

Play it Again (and Again), Sam: The Tape Recorder in Film (Part One on Noir)

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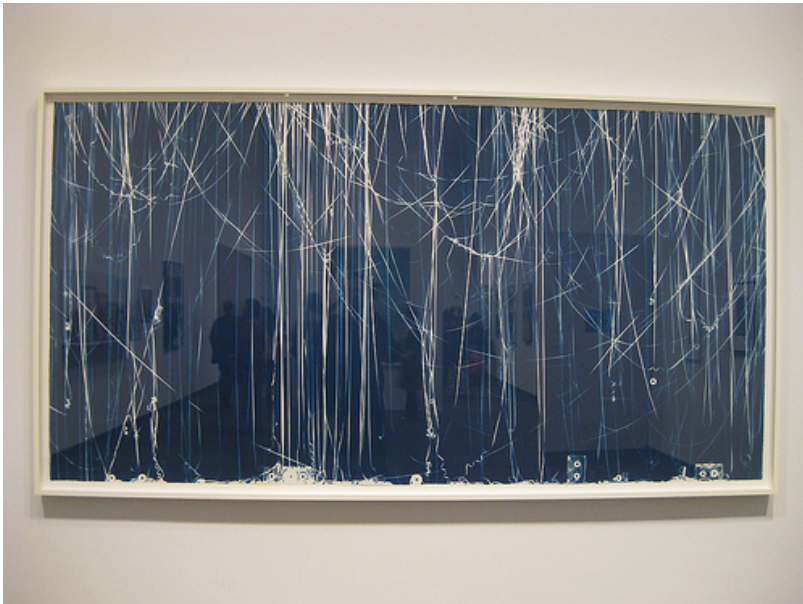
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Abstract

Being a teacher, I can't resist giving out a summer reading list. Being a researcher, I can't help but want to share the projects that I am working on—which right now includes excavating the cultural history of the magnetic tape recorder in the United States.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Classical Music, Film/Movies/Cinema, History



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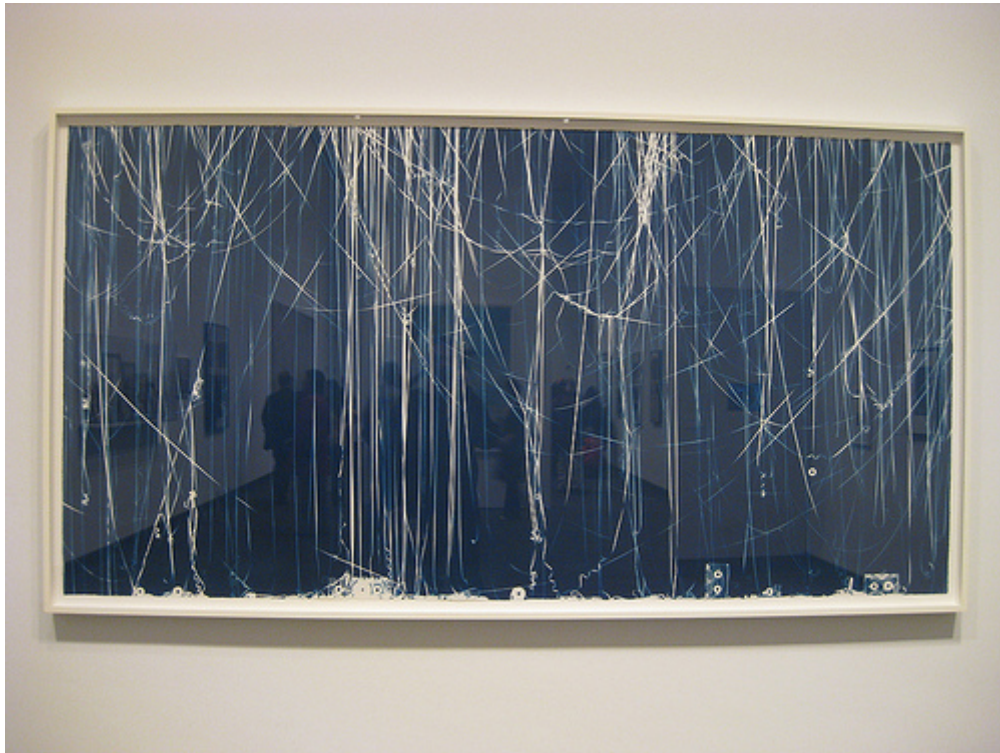
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Being a teacher, I can't resist giving out a summer reading list. Being a researcher, I can't help but want to share the projects that I am working on—which right now includes excavating the cultural history of the magnetic tape recorder in the United States. So, in honor of the Summer Solstice tomorrow (marking the official start of the season) I compiled a three-part summer series for *Sounding Out!* that does both: "Play it Again (and Again) Sam: The Tape Recorder in Film."

