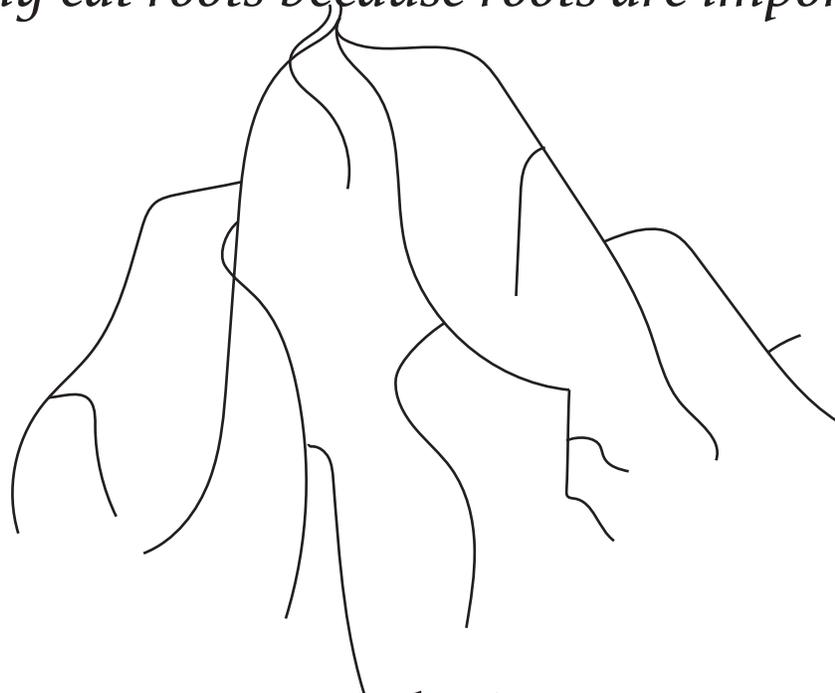


I only eat roots because roots are important



an MFA thesis paper

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/root

At the beginning there was Vacca Indu, Fangosa Cassetta and Cassetta Marta.

Cassetta, which is the Italian word for VHS, holds all the meaning of this introduction; it all began with a *Cassetta*.

It was the time of high school. Italian high school, which means no clubs, no activities, no sports; just study study study, theory theory theory, exam exam exam. This was the setting where two other classmates and me decided to found our own video club. We held it guerrilla-style during school hours and its functioning was simple. We had a roster of *Cassette* with specific recognizable names - some of which had high culture references, like the Fangosa Cassetta, which paid tribute to Dante's *Inferno*¹ - a TV Guide and a weekly chart. One of us - Ketty the one with cable - was in charge of setting up the recorder at a specific time depending on the day while Marta and I were responsible for the scheduling of what films we wanted to watch - activity that was mostly undertaken during the mandatory religion class. Once the films were recorded we individually started to watch each movie. Once all of us were done watching a specific film the *Cassetta* was then ready to be overwritten - reason why they all had individual names written on them and not the title of the film that was recorded on. We reached a moment where we had over fifteen *Cassette*. It was hard to keep up with them all but we always did. We were devoted to our club. We had a rule stating that we must finish a film once we had started. Even the most boring and long-winded film had to be finished - and yes, under specific circumstances the use of fast forward was allowed.

¹ "E io, che di mirare stava inteso, vidi genti fangose in quel pantano, ignude tutte, con sembiante offeso." (Intent I stood to gaze, and in the marsh sunk descried a miry tribe, all naked, and with looks betokening rage.)

We loved watching movies and we loved our small weird club. Making movies seemed to be all we wanted to do with our lives. However, we never even tried. Looking back from where I am now, here, seems odd. Nonetheless, if I think about it, it is not *that* odd. There is a simple and twisted reason behind it; in Italy there is too much art. It is a well-known fact that Italy flourished in the arts for centuries and produced a good amount of what are considered to be the most relevant works of art according to Western standards. Over the centuries, Italy has seen too many geniuses, creating a culture in which, unless you are a born Maestro, there no reason for you to try to make anything. This burdensome past, joint with an unhealthy demeaning engraved catholic heritage, produced a society that looks with disbelief at any individual attempt of self expression. Unless one is properly legitimized by a higher authoritarian figure which recognizes one's innate talent and promotes it, there is no room for passionate attempts at making art because the social system will sooner or later dismantle your motivation. For this embarrassing reason, in school we spend a lot of time studying the history of art but zero time practicing. In this sad scene there are no facilities or instructors trained in teaching how to make something. This is the reason why our film club never dreamed of making a movie.

