⁶ In the history of Western philosophy, there have been many philosophers who followed the visualist cultural tradition. As Martin Heidegger reveals in his brilliant questioning of Being, the Greek philosophical tradition unfolds “as the process of allowing Being to ‘show forth’ as the ‘shining’ of physis, of the ‘manifestation’ of Being as a ‘clearing,’ all of which recalls the vibrant vision of Being.”⁷ Vision has therefore been used as the fundamental metaphor for thought and perception, undoubtedly preserving its place at the top of the hierarchy of senses. To challenge the dominant visualism in Western philosophical tradition is not to accuse it of being unproductive or to dismiss it altogether. However, it is a warning against the reduction of the rich experience of all the senses to a single sense, and an attempt to draw attention to the acoustic turn emerging through the technological processes.

As Wolfgang Ernst emphasizes, the rise of techno-mathematical media that have brought the “technically augmented sonospheres” in an *acoustic turn* necessitates us to improve our cultural analysis tools that stemmed from the aesthetics of photography in the form of the “cold gaze.”⁸ To disrupt the traditional narrative that projects the “cold gaze,” one of the central aims of sound studies is to challenge the deep-rooted privilege of the “eye” in the field of cultural studies. For that purpose, to think sonically does not necessarily require any “light” pre-determined by any tradition; to sense the vibrations of the universe sonically, both in the sense of science and art, stands as a critical investigation asserting a non-hierarchical mapping of the senses against the dominance of the optic-centric paradigm. As will be elaborated later, unlike the relation between visuals/images and the technological apparatus of the camera, the technological device of the phonograph/sound recording does not fabricate representations of sonic events or moments but only reproduces ‘the Real’ as it is—through the sound recording process in which the sound vibration waveforms are captured and recorded in the machine. Without instigating changes in the captured

⁴ “Visualism” refers to privileging vision over other means of sensory perception. For a more detailed review, see Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 6-10.

⁵ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 2007), 6.

⁶ Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 7.

⁷ Ihde, 6.

⁸ Wolfgang Ernst and Jussi Parikka, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis and London: University Of Minnesota Press, 2013), 24-25.

materials, the purpose of the sound recording is to “not fix sound, all it can do is to re-actualize it on demand, which is something entirely different.”⁹ Upon relating to the environment not as legible but audible,¹⁰ and by including inaudible sounds, one might sense that they are surrounded with sound waves or vibrations. In 1950s, acoustic engineer Frederick Vinton Hunt asserted that “Man lives in an uneasy ocean of air continually agitated by the disturbances called sound waves.”¹¹ This claim has since motivated many scientists, artists, and sound studies scholars, but despite the understanding that sound waves and acoustic energy in the environment play a compelling role not only for thinkers working with concepts, but also for scientists who research materiality, sonic approaches have not so far received the necessary attention. In contemporary scholarship, various minor approaches are being developed to unfold new ways of perception of the world. McLuhan heralded sixty years ago that, “aural had displaced the visual as a result of new communication technologies and media shifts,”¹² setting the scene for the importance of sonic-oriented theories and studies.

The interest of media archeology in inaudible sounds, vibrations and the epistemological importance of sound is to be emphasized. “Acoustic space” is a term coined by McLuhan to explain sound as the epistemological ground of electronic media.¹³ His pioneering media-archeological explorations define sonic approaches as not only limited to music or sounds that can be heard by humans but encompassing inaudible events that happen in vibrational (analog) and rhythmic (digital) fields.¹⁴ As Ernst explains in *Sonic Time Machines: Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity*, “acoustic space” indicates the electromagnetic field where electronic communication media operate and evolve; it is “the chrono-epistemological background of electronic communication.”¹⁵ According to this, sound exists implicitly in electronic technologies regardless of whether they are electronic media, video or sound technology. Sound as mechanical vibration that propagates acoustic waves through the transmission medium is what makes electronic communication media physically possible. Thus, the ontological primacy of sound gained a more solid ground with the advent of electronic communication. Bill Viola presciently states that “video camera, as a transducer into electrical impulses of varying light input, bears a closer original relation to the microphone than to the film camera”¹⁶ because of its vibrational acoustic nature. All video images are composed of an electronic beam that is rooted in nothing other but acoustics. The substance that generates sound through a sound system which converts

⁹ François J. Bonnet, *The Order of Sounds a Sonorous Archipelago* (Oxford: Urbanomic Media Ltd., 2016), 7.