My summer sound studies A-V list encourages you to fill your idle hours watching the "top 6" featured appearances of the magnetic tape recorder in film, in chronological order (2 each month, with a bonus "supporting role" nod rounding out each post). Not only will "Play it Again (And Again) Sam" help you beef up your cinema buff credentials, but it will trace a little-known history, asking you to consider how the recorder tangled its thin brown plastic tape so effectively into the warp and weft of our twentieth-century lives. You'll find that my "top 6" list reveals much more human desire than technological determinism; the representations I examine express a complex mixture of fear and fascination, optimism and regret, change and stasis. Often a tool of the powerful, sometimes a weapon of the weak, the tape recorder was a cold war domestic product that could never truly be domesticated. As you will see in this spoiler-free three part series, interactions with the tape recorder remixed America's workplaces, schools, homes, public spaces and private moments, ultimately shifting how the world was heard (and heard again and again).



Memento (Soul II Soul) 2008 by Christian Marclay, Photo by Nathan Bowers

So, load up your Netflix queue, shake up your Jiffy Pop, and take a much-needed couch-break from the heat and humidity with these oh-so-cool black-and-whites from the 1940s and 1950s. Of course, we can't start our films without some "Coming Attractions": look for [part two on July 18th](#) (spotlight on [Walter Murch](#)) and part three (the 1980s) on August 15th.

1. *Double Indemnity* (Paramount, 1944, Directed by Billy Wilder)



Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) speaks his sordid tale into the dictaphone

Okay, so it is actually a [dictaphone](#) that appears in this film and the tormented insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) is "putting it on wax" rather than magnetic tape, but this

once ubiquitous, now long forgotten recording device has such a haunting presence and a structuring role in this grim noir confessional that, like Neff himself, I am suddenly willing to break my own rules. Outside of femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson's (Barbara Stanwyck) elaborately sculptured coiffure, the key image of *Double Indemnity* is Neff's lips murmuring his murderous late night confessions into the dictaphone's horn, a physical and metaphorical stand in for the ear of his hardnosed boss (and the true object of his desire) claims investigator Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson).

The dictaphone was Billy Wilder (director/screenwriter) and Raymond Chandler's (screenwriter) deliberate addition to the filmscript; James M. Cain's 1943 [novella](#) was essentially Neff's scrawled confession to the reader of his almost-perfect plot to kill Phyllis's husband and reap double insurance rewards. The introduction of the dictaphone transformed the standard noir flashback voiceover into an even-more intimate exchange of anxious aspiration, guilty pleasure, and homosocial desire channeled through Neff's tense vocal grain and fierce grip on the machine's cord. A familiar office machine made strange by Neff's late-night admissions, the dictaphone mediates the entire film, transforming the audience into eavesdroppers, listening in to an act of recording made for Keyes's ears only. After stumbling into his office and jamming a cylinder into the machine, Neff begins, sternly: "Office memorandum. 'Walter Neff to Barton Keyes, Claims Manager, Los Angeles, July 16, 1938. Dear Keyes: I suppose you'll call this a confession when you hear it. Well, I don't like the word 'confession.' I just want to set you right about something you couldn't see because it was smack up against your nose.'" Sound, in the form of Neff's heated breath pressed through the dictaphone's curves and into our waiting ears, is the perfect device to exorcise the unseen desire in a film that tests the boundaries of darkness.