Fortunately, that was not the end of my aspirations. My fantasies of making films just laid dormant for some time. Flash forward an indefinite number of years. After taking a class called Introduction to Digital Film Production at Dickinson College, PA, and realizing that I could make something and that it was such a liberating process, I decided to apply for the MFA program in Film at Syracuse University. What I learned at Dickinson was not really about technique or language. All I learned formed the foundation for how I would use moving images in my practice and what value I would attribute to the process of making. Through film I found a healing medium.

/heal

My first attempt of making a film was titled *Full Load*. It told the story of a man who, haunted by the memory of a woman denying his love, was finally able to overcome his past through the aid of a man in a bunny suit. It all took place in one night in a laundromat. For the first time, with this film, I experienced the power of healing through making; I was trying to deal with a recent rejection of my affection and through film I had found my man in a bunny suit.

I believe that one of the functions of art is to help people understand something about themselves and others. I find myself very close to Hegel's view on the matter. The philosopher believed that the prime motor that motivates humans' creation of art originates from the fundamental nature of man as a thinking consciousness. Humans project their *Geist*, essence, into the outside world to achieve consciousness of themselves. Like religion and philosophy, art allows the individual to achieve self-understanding. However, instead of doing so through concepts, art acts through objects made by women and men just for this purpose. Ultimately art is made not just for the sake of art but for the sake of self expression and self understanding which, in Hegel's view, is what constitute beauty.² I see film as an object capable of providing self-understanding to both the maker and the user.

I prefer to use the word "user" against the word "viewer" because I believe in a form of film where who is watching is responsible as much as the maker for the generation of meaning. I am fond of the Reader-Response Criticism movement that arose in opposition to the New Criticism and the concept of The Affective Fallacy.

The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results (what is and what it does) ... It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome... is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear.³

² Houlgate, Stephen, "Hegel's Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/hegel-aesthetics/>>.

³ Wimsatt, W.K. with Monroe Beardsley (1954). *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Wimsatt and Beardsley, the proponents of the New Criticism movement, believed in the objectivity of the text and the text's only authority to dictate its meaning. I find the thoughts of Wolfgang Iser, one of the opponents of The Affective Fallacy dictum, more useful when trying to understand how a work of art functions once it is released into the world. Iser conceives the literary work - although this can be applied to any artwork - as composed of two poles.⁴ He identifies the first pole as "artistic" and the second one as "esthetic". The artistic pole refers to the text created by the author while the second addresses the realization accomplished by the reader. "From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two."⁵

I find this definition useful because it stresses how the work of art is the product of a continuous negotiation between the text and the user. This represents a core concept in my work and part of the reason why I am not interested in creating films that follow a traditional narrative model. According to Bordwell⁶, traditional narrative films are particularly appealing to us because, through the aid of framing, composition and editing, are able to raise clear questions; something real life experiences lack. Films allow the viewer to speculate with hypothesis that by the end of the screening will be either rejected or confirmed by providing full answers. Traditional narrative film keeps the audience engaged by allowing them to construct coherent narratives that eventually lead to closure. This idea of narrative film seems to be problematic because it ends up levelling the film panorama to an homogenous safe amalgamation of movies that are responsible for producing a narcoleptic audience that, by following the traditional narrative behavioural script, soothes any proactive brain activity.