¹⁰ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 3.

¹¹ Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), XI.

¹² Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, XI.

¹³ Wolfgang Ernst, *Sonic Time Machines: Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 14-15.

¹⁴ Ernst, *Sonic Time Machines*, 22.

¹⁵ Ernst, 29.

¹⁶ Micah Lexier and Dan Lander, *Sound by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1990), 44.

voice over the telephone, and materializes an image on a television set, is essentially the same on a material level.¹⁷

“Acoustic space” can be thought in relation to Ernst’s term “sonicity.” As Ernst depicts, the definition of sonicity is derived from media archeology which presents us the sonic nature of electronics as, on the one hand, “sonic knowledge that is implicit within instruments of sound analysis and synthesis, and, on the other, graphically or mathematically derived sound.”¹⁸ As media archeology explains, “the signal regeneration of television or computer images on a CRT monitor is a form of implicit sonification, since the electromagnetic waves emanating from such transduction can easily be detected by an aptly tuned radio receiver.”¹⁹ These technological operations are just a few examples of the implicit sonicity, which is more than the audible sounds to be heard by humans, in electronically-mediated technologies.

I cannot stress enough the importance of positing that sound does not consist only of phenomena that a human can hear—the human without the ability to hear all the ranges of sound but merely a limited version of it—and yet, everything can be affected or transformed by these waves even if they are nowhere to be seen or heard. Sonic theory covers a very wide field of study that is fundamentally focussed on vibration, which cannot be reduced to human listening abilities or perceptible and audible sounds. The AUDINT group has proposed the notion of ‘unsound’ for investigating inaudible and imperceptible vibrational continuum and frequencies that emerge through recording and communications technologies:

From high-frequency crowd control systems, whispering windows, and directional ultrasound technology to haptic feedback devices using vibration within immersive VR, the parameters of the sonic are constantly reengineered. We refer to such augmentations, which extend audition to encompass the imperceptible and the not-yet or no-longer audible, as unsound. The term refers not only to what humans cannot hear, but also to non-cognitive, inhuman phenomena connected to the unknown, including the hum, hyperrhythmia, and auditory hallucinations.²⁰

The ability of vibration to transform entities even if it is imperceptible or inaudible, and the sonic approaches to vibration that can capture this, should play a critical role in scholarship. Sound is a vibration that flows as an acoustic wave through various media and is capable of impacting them whether we realise it or not. What can then sonic theory and sound recording machines teach us about both our environment and the world that is otherwise imperceptible? As McLuhan indicates, we live in an environment in which, beyond our control, we hear sounds everywhere and “the ear favors no particular ‘point of view.’ We are enveloped by sound. It forms a seamless web

¹⁷ Lexier and Lander, *Sound by Artists*, 49.

¹⁸ Ernst, 26.

¹⁹ Ernst, 29.

²⁰ Steve Goodman, Toby Heys, and Eleni Ikoniadou, *Unsound: Undead* (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media and MIT Press, 2019), 1.

around us.”²¹ It comes from every direction, and it is not possible to escape its influence. In addition, the world we live in does not contain just audible waves but inaudible frequencies that deeply affect our relationship with the material world. Vibration artist Mark Bain defines the earth’s invisible but always active “inaudible pulsing” as “screamingness of the earth,” in his art piece in which he used the seismological data recorded during the September 11th attacks for a musical composition.²² The vibrations, rather than audible and inaudible sounds, can be seen as communication with the material world that does not speak but vibrates. This strongly indicates that we should engage deeply with both audible and inaudible sounds, with waves and vibrations, in our theoretical investigations. How could such body of literature and practices challenge the human who approaches the world based on an image of thought?

