

A Lecture on Transcription

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Today I would like to talk about transcription, from a personal perspective. As a writer and a musician, transcription has been an important tool in my professional life. I have had to transcribe tapes of interviews of tapes that I've conducted, read transcripts of interviews that people have done with me, and read my own writing aloud, which I'd only meant to be read silently. I've also transcribed particular instrumental solos and learned how to play other ones through transcriptions. Transcription is a valuable resource for documentation and dissemination, but the challenge is in capturing the nuances of speech, or sound, in notation; often the differences can make the transcription and the original speech or performance almost mutually exclusive.

During the interview, he [John Cassavetes] stopped suddenly and said, "This isn't going well," and I said, "Trust me, I see your words as printed sentences as you're saying them, and this is going very well."

—Michael Ventura, *Cassavetes Directs* (2008)

In writing profiles of musicians and artists, for the British music periodical the *WIRE* and other magazines, I have often interviewed them, then transcribed the tape and used quotes for the article or had the interview printed as a Q & A. Audiotape as a transcription device presents certain issues—that certain things may have been more audible during the conversation than on the resulting tape (or less audible), or that something may have been cut off at the end of a cassette side (not a problem, I suppose, with digital recorders now). Whenever I read back the quotes, I can hear the person's voice in my head—but of course the reader can't, unless they know what the person's speaking voice sounds like (and even then they won't know the precise inflections from the original conversation). Italics, exclamation points, and other punctuation can help in transcribing someone's speech accurately—but it can never fully take on the qualities of an individual voice.

The reader will be reading my words, and the interview subject's quotes, in his or her own interior voice. I believe that one's success as a writer of any kind depends, to some extent, on how well their writerly voice transfers to the reader's interior voice. Part of the experience of reading is taking on another identity—having someone else's "voice" channeled through your own interior voice. The writer's own voice is obviously distinct from your own; it's speaking to you as another person would; yet it's heard, in your head, in your own voice. Even if you're learning a great deal from what you're reading, you still have to identify with the writer's voice. You have to share the same vocabulary, to a certain degree. This idea carries over to reading an interview, where the quotes have to somehow resonate with your own interior voice in order to connect with the person speaking, via print. Reading an interview with someone is not just a

form of companionship with the interviewee and interviewer—it's a form of keeping company with yourself, since you're putting the words you're reading into your own voice.

In print only so much of a person's personality can come through. You don't see the body language, or hear the inflections, or the tone of voice (of course, the reader may already be familiar with the interview subject's persona). It's strictly the words, and the ideas, alone. The more you need to convey someone's distinct personality, the more this becomes a problem. In one instance I interviewed a band whose leader had a dry sense of humor. In the manuscript I submitted, I quoted him as saying "one thing I noticed on *One Bedroom* [one of the band's LPs] was that Archer [one of the band's guitarists] had, like, no parts (laughs)." He was kidding the other band member about a lack of musical contribution. But when it appeared in print, the parenthetical "laughs" had been removed by the magazine's editors, not only from this line but also from every other instance it appeared in the article. This made the bandleader seem not droll but rather grave: a regrettable distortion of his personality.

Secretaries have often taken dictation from their bosses, writing down what they say in the form of a letter or other written communiqué. Since the invention of the cassette recorder in the early 60s, businesses have sometimes used them to transcribe letters, memos, etc, which the employer may compose in an off-hour, or to record business meetings which are later transcribed. In this case conveying the speaker's personality or inflection is not an issue; it's simply a means to an end. This is also true of court/trial transcripts.

Thoughts are expressed through language, both spoken and written. Some are spoken, some written down, some spoken first and later written down (or vice versa). But people also tend to write down thoughts they might not ever say out loud, or want other people to see, as in a diary. I read the recently published memoir of a friend of mine, the rock musician Dean Wareham. Dean had kept detailed tour diaries, but presumably with the intention of having them published at some point. Because I know him, I was able to read the book with his speaking voice in mind. But I watched a video of a reading he gave from the book, and his delivery was much different from the way I had read it in my head. So even if you read silently with someone else's voice in your head, the rhythms of speech may still be your own.