I love telling stories. When I tell a story I want it to reflect the complexities of the world and its unfathomable essence. I don't believe in a single truth but in an indefinite number of truths that depend on circumstances, angles and perception. I think that in this world there is so much diversity - just by looking at things from a human standpoint, and not even considering the variability from a non-human or inanimate point of view - that the idea of one single truth is unimaginable. I am fascinated by matters of perception and points of view and how they change from culture to culture and then from individual to individual. Having a background in Communication Studies, I have a tendency to analyze social interactions. Daily, I am amazed by all the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that seem to happen, at least to a certain degree, in every human interaction; they all seem to depend on differences in

⁴ Iser, Wolfgang (1974) *The Implied Reader: Pattern in Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 274

⁶ Bordwell, David, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

perception, values and perspective. I would like here to mention a scene from *The Simpsons*⁷ that, when I first watched it, struck me for its unexpected insight. In this episode the Simpsons are kidnapped by aliens and end up being caged in a zoo as the new featured attraction. An alien little girl visiting the zoo looks at Lisa and hands her a round object through the bars. Lisa, excited about the gift drops it on the floor to make it bounce as if it was a ball. The rounded object shatters as soon as it lands on the ground. The alien girl looks at Lisa with horror crying “why would you do that?”.

What Lisa assumed was a ball, for the alien girl was *something else*. Too many times we assume that things are what we think they are, defaulting their meaning and value to the one we perceive, not considering that it represents only one limited angle of a whole and complex situation. In the the Indian Subcontinent there is a recurring story that is part of the local folklore that narrates, with some variations, the event of several blind men examining an elephant. Each man focused on a different part of the animal; one touched the trunk, one examined the ears and another the tail. At the end they gathered to compare their experiences finding out that each of them had made a different assumption on what the object was. The man who touched the trunk assumed that he had in fact encountered a snake while the man who had felt the ear thought that it was a fan. Finally, the man who had focused on the tail thought that he was touching a rope. Unhappy with the different interpretations of the objects the men end up harshly disagreeing and everything ends up in a fight. By synecdoche, we look at a part and assume it represents the whole.

Through my work I aim at giving a representation of the world that emphasizes the complexity, impenetrability and openness of the life experience. Because I assume that there are significant variables in how people experience the same instances and process the same experiences, my work prioritizes fragmentation, half-illumination and lacuna. Believing in the art experience as originating in a negotiation between the text and the user, I opt for a form of artwork that privileges this relationship through an open-endedness that provides the user with questions rather than answers. My underlying idea is that, by providing the user with freedom to interpret, they become free to inject her/himself more fully into the work. The user is compelled to complete the openness of the film by bringing in his/her memories, values and emotions in a way that allows to experience to work at a deeper level. Through this process, I aim at creating a connection with the viewer that is based on empathy.

⁷ “The Man Who Came to Be Dinner”, *The Simpsons*, Season 26, Ep. 10 (2015)

Einfühlung - translatable as "Empathy" in German - is a concept that, overlapping between philosophy and psychology, was first introduced by Theodore Lipps and represents a key framework to understand "the human inclination to 'feel into' other people and things - whether they are living creatures, inanimate objects, or phenomena such as moods, colors and sounds."⁸ According to Lipps, our ability to empathize is based on the instinctive mimicry of the Other. Later psychological studies have found a biological foundation of this process in the discovery of *mirror neurons*. Studying monkeys during the 80s and the 90s, Vittorio Gallese and his team found out that certain neurons located in the *premotor cortex* react both when a monkey picks up a piece of food with its own hand and when the animal observes another monkey perform the same action. Interestingly, when the other monkey did the same action without picking up a piece of food, the neurons of the observing monkey did not activate. According to the Italian scientist, these neurons could be at the base of the brain's intersubjective experience endorsing Lipps' theory on human mimicry. For the philosopher, *Einfühlung* is an active and intentional activity that brings life to an object that is not actually experienced as "alive". This experience is not something that we imaginatively add to an object but something that emanates from it.

In my work I strive for this experience. I want the user to feel empathy through an object of art that resonates with him/her through an openness that allows who is watching to bring their own set of interpretations, memories and values. At the beginning of this chapter I brought in the concept of healing. I believe that this aspect of my work is not solely related to my own experience while making the film but, because of the process of empathy I aim for, it finds a possible mirroring in the user. Not being the user of my own work I cannot speak about its healing power. However, I find healing daily through the work of others and therefore I can only hope that the same can happen to others with my own work.

⁸ Robin Curtis & Richard George Elliott (2014) An Introduction to *Einfühlung*, *Art in Translation*, 6:4, 353-376,

/seedbed

I only eat roots. Because roots are important.