BUILDING A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR SONIC THINKING: KITTLER AND LARUELLE

How is one to design sonic thinking? To put it schematically, let us think of it as an amalgam of sound and thought. Should we keep any conceptual difference between the two, it would be unimaginable to grasp how sonic thinking functions. The two do not belong to different realities or natures; on the contrary, they both are material that produces vibrations. Just as the material nature of sound, thought does not refer to any transcendental reality beyond materiality. The operation of sonic thinking entails capturing the vibrations produced by sound and thought as acoustic events. In an attempt to examine the ways in which sonic thinking can capture vibration through technology, I turn to the experiment conducted as part of Kittler’s investigations of technology. Kittler claims that “*Real has the status of the phonograph*,”²³ suggesting that an event can be recorded by a phonograph without transposing it into any semiotic order. Therefore, I suggest that the Laruellian immanence, which completely embraces the reality of the material world and rejects the idea of any transcendent realm beyond material existence, can be observed in the Kittlerian manner of discovery through technology and in his *media materialism*.²⁴ The question still remains, why pay attention to ‘vibrations’ rather than ‘observe the world?’ The answer is evident in Kittler’s technological examination of phonography. As Kittler strongly suggests, the phonograph is the only recording technology that captures sound phenomena as they are. It is technologically distinguished from other recording technologies “as an

²¹ Quentin Fiore and Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Bantam, 1967), 111.

²² Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2012), 77.

²³ Friedrich A. Kittler and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 16.

²⁴ Nicholas Gane, “Radical Post-Humanism: Friedrich Kittler and the Primacy of Technology,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 3 (2005): 25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405053718>.

inscription into the real,”²⁵ and excludes itself from producing representation since, “only the phonograph can record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning.”²⁶ By remaining excluded from visuals and linguistic symbols, “it registers acoustic events as such”²⁷ and is able to capture vibrations and reproduce sounds. Voice transmission is here positioned not as representation of recorded voice and its material reality, but “as identical with the human voice itself,”²⁸ since it operates without transferring the source to another technological dimension or creating any meta- or symbolic position, but simply converts sound wave as invisible vibrations into an electric signal. Following this line of thinking, the phonograph emerges as the only possible way to capture the real, which is an insight that might pave the way for sonic thinking. Such thinking would give attention to vibration in the manner that Bachelard indicates when he writes, “Being does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself.”²⁹

Before moving on to linking Laruelle’s materialist and non-ontological immanence with Kittler’s techno-materialism, it is essential to introduce materialistic thought in more detail. Materialist philosophy positions itself in the existence of material world, i.e., the world that exists independently of our minds, and as such is not constructed by the human mind. As Manuel DeLanda writes, materialism assumes that the world is not constituted by our minds or our cognitive categories but that “all objective entities are products of a historical process, that is, their identity is synthesized or produced as part of cosmological, geological, biological, or social history.”³⁰ Materialist approaches refuse speculative and ideal realms that are alleged to be distinct from the material world, since these conceptualizations posit a transcendental realm which conceptually determines the material one. For materialist thought, “The antithesis of a real and an apparent world is lacking here: there is only one world.”³¹ Evidently, there have been various materialist perspectives in the history of ideas; however, for sonic thinking, Laruelle’s immanence which restricts itself to ‘pure’ materiality will be of great significance. I wish to suggest that Laruelle’s non-philosophy may find its application in sonic thinking’s ability to capture the Real through the phonograph since it rejects the speculative realm of philosophy and restricts its scope to materialist practices. Considering Kittler’s analysis of the phonograph and its interaction with materiality, sonic thinking could be understood as an application of non-philosophy. Parallel with the aims of non-philosophy, sonic thinking is immanent to material world through technology and has the ability to capture the Real as it is

²⁵ Stephen Sales and Laura Salisbury, *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2015), 15.

²⁶ Friedrich A. Kittler and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Gramophone*, 16.

²⁷ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 23.

²⁸ Wolfgang Ernst, 85.

²⁹ Gaston Bachelard and Maria Jolas, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 215.