However, the French fashion magazine publisher Jean-Dominique Bauby composed his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, from a hospital bed, paralyzed completely and unable to speak following a massive stroke. He was only able to blink one eye, and his words were transcribed by an assistant, who recited the alphabet to him arranged in order from the most to the least-commonly used letters. Bauby would stop her with a blink when she got to the next letter of the word he wanted to spell. This is a case of transcription where there is no possibility for alternate expression—the interior voice is all that is left.

Then there is the question of transcription for the sake of a live audience. Let's consider comedy and comedy writing. A comedy writer sits down and tries to come up with ideas that will either be funny when delivered by a comedian, out loud in front of an audience, or to a reader, reading silently. A stand-up comedian may jot down bits to use on stage ahead of time or simply say what

comes to mind in the moment, and then may write down what he said during his act later, either to re-use it in performance at another point or to collect transcriptions of his comedy in print form—or it may be a combination of the two. Books and records have been ways that comedians have tried to make products out of their performances. Listening to a live comedy record at home can be an odd experience; only the voice of the performer (and audience) remains. The body language of the performance is lost, and the listener is isolated from the other listeners; when they laugh, it is being projected outward from the speakers, just as the comedian's voice is, rather than being projected towards the performer. If the home listener laughs, he is (physically) laughing both towards the performer and the audience. A comedy record that has been engineered in the studio has no laughter on it, but the comedian is still performing the material. A comedy book can either consist of material that has been performed already before a live audience or material that is strictly intended to be read silently. Laughing out loud is not as much of a requirement for a comedy book as it would be for a comedy performance; laughing out loud while reading is the exception rather than the rule, the inverse of what it would be during a performance.

Poetry is interesting here too, as it comes from an oral tradition but has increasingly become a written art, though one that is often vocalized. Poets are often inclined, or expected, to do readings of their work. The lower case poetry of e.e. cummings, or the minimal poetry of Aram Saroyan, of course, lose quite a bit of their identity when experienced in a form other than the printed page, and even less visually-oriented poetry also becomes different when read aloud. With poetry, the writerly voice comes first; in a way, reading poetry aloud is a transcription of the poem using the voice, as opposed to other writing, which is a transcription of spoken word using the written word.

Part of the difference between a spoken voice and interior voice is, quite simply, breath; if you're reading a long passage you will have to pause at some point to take a breath. A friend who was organizing an art show around the Art Workers Coalition provided me with an old document from the movement, which he asked me to read aloud and record. I read an old letter from filmmakers Ken Jacobs, Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton to the Museum of Modern Art lobbying for equal rights with plastic and graphic artists. In reading the letter out loud I made certain mistakes—adding a “the” here or there, saying “XV” instead of “15th” (for a certain film festival), making emphasis in odd spots where I was simply pausing for breath, and so on. And there are one or two typos in the original letter that I corrected as I was reading. The letter was displayed at the show for visitors to follow along with as they listened to my reading (or to read for themselves and not listen to me at all).

In early 2002, I was preparing to give readings from my first book, *An Emotional Memoir of Martha Quinn*, during several in-store promotional appearances. The book is an extended personal essay, detailing my experience of underground rock music as a fan and a performer, and the changes in the scene as witnessed as a fan in the 80s and a performer in the 90s. I wrote the book in the fanzine style of slang, colloquialisms and extreme vernacular. As I re-read parts of it out loud to prepare for the readings, I found that I was uncomfortable

with hearing much of it spoken. It was composed in an interior voice, to be read by an interior voice, and several passages that I felt were amusing in print sounded harsh or impolite when vocally enunciated. I was ultimately able to string together enough passages to make a convincing and entertaining presentation, but since then I have often tried to think of writing not only from my own interior voice, to be read by an interior voice, but writing in a voice that holds up to both interior and oracular readings (this lecture is a good example—especially since it has never been read out loud and is being written for a poetics journal, not for a specific speaking engagement).

