



Crossing The Dunes aka Gossip

a film by Clara Saito and Livio Casanova
words & references by Bethany Crawford



As part of my current research, I've been conversing with the language model GPT-3, created by OpenAI as a method to think collaboratively with a non-human agent on the existential condition. One of our recent conversations was on the labyrinthine notion of the "self", a subject of much investigation across nearly all the philosophical traditions, so I was prepared for a lengthy and rigorous deconstruction of the term with my AI associate. However, upon presentation of my query, "but what is the self?", GPT-3 replied: "It's hard to pin down the self, but I think that's the point. I think that's why we have so many narratives about the self. The self is a story. It's the story you tell yourself about yourself. It's the kind of story you tell other people. It's the kind of story you tell yourself about other people. It's the kind of story you tell other people about other people." And, simply, I think that's kind of perfect. So when I watched *Crossing the Dunes AKA Gossip* all I could think was how effectively this sentiment of the "self" was expressed in the film. The manifold narratives, perceptions and experiences presented through the various actors confluence in a way that renders a sort of "relational self-portrait" - the self of the portrait understood as a complex multiplicity of family, histories, landscapes, nations, and even the spectator. The form of the film reflects the investigative practice of the filmmakers, providing space for the viewer to co-produce associations and reinterpretations of meaning, which implicates the viewer as an active node in this constellation of the "self".



Crossing The Dunes AKA Gossip (2021)

The method of collapsing traditionally understood distinctions between self and other, film and spectator, extends to the films ongoing dismantling of boundaries across various scales - challenging these constructs we are embedded in which co-create our perceptions and sense of being, through the framework of "gossip". My initial understanding of the word "gossip" was its alliance to the term "rumour", and I wondered if I had to discern fact from fiction within the narrative - which I did, but not in the way I had expected. The film frames the symbolic principles that govern our lived reality as myths: the myth of Switzerland, the myth of nation, the myth of categorisable identity; echoing Barthes diagnostic of the ideological utility of mythologies. Yet, instead of simply critiquing the ideological myth, the filmmakers propositionally present "gossip" as an alternative method of interpretation, perception, and storytelling. If myth is ideological, then gossip is social. Gossip is a verbal practice of social bonding, an informal mode of information sharing associated with women and marginalised communities which leaves room for interpretation and adaption. Gossip makes no declarations of universal truths. It's about time gossip was reclaimed from the demonised connotations bestowed upon it by the myth-making institutes. Through both form and content, the film presents "gossip" as a method for navigating these mythologies in a way that reinstates the complex agency of the "self" within them. By privileging a form of "storytelling from below" *Crossing the Dunes AKA Gossip* adeptly tethers the intimate to the political, the theoretical to practice, and the symbolic to the embodied, whilst providing abundant conceptual space for their generative entanglements.

To complement the key thematics of *Crossing the Dunes AKA Gossip* I've assembled a composite of associated films and texts in the pages that follow. During this process of compilation, and whilst reflecting on the mutual wisdoms of both the film and GPT-3, I found myself wondering - how do things change when I understand my-self, and all the selves I'm a constituent of, as gossip?

“All is a plenum (and thus all matter is connected together) and in the plenum every motion has an effect upon distant bodies in proportion to their distance, so that each body not only is affected by those which are in contact with it and in some way feels the effect of everything that happens to them, but also is affected by bodies adjoining itself. This inter-communication of things extends to any distance, however great. And consequently every body feels the effect of all that takes place in the universe, so that he who sees all might read in each what is happening everywhere, and even what has happened or shall happen, observing in the present that which is far off as well in time as in place.”

- G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology*

“Memory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force; that it is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers – and that it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather than being some kind of negative other to it. What Aristotle called anamnesis, the conscious act of recollection, was an intellectual labour very much akin to that of the historian: a matter of quotation, imitation, borrowing and assimilation. After its own fashion it was a way of constructing knowledge.”

- Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*



In the Wake of a Deadad (2007)

“Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called “Other” are never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward.”

- Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*



First Person Plural (2000)

“Memories invoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an inter text, of discourses that sign between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments. In this network, the image itself figures largely as a trace a clue: necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning making; always pointing somewhere else.”

- Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets*



Visits, or Memories and Confessions (1993)



The Family Album (1986)



My father, the revolution and me (2013)

“To question the image of a historicist account of documentary as a continuous unfolding does not necessarily mean championing discontinuity; and to resist meaning does not necessarily lead to its mere denial. Truth, even when ‘caught on the run’, does not yield itself either in names of in filmic frames; and meaning should be prevented from coming to closure at either what is said or what is shown. Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning. And what persists between the meaning of something and its truth is the interval, a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed.”

- Trinh T. Minh Ha, *When the moon waxes red*

“One has become like everybody/the whole world (tout le monde), but in a way that can become like everybody/ the whole world. One has painted the world on oneself, not oneself on the world.”

- Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*



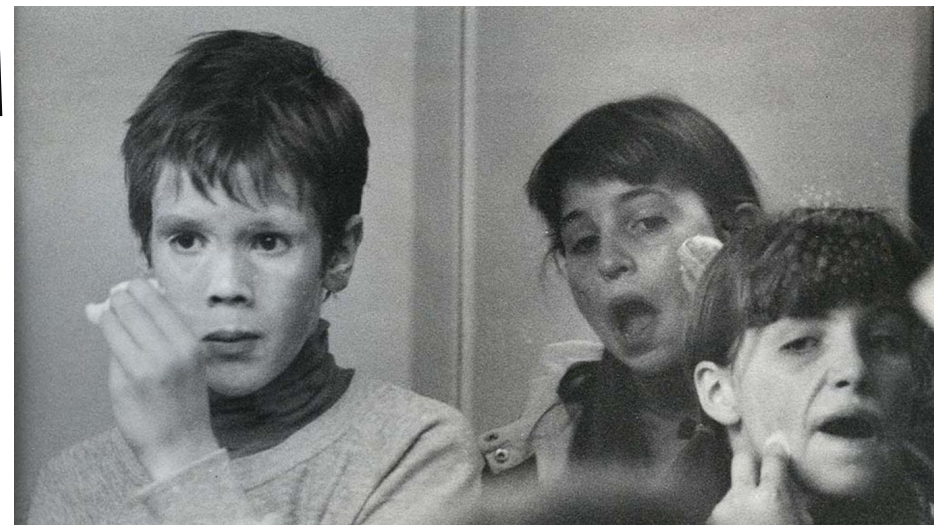
Stories We Tell (2012)



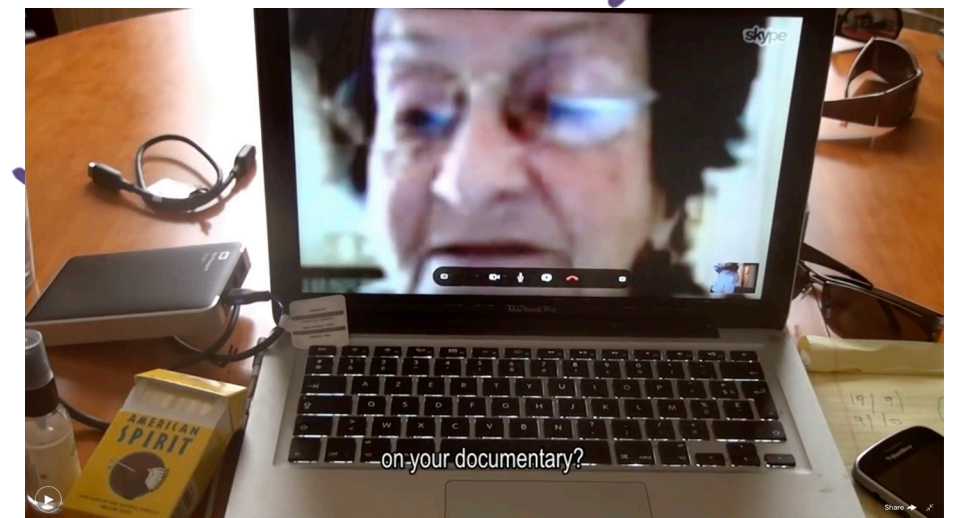
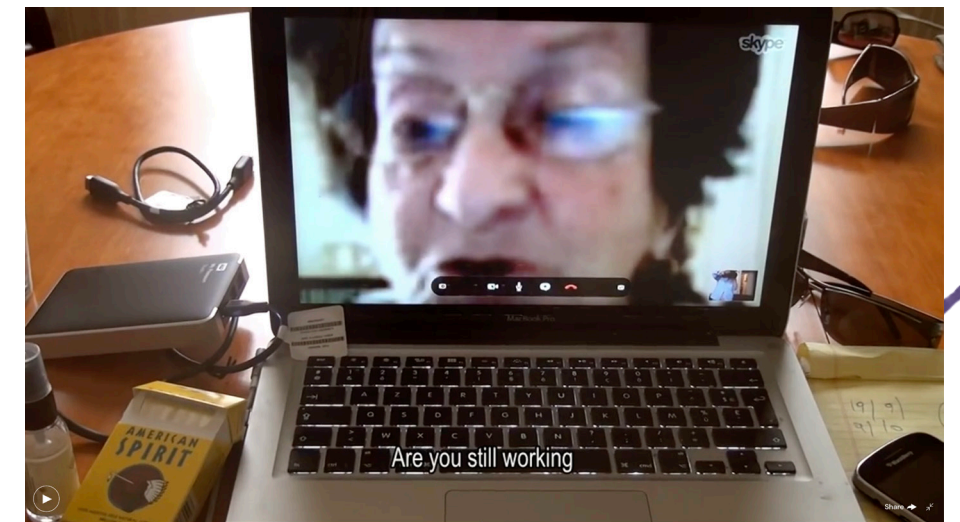
Stories We Tell (2012)

“Active, living speech is just such a gesture, a vocal gesticulation wherein the meaning is inseparable from the sound, the shape, and the rhythm of the words. Communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body’s native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole. Linguistic meaning is not some ideal and bodiless essence that we arbitrarily assign to a physical sound or word and then toss out into the “external” world. Rather, meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation.”