³⁰ Manuel DeLanda, “Interview with Manuel DeLanda,” in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, ed. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 39.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, R. J. Hollingdale and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 451.

through recording the event. To see how this unfolds, we will first consider how Laruelle's radical immanence functions.

FRANÇOIS LARUELLE'S HORIZONTAL (NON-)ONTOLOGY FOR SONIC THINKING

To think sonically is a practice that considers sound and thought as vibrations, thereby enabling us to imagine them as intertwined at the same level inasmuch as they are no longer presented as separate entities. I suggest that this approach is very much in accordance with Laruelle's immanence that provides a convenient framework to grasp all entities at the same equalized level.³² This is a required condition to design a theoretical ground that treats all forms of thinking horizontally. Such an approach will provide us with a plane to investigate technology as well—in our case, an investigation of sound recording technology due to its ability to capture acoustic events as they are. Laruelle's immanence also renders possible a Kittlerian analysis of media as it approaches diverse fields without treating them as conceptually distinct. In concordance with Laruelle, Kittler asserts that “Engineers and the avant-garde think alike;”³³ they do not engage with different realities but with nothing other than materiality. Additionally, the word ‘Techne,’ traced back to its Greek roots, refers to both art and technics simultaneously. Yuk Hui rightly asks, what the “and” implies when we mention “art and technology. What does it mean to say that art uses technology?”³⁴ Is there really a distinction between the two? Can we think of art without considering its technology? Is there any possible way to do science without artistic thinking? These questions assume a conceptual difference between the two; the one possible way to rethink this is to grasp sound and thought in a flattened immanence, or in Laruellian vocabulary, as *the One*.

With a conceptual differentiation between sonic world and the world of thought, it would not be imaginable to sense how sonic thinking functions. Therefore, what makes sonic thinking possible is its opposition to this differentiation. As far as Laruelle is concerned, to think an immanence that restricts itself to the material world is only possible by excluding the speculative and logical structures of philosophy, which has assumed and followed its own categorical principles throughout history. For him, following those concepts regardless of any acceptance or opposition, distanced philosophy from materiality. Laruelle's radical immanence, the Real/One, is one that is liberated from the determination of philosophy. Laruellian *the Real as One* is foreclosed to philosophical speculations and “mediates and re-structures the passage of

³² “In this democracy of thinking, all thought is equalized when regarded as raw material for non-philosophy, that is, as part of the Real, or ‘One’ (as it is also called), rather than as ‘representations’ of it.” For a more detailed reading on the democracy of thinking, see John Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

³³ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 46.

³⁴ Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotronics* (New York: e-flux, 2021), 50.

phenomena vis-à-vis its own internal structure.”³⁵ Such an undivided immanence that is immanent to itself does not allow for any infinite dyads (Being and beings, one and multiple) but relies on its *non-ontological*³⁶ character or its *indifference* to dyads of philosophy such as being and thought.³⁷ Laruelle’s radical immanence of *the One* opens a way to bring democracy that flattens all abstract hierarchies in thought and practices, and liberates itself from the speculative labyrinths that codify the Real.³⁸ In our analysis, the phonograph will operate as the machine that always keeps sonic thinking in the material world; thus, sonic thinking manages to distance itself from the determination of philosophy and becomes a non-philosophical performance.

In non-philosophy, all thoughts are equalized³⁹ to the flattened ground in order to comprehend all fields such as technology, art, and science, at the same level without any exclusionary positioning. Non-philosophy is placed against philosophy’s governing authority and a non-philosophical approach ensures a ground for theory that does not take any particular disciplinary basis. Non-philosophy presents a ground that is against the onto-logical structure of philosophy, “the oldest prejudice”⁴⁰ which produces theoretical hegemonies stemming from its own assumptions and self-affirmations by its own “decisional character.” From Laruelle’s standpoint, philosophy’s decisional character is structured in a way that governs thought while philosophizing, and it is this characteristic which is the problematic aspect of philosophy. As Laruelle argues, it restricts thought to the monopoly of philosophy. This attribute is imperceptible for philosophers since “it is philosophy’s hyper-reflexivity that prevents it from identifying its own decisional form.”⁴¹ Additionally, it is constitutive of philosophy that it directs thought in accordance with its own governing principles. As opposed to this philosophical attitude, Laruellian non-philosophy proposes a non-standard theory that positions itself not in “the World”⁴² of philosophy, which is the image of the world in the