In other words, I had to come up with a script, of sorts, for my in-store appearances. Scripts for theatre and films mix descriptions of the settings and characters, which are for reference and explication and not meant to be read out loud, and dialogue, which can vary greatly in its effect and meaning depending on who is reading out loud, and who is directing them. For example, I've found that I prefer reading Samuel Beckett's plays to seeing (or more precisely, hearing) them performed. I prefer to hear his language read in my own voice than in an actor's interpretation, which usually follows conventional thespian delivery and aims for the theatrical, rather than the existential.

Staying at a bed and breakfast a couple of years ago, the TV in the room I had was close-captioned for some reason, and so every line spoken, on every channel, was printed at the bottom of the screen. I watched a little of the show *Law and Order*, and was surprised to see how stiff much of the dialogue seemed in print, and how much richer it was when delivered—brought to life—by the actors. A related issue comes up in watching subtitled foreign films: when one reads the dialogue at the bottom of the screen, in English, one is hearing it in one's own interior voice. There can be a sense of the actors' delivery but it won't be as direct as understanding them in their native tongue (seeing a subtitled film multiple times is a good way to get past simply reading the subtitles and more deeply appreciate the actors' performances). In this case, the script transcribes the writer's interior voice first, then is read aloud by the actors, then is transcribed (and translated) again to be read by an interior voice simultaneous to its reading on screen. Of course the translation of the dialogue may be inexact to begin with, making for a transcript even more removed from the original.

Lyrics are often included with albums, enabling the listener to read the lyrics at the same time you're hearing them sung—much like the *Law & Order* example above. In rock music particularly, mishearing lyrics is a common experience (Kenneth Goldsmith has even transcribed misheard rock lyrics and published them in a book, *Head Citations*), one that is "corrected" by printing the lyrics in the album's package. It seems best to read the lyrics after hearing a song, not during—and especially not while hearing a song for the first time, which would be a distraction from the performance (as documented on the recording). This presents a similar quandary to reading subtitles during a film or TV show; in the case of music lyrics, they can sometimes look and feel better on the page than they are sung, but often it's the other way around. The lyrics written by Darby Crash for the Germs are largely unintelligible on their recordings, and a real revelation on the lyric sheet; but his voice is a fearsome instrument, actually adding layers of meaning by shredding his own lyrics. Bob Dylan's lyrics can

look great on paper, but his delivery is also a big part of their enduring appeal, by projecting his own persona onto them. The hardcore punk band the Minute-men always printed their lyrics in paragraph form, one song after another (the song were usually only a minute or so long to begin with, the lyrics more like sentences than conventional lyrics might be). These lyrics were also hard to understand when sung, but took on a specifically visual identity this way.

Also notable is the fact that sometimes the lyrics printed on the sleeve differ from what's being sung on the recording. Is this because the performers changed their mind in the studio and improvised something else? In the Talking Heads song "Psycho Killer," David Byrne sings "fa fa fa fa fa fa fa fa fa," but the printed lyrics included with the *Talking Heads 77* album only list 6 "fa"'s, not ten. In the song "Thrasher" Neil Young sings "When the thrashers come I'll be stuck in the sun like the dinosaurs in shrines/ But I'll know the time has come to give what's mine," but the lyric sheet (included with the album, *Rust Never Sleeps*) reads "When the thrashers come and I'm stuck in the sun like the dinosaurs in shrines/ Then I'll know the time has come to give what's mine." Was the performance a deviation from the lyrics? Or was the printed lyric a revision from the performance? It seems that lyrics included with albums are not a transcription of the performances but a script that the performer may adhere to or depart from.

Transcribing music itself provides similar questions to transcribing speech. Music has been taught and archived, as it were, through oral tradition of folk music and also some forms of classical music (Indian ragas in particular). Notating music is a relatively recent development, as more complicated forms of polyphony required a written language both to teach performers and document the composition (and ultimately to publish the composition). In some cases notation is used to transcribe a melody, harmony or rhythm that is first played on an instrument by a composer, but often the composer sits down with a pencil and music paper and begins the process of transcribing parts out of his or her head. A piano may be used to develop parts that will later be played by another instrument in an ensemble, which is much like a line of dialogue that will be delivered by an actor (or any number of actors in different productions of a play). The other form of transcription in music is transferring a composition from one instrument, or set of instruments, to another—for example, an orchestral piece translated to piano (Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, for one—also known as a "reduction") or vice versa (Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* transcribed for orchestra by Ravel). A musical score is really a script for the performance of a composition.