Towards the end of *The Great Beauty*⁹ there is a scene that takes place at night on a balcony facing the Colosseo. The scene features a dinner at the apartment of the protagonist - Gepp Gambardella, a middle age journalist. The gathering is a stereotypical Italian scenario: with abundance of food, wine and loud voices. Nonetheless, the guest of honor at the table is neither loud or gluttonous; she is centenarian nun who doesn't touch food. Throughout the dinner the woman blankly stares at the people eating and doesn't emit any sound. Her guardian is a mirthful clergyman who entertains the table talking about his secret recipes. After a while someone asks him why the nun is not eating. Unexpectedly the nun speaks for the first time and states that she only eats roots because, roots are important.

About two years ago I started taking textiles classes. These classes covered several aspects of working with textiles like knitting, crocheting, dyeing, embroidery and felting. During these classes I realized that I really enjoyed working with fibers and how the use of my hands provided me with a soothing effect. When the moment came to learn felting, I had the chance, for the first time in my life, to card some wool. Before then, I had only known wool either through knitting or crocheting, using a comfortable and easy-to-use ball of yarn. The experience of picking and carding wool struck me, as the life of that sheep unfolded between my hands. Tangled in the wool, hay, urine and other organic traces of daily ovine life adorned the material, to remind me of its origin. Once I started felting I decided to leave those elements within the final product, as homage to its roots.

I now realize that I deeply care about roots. Every time I look at something I unconsciously look for its origin, trying to understand where it comes from. In certain cases, like the one I had with wool, the discovery of its origin constitutes a moment of awe. By understanding connections I had not considered before, what happens in my brain is that a new window opens and a new landscape can be seen. An unseen truth

⁹ Paolo Sorrentino, 2013

suddenly presents itself; like I were one of the blind men touching the elephant, I switch from touching the trunk to the tail and a new perception of reality hits me.

When I practice felting with wool I always leave traces of the life of its originator – the sheep- in the final product. I see this act as a tribute to its maker and as a memento of its, several times forgotten, origin. I try to do the same in my film work and incorporate certain elements as mementos of its origin. For this reason I am devoted to use 16mm film - when I can afford its processing cost- and stop motion animation. As digital technology develops, filmmaking has become a fast paced practice where process is distinguished by immediacy. The increasing affordability of gear and data storage risks producing a nonchalant kind of filmmaking that is motivated by action rather than thinking. While I incorporate and embrace technology in my practice, I also try not to forget about the origin of film. For this reason I combine digital, 16mm film and stop motion animation. By bringing in frame-by-frame work I try to bridge the gap between the two practices; the act of focusing on each frame allows me to connect with the nature of the moving image; in the process, every frame is equally important. I consider animation and film as complementary practices. In film a movement is recorded by fragmentation into single exposures. In animation a movement is created by the combination of single exposures. The end result is the same but the process is different. I believe that the two practices can serve each other in the making of moving images and that the combination of the two can enhance both the experience of the maker and the user.

In my film work I feel compelled to bring in elements of materiality, texture and manual work; in digital filmmaking post-production image processing yields a practice where these elements tend to get lost. There is no loading of film in the camera, no construction of special effects, no real craft in the making of props. Practicing filmmaking in the last years, I realized how I unconsciously always find an excuse to build something. I started realizing that something filmmaking lacks when compared to other art practices is an established studio practice. I think a constant studio practice can deepen the filmmaking process and free it from the alienation that the intangibility of the medium might produce in some artists. In my work I want to bring back some of that endangered materiality that is connected with the roots of filmmaking.

I have felt alienated from my own work several times and for this reason I started to set some parameters that help me to limit the loss of control over my artwork. These fundamentals allow me to keep being invested in it through its very long process. I shoot my films. I think the making of images, moving and still, is inherently a visual practice that comes from the mind of its author. For this reason I refuse the distinction

between director and cinematographer and consider these two roles one and the same. As a painter works with paint and brushes a filmmaker works with a camera.