³⁵ Ekin Erkan, “Laruelle Qua Stiegler: On Non-Marxism and the transindividual,” *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* 16, no. 1-2 (2019): 49. <https://doi.org/10.51151/identities.v16i1-2.372>.

³⁶ For discussions on *non-ontological*, see, for example, “in the One, then in the nous as non-thetic-Transcendence and non-decisional-Position, in what could be called the non-ontological experience of Being,” in: François Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 67.

³⁷ Laruelle François, Nikola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith, *Principles of Non-Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 21.

³⁸ John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith, *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 45.

³⁹ For discussions on democracy of theory, see, for example, “It is not a theoretical democracy—which would leave what counts as “theory” alone—but the “democracy of theory itself,” in: John Ó. Maoilearca, *All Thoughts Are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 3.

⁴⁰ François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth and New York: Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2011), 123.

⁴¹ Ray Brassier, “Axiomatic Heresy: The Non-Philosophy of François Laruelle,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 121 (2003): 25. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/axiomatic-heresy>.

⁴² For further discussions, see, “World,” religious lived experiences which are gripped by Christic experience are integrated, like philosophy, in a broader experience of the World as potentially philosophizable.” Jeremy R. Smith, “Translation of François Laruelle, “The

eyes of philosopher, but in the radical immanence of “Non-Parmenidean Equation” Practice = Thought, or “the (non)relation of theory and practice.”⁴³ It does not define itself as anti-philosophy nor does it claim the end of philosophy, since the very claim itself would necessitate doing philosophy. On the contrary, it is a theoretical project that aims to expand philosophy’s scope. ‘*Non*’ does not indicate a negative philosophy; instead, in a very positive sense, it is the savior of philosophy that has limited its scope. Its very invention is to transform philosophy into “the practico-theoretic ‘science’ of non-philosophy”⁴⁴ that operates within a broader paradigm of materialistic immanence. It gains its power from immanence that is immanent to itself and restricted to materiality. This neutralized and flattened immanence that experimentally creates various ways of thinking finds its profound or desired model in the musical.⁴⁵ Musicality can be interpreted as a phenomenon that exists on such a groundless ground that it does not have any structures that restrict its freedom; but it must be noted that to think sonically is no doubt broader than the concept of musicality. This would entail sonic thinking which engages with vibrations and technology without limiting itself neither to philosophy nor to music but, in a broader sense, as Laruelle depicts it in *Tétralogos*, is about “making music with concepts,” i.e., beyond all categorical differentiations.⁴⁶ At this point, sound-recording technologies that capture sound vibrations may provide us with such a non-representative and materialist ground to grasp the world and its future.

FRIEDRICH KITTLER’S PHONOGRAPH THAT CAPTURES THE REAL

Analyzing Guyau, a philosopher of the phonograph,⁴⁷ Kittler indicates that there is no philosopher that excludes themselves from the delusions of the tradition that they follow; however, Guyau was one who was aware of “the unconscious mnemonic capabilities of the phonograph”⁴⁸ and its ability to capture the unconscious. As Kittler discusses, following Guyau, the phonograph is not interested in tracing or following any traditional conceptualization or transferring data into any semiotic system that

World as Mystic-World,’ in *Mystique Non-Philosophique à l’Usage Des Contemporains* (2007),” *En-Demic*, July 12, 2021, <https://endemictheory.wordpress.com/2021/07/11/translation-of-francois-laruelle-the-world-as-mystic-world-in-mystique-non-philosophique-a-lusage-des-contemporains-2007/>.