In the 20th century, graphic notation was developed for compositions that went beyond pitch notation in utilizing other sounds. In some cases this was a visual representation and thus a very subjective transcription of the sounds that were used, at other times musicians were expected to respond to the graphic score to produce sounds, often on conventional instruments. Notation has also been used to transcribe various ethnic musics, but this presents a problem, as it is difficult to represent microtonal intervals other than through glissandi. Attempting to convey timbre is also difficult, as the same note will sound very different depending on what instrument it's being played on (and even on one instrument

there are different ways of articulating the note). It's much like trying to convey the timbre of someone's voice and the rhythm and delivery of their speech through punctuation.

Although I've learned how to read and write music, I've rarely written anything but instructional scores to my own music. When I played in rock bands we learned the songs by playing them to each other and creating our own parts, not by writing them out. I've also favored playing in free improvisational situations, where there is no determined or pre-set plan at all for how the music will take shape; its form reveals itself in the moment, in real time (someone once described music improvisation to me as "a transcription of reality"). The tool of recording has been a factor here, as you could always present a tape of a song to someone and have him or her learn it by ear from the tape, in the manner of oral tradition (and recording a free improvisation would serve as a manuscript of the performance). When I first began taking guitar lessons, I would bring in a cassette of a song I wanted to learn and my teacher would write out the chords, but I soon found I was able to recognize the chords myself and teach myself the songs.

Reading music is still important for classical musicians and for session musicians, who have to be able to read through a piece of music as instantaneously as one would read a newspaper article. But I prefer to have music remain as direct an expression as possible, not something that is a performer's interpretation of something I have written down, or even the compromise in the conflict of opinions regarding the interpretation of something I have written between a conductor and a performer. Even if there is a matter of interpretation between a composer/performer and a producer at a recording session, it will usually be more direct than it would be with a written piece of music (which is more like arguing the letter of the law in the legal system). Of course, there is the example of Jimi Hendrix's recordings, many of which were left unfinished and then released with controversial posthumous overdubs by producer Alan Douglas.

As a guitar student in my teens, I transcribed John Coltrane's saxophone solo on "Mr. P.C." This was a fascinating exercise, as I was able to analyze how he was thinking about scales and harmony as he improvised the solo. In this way, transcription is a great apparatus for figuring out how music works. Steve Reich has said that he had heard African music, but didn't understand it until he had looked at transcriptions by musicologist A.M. Jones in his book *Studies in African Music*, and that's when it became an influence on his own composing.

It would be interesting to compare different transcriptions of the same piece of music, or of lyrics (this is certainly possible on the web, where there are many sites where people have transcribed lyrics by ear), or of an interview (I've had to correct someone else's transcription of an interview I'd done, which was full of errors). Transcription can be a *Rashomon*-like exercise, where we can never be sure what exactly was said, or more importantly, *how* it was said. A published interview is rarely a full transcription that incorporates every "ah," "um" or extraneous "like." Like a documentary film, it is edited, and becomes a writer's version of the actual event (the conversation). Therefore, an interview with Mick Jagger by *Rolling Stone*'s Jann Wenner would give you Jann Wenner's version of

the interview—and Jann Wenner’s version of Mick Jagger. By choosing the questions, an interviewer is paving one road into a particular personality—but obviously not the only one.

Public figures often hate the media because they are being used as material for a writer’s work, and they’ve already used themselves as material for their own work. So the writer’s work may be at odds with that. I’ve been trying to play both sides of the fence by establishing an identity both as a writer and a musician, someone who conducts interviews and is an interviewee, someone who could potentially either play music with someone or interview them (but not both—I’ve rarely, if ever, written about someone I’ve played music with, or vice versa). Either way, I’m commenting, in some way, on their work as I perceive it and how it relates to my own aesthetic. Transcription is ultimately a means to this end.

I thank you for listening.