In everyday instances I am struck by images – from the surroundings, from other works, from my own mind – that I feel compelled to give life to and I know that I can only serve them justice if am the active maker in their representation. For a similar reason I like to work with the help of few people. I don't like big crews. On big sets it is rare that participants have an idea of the essence of what is made; collaboration is mostly about technical matters rather than about the nature of the work. On set I like to create an environment that values collaboration and wellness rather than competition and performance. These foundations are in some respect closer to a fine arts process than the predominant filmmaking practice. I embrace this difference because it creates a tool to achieve an empathetic work of art that the user can feel close to.

Onikuma and other animals

The idea for my thesis film *Onikuma* started to haunt me during my first year of MFA when I came across a short story by Curzio Malaparte. War correspondent on the Russian front during WWII for the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, Malaparte is well-known for his fictional accounts of the war. His real name was Kurt Erich Suckert but he soon changed it deciding to create a last name for himself that would play on Napoleon Bonaparte's name (in Italian, "good side") by swapping the good with the bad and coining Malaparte (Mala; evil).

The story is part of *Kaputt* (1948)¹⁰, a collection of short stories that mix fiction and actual facts through metaphor and surreal moments. Malaparte narrates of a lake in Russia - Lake Ladoga, very close to the Finnish border- where there is an eerie garden of frozen horse heads that stick out of the water. According to the account the horses of the Russian army, trapped by a wildfire, ran from a burning forest into the lake. Suddenly, they were surprised by a flash freezing effect that ensnared them in the ice for eternity. Like a dart, this story struck me because it was so evocative and filled with significance that I still cannot completely understand. The story kept coming back to me in the following months so strongly that I felt compelled to take it out of my head and give it a representation.

I grew up among animals. In my life there has never been a moment where I was not surrounded by creatures; Dogs –so many dogs!- horses, hamsters and a pygmy goat. In my daily life I always have experienced the comfort of touching their fur, feeling their breathing and smell or mostly just watching them with endless fascination. By being exposed to such fauna I developed a sensitivity that makes me hyper-sensitive towards animals to the point that, depending on how crazy the chemicals of my brains are in that moment, I can be moved just by looking at a horse.

In all my films there is at least one animal that carries a symbolic meaning. Sometime its function is rather simple and relatively easy to grasp– like the fish oven mitt in my second year film *cold fish*. Sometime it's rather obscure and unattainable like in *Onikuma*. With this film I let my inner images and memories flow into something that I decided not to rationalize or impose a structure upon. In a same way as I intend my artwork to be filled in by those who are watching, the symbolism in this film can only be individually unlocked by inscribing one's subjectivity in it. This is true for its maker as much as for its user.

¹⁰ Chapter 3, *I cavalli di ghiaccio* (*The Ice horses*)

Onikuma is a Japanese yokai originary of the Kiso province. As its name says – Oni; demon, ogre and kuma; bear – the mythological creature is a magical bear. This creature is known for raiding villages and hunting horses,¹¹ his favorite food.

The culture of Yokai is one of negotiation and change. As Michael Foster¹² studied, these supernatural creatures transcend folklore creating interaction between local, national, scientific, scholarly and economic systems. In this way their significance is not always the same but changes through time depending on the system that is prevalent in that moment. I see this notion of negotiation close to the way I intend my films to be, although rather than being a discourse between macro systems is one that involves the micro systems of individuals.

I am interested in the Japanese philosophy that relates to beauty and contemplation. Most of the Japanese aesthetic philosophies that define beauty originated from the indigenous Shinto religion that values the inspiration brought by nature. One of these, *Mono no aware*, conveys an ephemeral contemplation that belongs to the moment and cannot be pinned down. Because of this temporariness this beauty is not easy to catch but it constitutes a powerful emotional experience for the time that it exists.¹³ In *Onikuma* the element of snow is inherently an ephemeral phenomenon; when I went to scout the location one week before shooting, there was a lot of clean snow and Lake Ontario had blocks of ice floating in it. The landscape was eerie and fantastic; it looked like it did not belong to earth. Experiencing it was sublime. One week later, the day of the shoot, most of the snow had melted leaving small amounts of snow and ice here and there; the ice blocks had disappeared underwater. However, this *other* stage of snow had a whole new beauty to it; it featured a half-melted scenery where the grass could be seen through the snow as well as the red soil that gave it a magenta coloring. The landscape was constituted by a rotting sort of beauty that was nothing less inspiring than the candid snow experienced the week before. This consideration brings me to *Wabi-Sabi*, which “depicts a crude or often faded beauty that correlates with a dark, desolate sublimity.”¹⁴ *Wabi-Sabi* values the elements of an object that constitute its imperfection, like asymmetry, roughness and frugality. The frozen horse head that sticks out of the lake at the end of *Onikuma* is flawed; its fakeness is