⁴³ Sven Låwen, “Another Beginning of Philosophy is Possible: Towards a Democratic and Disruptive History of Systems of Thought,” *Oraxiom: A Journal of Non-Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2020): 127.

⁴⁴ Keith Tilford, “Review of Generalized Transformations and Technologies of Investigation Laruelle, Art, and the Scientific Model,” *Superpositions: Laruelle and the Humanities*, ed. Rocco Gangle and Julius Greve, 139–55 (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), 139.

⁴⁵ François Laruelle, *Theory of Identities*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), XII.

⁴⁶ François Laruelle, *Tétralogos: Un Opéra de Philosophies* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2018), 593.

⁴⁷ Jean-Marie Guyau is a French philosopher who treats the phonograph “as the only suitable model for visualizing the brain or memory.” See Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 30-33.

⁴⁸ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 33.

leads to systematization.⁴⁹ On the contrary, it is grounded solely in materiality, the vibrations of the event per se. Sonic thinking seeks a way to think sonically without limiting itself to theorization of sound, music or writing, and regardless of which realm, medium, or technology is used. It is very useful to correlate Laruellian radical immanence that is ‘purely’ material with Kittler’s ‘techno-materialism’ to grasp how sonic thinking functions. As Kittler examines in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*; before the invention of optical and acoustic recording technologies, the only available recording technology was writing. Writing was the only possible recording medium to transmit information since it was not possible to capture any visual or sonic information prior to the technological inventions of the phonograph and film. The inventions of phonograph and film separated the information types and brought an end to the monopoly of writing in recording technologies.⁵⁰ Optical and acoustic information became individual entities.

Not only did such technologies create two realms but writing also transformed in accordance with these inventions. As Kittler discusses in reference to psychoanalysis and its compatibility with recording technologies, the imaginary realm that constructed the world of fantasies mapped onto the cinema, whereas the symbolic realm was seen to be composed of linguistic signs and a reduced form of the unconscious.⁵¹ However, as Kittler strongly claims, the phonograph has different abilities compared to the film and the typewriter since it is competent enough to reproduce *unimaginable real*.⁵² We can think of the phonograph’s abilities in terms of Laruellian non-philosophy and *the One*, and argue that the phonograph is one of the practitioners of Laruelle’s non-philosophy. It performs its recording act and captures *the Real/the One* as it is, in ‘pure’ material sense without transferring it to any linguistic system. To examine how the phonograph can record acoustic events as such, consider a person watching a scene standing next to the cinematographer—what they see will be strictly different from the recording of the camera. The person can easily observe that the recording does not match their perspective because the camera has its own perspective. The camera is not able to capture the event as such, but it selects a certain pose, angle, light, etc. In addition, the visual data is reduced to a two-dimensional printed version of the ‘real.’ It limits and represents the event on its own terms; however, the sound produced in a concert and the recording of it are not different at all. The event is captured as it is because sound recording technologies impose no limitations while recording, but allow the sound to flow through the recorder rather than apply a selection process to it. Vibrations do not wait to be captured by a recorder or human but invade the phonograph themselves.

⁴⁹ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 33.

⁵⁰ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 14.

⁵¹ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 16.

⁵² Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 22.