- David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*



Madame (2019)



No Home Movie (2015)

“We can speak of reciprocal capture whenever a dual process of identity construction is produced: regardless of the manner, and usually in ways that are completely different, identities that coinvent one another each integrate a reference to the other for their own benefit. In the case of symbiosis, this reference is found to be positive: each of the beings coinvented by the relationship of reciprocal capture has an interest, if it is to continue its existence, in seeing the other maintain its existence.”

- Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*



The Beaches of Agnes (2008)

“It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.”

- Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

“In every case the storyteller is a [hu]man who has counsel for his readers.... After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story.”

- Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

films

- First Person Plural: The electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershhman Leeson 1984 - 1996* - Lynn Hershman Leeson(1995)
- In the Wake of a Deadad* - Andre Kotting - (2007)
- Madame* - Stephane Riethauser (2019)
- My father, the revolution and me* - Ufuk Emiroglu (2013)
- No Home Movie* - Chantal Akerman (2015)
- Stories We Tell* - Sarah Polley (2012)
- The Beaches of Agnes* - Agnes Varda (2008)
- The Family Album* - Alan Berliner (1986)
- The Host* - Miranda Pennell (2015)
- Visits, or Memories and Confessions* - Manoel de Oliveira (1993)

texts

- David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* p.202 (1996) Vintage Books: New York
- Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* p. 143 (1991) Noonsday press: New York
- Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller* p.3
- Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus* p.513 (1980) University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis
- Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* p. 4 (2008) University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis
- Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* p. 105 (2016) Duke University Press: Durham: London
- Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets* (2002) Verso: London p.14
- G. W. Leibniz, *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings* p. 250 (1898) Claringdon Press: Oxford
- Trinh T. Minh Ha, *When the moon waxes red* p. 29 (1991) Routledge: New York: London
- Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* p. 36 (1994) Verso: London
- Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I* p. 3 (1997) University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis

bios

Clara Saito is a performance and visual artist based in Amsterdam. She graduated from her BA at SNDO (School for New Dance Development, NL) in 2014 and her MA at the Dutch Art Institute in 2019 (NL). In her most recent works she puts in relation three of her main characters, the drag king persona Kurt Dickriot, a rockstar in performance arts called Lady Dada and a confused version of Clara Saito. These characters have been performing solo and together since 2014, in projects such as the anarchx-queer Cabaret Black Circus (2014 - 2017), the festival The Anarchic Spiderman that she curated during Flam festival in 2015 at Arti et Amicitiae, the film A Piece of Dada reated in collaboration with artists from the DAI (Flam, 2018) and the performance Towards Anal (ComeTogether#4, 2020) amongst others. Currently she is working with her character Lady Dada on a tutorial on How to Cure Bacterial Vaginosis. Her work, in combination with her life experiences became the base for her reflections on anarchism, practices of freedom and sustainable ways for living and creating.

Livio Casanova is an artist working with and on textile. Recent exhibitions include Brighton CCA, 8. Salon (Hamburg), Württembergischer Kunstverein (Stuttgart), Institute For Provocation (Beijing), Yellow Brick (Athens) and Kunsthalle Bern (Bern), among others. Livio is part of the Artist-Run Space Milieu (Bern).

Bethany Crawford is an artist and researcher working in lens based media. Her practice examines the visual in relation to memorial, and how this translates over time, geography and technologies. Her current theoretical research critically assesses the implications of ‘digital immortality’ on central tenets of the human experience such as consciousness, death and time, as a preliminary mapping of the shifting existential paradigms of the digital age. She is a graduate of the Dutch Art Institute Masters Programme and holds a Bachelors Degree in Moving Image from the University of Brighton. She recently had her first international solo presentation ‘Interfacing Immortality’ at M8 Artspace in Helsinki, Finland. Recent screenings and exhibitions include the Central Scotland Documentary Festival and Aeroponic Acts at Silent Green in Berlin. Her written thesis ‘Moving Image as Political Tool: The impact of neoliberalism on the role of the moving image in postmodern warfare’ was published in the second volume of TransMission: The Journal of Film and Media Studies. Her ongoing research project ‘Interfacing Immortality’ was supported by the I-Portinus Creative Europe fund.