<https://youtu.be/S3wjJcuGsVE>

2. Blackboard Jungle (MGM, 1955, Directed by Richard Brooks)



Screen Capture by JSA

Most people remember *Blackboard Jungle* for its seductive visual representations of juvenile delinquency, stoked by the sound of Bill Haley and the Comet's "Rock Around the Clock," the song (written in 1952, recorded in 1954) that opened and closed the film (and became a smash hit as a result, as I discussed in a previous archival blog post [here](#)). I'd like to add an often-overlooked image to the film's legacy, that of teacher Mr. Dadier (Glenn Ford) plunking a bulky case down on his desk and triumphantly announcing "This is a tape recorder!" A cutting edge device at the time—magnetic tape was only introduced in the states after World War II, largely through the efforts of [Bing Crosby](#) and [Les Paul](#)—Dadier's recorder is part and parcel of the technological milieu of the 1950s, which evoked positivistic fascination with "progress" even as it was shaped by existent fears and inequalities.

At the point of almost giving up on his surly working class, ethnic, inner-city students to seek a cushy job in the segregated suburbs, Dadier brings in the reel-to-reel as a Hail Mary attempt to quell his students' noise and remake them into good Cold War citizens once and for all. As he tells them, "We all talk, but nobody listens." From the moment he enters the classroom, the students continue to defy the white male authority embodied in Dadier and housed in his machine—"Did you bring your cosmetics to school, Chief?" taunts one student (Gregory Miller, played by Sydney Poitier)—and they undermine his assignment by selecting the "noisiest" student in the class to make a recording: Puerto Rican Student Pete Morales. As I have discussed on this [blog](#) and in [print](#), the concept of "noise" has a racialized edge, particularly in the 1950s, when Cold War cosmologies of colorblindness and "enemies within" ruled the day. Sound was an efficient way to separate "Us" from "them"—the noisy dissident from the quiet citizen—without making explicit reference to visual markers of race. And, let me tell you, Morales's obscene, heavily-accented speech—peppered with "stinkin'"s, 14 of them in total—*really* makes Dadier's spools spin. To hear more on the tape recorder in 1950's American life and this film, see my essay "Reproducing U.S. Citizenship in a *Blackboard Jungle*: Race, Cold War Liberalism and the Tape Recorder" forthcoming in the [American Quarterly](#) special issue on sound (September 2011).



<https://youtu.be/ISU9ECTxMFQ>

youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr7n9Wxmc4].

And. . .in a supporting role:

Kiss Me Deadly (Parklane Pictures, 1955, Directed by Robert Aldrich)



*Hammer Screens His Calls: Screen Capture by
Michael Leddy*

The byzantine stairwalks and gingerbread Victorians of Los Angeles's defunct Bunker Hill neighborhood are not the only ghosts you will encounter in the noir classic *Kiss Me Deadly*. Our first glimpse of Mike Hammer's (Ralph Meeker) space-age Wilshire Boulevard bachelor pad includes a shot of his wall mounted, reel-to-reel answering machine, quite a technological marvel in 1955; it would be over 15 years before Phone Mate introduced the first commercially viable home model in 1971. His recorder manages to look both ridiculously large yet streamlined—and to twenty-first century audiences, old yet futuristic. However, it also allows the hunted, haunted private detective to take just a little more control of his tailspin of a life. After the jarring ring of a telephone call, the spools spin, and a sultry female voice intones: "This is Crestview 5-4124. Mister Hammer, whom you are calling, is not available at present. If you wish to leave a record of your

call, please state your message at the sound of the tone.” His back inevitably against the wall, Hammer brings a suave tension to an act that has now become mundane: call screening. Removing the small surprise of who’s on the line, Hammer uses his recorder to listen just a step ahead, pacing an increasingly mysterious world given over to the dangerous riddle of the “whatsit” that leaves so many in the morgue by the film’s end. For a more general take on sound in this film (with a brief mention of Mike Hammer’s tape recorder), see Noira-Blanchère-Rougi’s November 2009 blog post, [“The Use of Sound in *Kiss Me Deadly*.”](#)



https://youtu.be/qCuhR_SyH8k