FÉLIX GUATTARI'S TAPE RECORDING WHICH TOUCHES THE SCHIZOPHRENIC REALM THAT IS THE REAL

To elaborate more on the phonograph's ability to capture the *unimaginable real*, as declared by Kittler drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Félix Guattari's case of R. A. can be given as a good example to grasp the relation between the phonograph and the schizophrenic state that is the Real in Lacanian vocabulary. R. A. was a patient who rejected all forms of sociality ranging from speaking with people to participating in dinner events and meetings in the La Borde clinic. Dr. Oury and Félix Guattari came to the conclusion that the case required a special psychotherapeutic technique to recover the patient's social skills.⁵³ R. A. agreed and Guattari decided to record their dialogue using a tape recorder. Thanks to the tape recorder, Guattari created a therapy session that "was then as if a third person had appeared in the room."⁵⁴ The use of the tape recorder made it possible for R. A. to hear his own voice, which gave rise to reestablishing his social relationships. As Guattari reports, listening to his own voice led him to reconstruct his identity. R. A. became aware of his own existence by hearing his own voice and "the opposition that he had turned against the world, the "what?," "huh?," etc., he now turned against himself."⁵⁵ Lacan similarly describes this in *The Mirror Stage* as identification, the first encounter and primordial recognition of the subject with its own 'I.' An infant of 6-18 months of age comes across their own 'visual' appearance in front of the mirror which "characterizes the ego in all its structures."⁵⁶ As Guattari constructs an analogy between R. A. hearing his own voice and a baby seeing its own image in the Lacanian mirror, I suggest that hearing one's own voice and seeing one's own image are not one and the same thing, i.e., there is a difference between R. A.'s case and the mirror stage. That difference can be grasped from the perspective of sonic thinking, which is opposed to the hierarchy of the eye. Lacan states that "the mirror stage is . . . visual Gestalt of his own body," i.e., the visual that baby sees represents their own "ideal unity, a salutary imago."⁵⁷ However, I wish to suggest there is an important distinction between seeing one's own image in the mirror that creates a representation, and hearing one's own voice on the tape recorder that has a non-representational and irreducible character. The tape recorder that records R. A.'s voice captures R. A.'s voice as it is since it is able to capture and reproduce the exact sound waves of the voice, not an image of it, without transferring them into another physical and technological dimension. That is what makes it possible to connect to R. A. as being in a 'schizoid state,' which corresponds to the Real in Lacanian framework. In the case

⁵³ Félix Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews 1955-1971* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015), 36.

⁵⁴ Guattari, 37.

⁵⁵ Guattari, 38.

⁵⁶ Jacques Lacan, Alan Sheridan, and Malcolm Bowie, *Écrits: A Selection* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 5.

⁵⁷ Lacan, 15.

of R. A., the imaginary realm where the ego is constructed in the mirror would not be helpful to fully grasp R. A.'s situation, but rather positioning him as 'schizophrenic' and within the realm of the Real that 'has the status of phonography,' through the voice and tape recorder. As we see in this case, audio recording has the ability to capture the unconscious that "coincides with electric oscillations,"⁵⁸ and gives us the possibility to connect with the patient's mind, allowing him to hear his own voice and recover his sociality. Thus, regarding the case of R.A and Guattari's treatment with tape recording, we could thus argue that the phonograph has ability to connect to the schizophrenic state, the Real in Lacanian three stages of identity, which is the structure that Kittler's technological thinking is grounded in.

PHONOGRAPH INSTEAD OF HUMAN EAR FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF SONIC EVENTS

The human ear is not completely excluded from the selection processes of consciousness since it is biased by various affects that challenge the accuracy of research in a media archaeological approach. However, materialist theories must keep this biased position at bay in order to conduct a non-human centric study which is operated by machines themselves. As Kittler carefully depicts, the phonograph as a recording machine does not hear like ears that have been trained to filter out sounds through their biases.⁵⁹ In researching sonic events in which sounds as physical vibrations are investigated through a media archeological approach by focusing on the technical functions of machines, the phonograph emerges as the main conductor of the study. As Ernst indicates, "sonic perception with media-archaeological ears is functionally related to sound technologies that go beyond the classic Pythagorean mode of listening."⁶⁰ The phonograph's listening activity is the main agent of media archeological study, which desists human-centric perspectives that do not put machines at the center of their study. To propose a sonic theory, which focuses on the technical functions of machines, the ear must indeed give way to the phonograph/sound recording technology itself that goes beyond *non-Pythagorean*⁶¹ listening. As Kittler suggests, "Phonographs do not think, therefore they are possible."⁶² The phonograph as a non-thinker and unbiased researcher in media-archeological projects, would be exempt from historical prejudice by operating through materiality itself, and not through representations of it. □

⁵⁸ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 89.

⁵⁹ Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 23.

⁶⁰ Ernst, 44-45.

⁶¹ Ernst, 45.

⁶² Kittler and Winthrop-Young, 33.

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