¹¹ Davisson, Zack, *Translated Japanese Ghost Stories and Tales of the Weird and the Strange* (2013) <https://hyakumonogatari.com/2013/05/28/onikuma-demon-bear/>

¹² Foster, M. D., 1965. (2009). *Pandemonium and parade: Japanese monsters and the culture of yokai*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹³ Prusinski, L. (2012). Wabi-sabi, mono no aware, and ma: Tracing traditional japanese aesthetics through japanese history. *Studies on Asia, Series IV, 2*(1), 25-49.

¹⁴ Ibidem. P. 29

striking. When I decided to make a horse head – instead, for example, of buying a taxidermy – I wanted to explore the borders between reality and illusion by rendering something that was unique; a representation of a horse that would read at the same time as the animal horse and the idea of it. Like a *memento mori* in a church, I wanted to bring in its fakeness without trying to elude the viewer into believing that it was real. In these respects I share the ideas of Fellini in regards of the representation of reality. He believed that reality cannot be portrayed by film because simply, film is not reality. Therefore the portrayal given by film is a lie. For this reason he would not try to convince its audience by using credible props but by exaggerating their fakeness and consequently calling out the attention of the audience on the illusion of film. Some of Fellini's ideas have a postmodern feel to them; this brings me to the last element of *Onikuma* that I want to bring up this writing.

In an essay titled *Acinema*,¹⁵ postmodern scholar Jean-François Lyotard, praised a form of filmmaking that, as a shift away from mainstream filmmaking, would make use of stillness and movement. Defining filmmaking as fundamentally concerned with movement, he argues that the potentially infinite number of movements is limited through framing, editing and composition. The rationale behind these choices is, according to Lyotard, dictated by matters of functionality that eventually has to do with the capitalistic system. In order to make sense, commercial cinema excludes movements and shots that are not identifiable or related to the logic of the scene. In *Onikuma*, I privileged stillness over movement through a process of subtraction. Moving through still shots of the environment and of the two protagonists, I opted to privilege contemplation over action excluding some elements that, while usually pursued in traditional narrative filmmaking, I find unnecessary to include because they can easily be inferred. One of these elements is the representation of the trope of the discovery. Instead of showing the characters while they find something, I show them before and after; two moments of emotional stillness. These moments of contemplative immobility are places for the user to fill in with their own set of experiences and memories, leaving room for an empathetic experience. Instead of seeking the engagement of the viewer through close ups or a piano soundtrack, I privilege wide shots and immobility that allow space for poetic contemplation.

¹⁵ Lyotard, Jean-François. (1986) 'Acinema.' In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. Translated by Paisley N. Livingston and edited by Philip Rosen, 349–359. New York: Columbia University Press

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Three years of MFA have passed and my understanding of art has changed throughout. When I first arrived in Syracuse my idea of what constitutes film and art was very limited and sectorial. For example, at the time I was eager to work in the industry. Now my understanding is completely different and I am starting to see things I could not see before; I am gradually acquiring tools that help my critical thinking and expand my perception of what film is and what it can be.

I started to be interested in film as installation; for the MFA show I wanted to create an inclusive experience for the user that would go beyond the frame. Although this is something that did not work as I originally hoped it would, I learned a lot from it and I know it is something I want to study and practice further in combination with matters relating to paracinema and different modes of storytelling. I am interested in finding new ways to tell stories in a way that the user will always be inscribed into the text through gaps that allow active participation.

I can now look back at our small film club and identify it as the first tool that allowed me to start developing an understanding of film that I was then lucky enough to deepen through further education.

Even though everything started with a *Cassetta*, not everything ended with a *Cassetta*.

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