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In a letter of the year 1914, the poet Ezra Pound tells his correspondent that it took him ten years to learn his art, and another five to unlearn it. The same year saw the tentative publication of three cantos for a "poem of some length" that was to become, though nameless and abandoned, the longest poem in English . . . prominent among whose denumerable traits were a lexicon of compositional tropes and a thesaurus of compositional strategies that tend to converge in a reconstitution of Western poetics.

Since it has been widely asserted that art can be neither taught nor learned, that it is a gift from Jehovah or the Muse, an emanation from the thalamus, or a metabolite of the gonads, we may pause to wonder what Pound, a failed academic and life-long scholar of diverse literatures and arts, meant by the verb *to learn* . . . let alone *unlearn*. In the same letter, Pound himself is obliquely illuminating; he had begun, he says, around 1900, to study world literature, with a view to finding out *what* had been done, and *how* it had been done, adding that he presumes the motive, the impulse, to differ for every artist.

A few years later, in the essay *How to Read*, Pound diffracts the roster of poets writing in English into a hierarchic series of zones, of which the most highly energized comprise 'inventors' and 'masters'. The essay, like most of Pound's prose writing of the period, is addressed primarily to other (presumably younger) writers; it is permeated by Pound's highly practical concern for what might be called an enhanced efficiency in the process of 'learning' an art. We need not look very deeply to find, inscribed within the pungent critical enterprise that extends and supports his concern, a single assumption: that one *learns* to write by reading. Moreover, one learns to write mainly by reading those texts that embody 'invention', that is, the vivid primary instantiation of a compositional strategy deriving from a direct insight into the dynamics of the creative process itself.

Implicit, finally, is the assertion that the compositional process is the oversubject of any text whatever: in short, what we learn when we read a text is how it was written. To put it more generally, a paramount signified of any work of art is that work's own ontogeny. Partially masked though it may be by the didactic thrust of Pound's critical writing, this insight is by no means atypical; in fact, where we do

not find it among the procedural givens of any major artist of this century, we experience a certain malaise, as if confronting a mental anomaly whose gestural consequences somehow elude detection. Indeed, at this moment we find ourselves at a critical pass that divides work that is serious from work that is not, quite precisely along the boundary between reflexiveness and naiveté.

According to a new transposition of the ancient notion that the artist is nothing other than a conduit for energies that he incarnates in the things he makes, the Elsewhere whence those energies come is now imagined to be, in the largest sense, the 'material' of the art itself. For example, the notion that language, considered as a disincorporate faculty of an entire psycholinguistic community, should, of its own nature, tend to secrete poems, is our legacy from the Symbolists. By implication, the work of the poet must be an investigation into the internal economics and dynamics of language; a theory of poetry, an enunciation of the axiomatics of language; and the poem, a demonstration consequent upon the self-interference of these axiomatics.

As for the activity of poetry, so also for poesis at large. Without a similar understanding with regard to music, to painting, or to film, the work of a Varèse or a Berg, a Mondrian or a Pollock, an Eisenstein or a Brakhage, is not only impenetrable, it is utterly unapproachable. But, given that much, *and nothing more*, the individual work of art is virtually self-explicating: to understand it is to be struck by the nature of art, and indeed, in some measure, by the nature of thought itself.

Thus the artist of the modernist persuasion outlines, if he does not utterly preempt, the terrain, the contours, of that critical activity which shall best serve language in its anguished compulsion to encompass and account for every other code: a criticism, that is, that shall direct its attention to the energies deployed in the compositional process rather than to the matter disposed in its result.

And if it is true that the object before us thus clearly predicts the vector of our research, then we might expect as well that close observation of that object will yield specific methodological prescriptions.

Since the learning, the understanding of an art consists in the recovery of its axiomatic substructure, we can begin to say that the 'unlearning' that Pound cites as indispensable to new creation, consists in the excernment, castigation, and transvaluation of that axiomatic substructure. New composition, then, may be seen as an activity synonymous, if not co-terminus, with the radical reconstitution of the imbedding code. It is in the context of such a reconstitution that we must understand Eliot's celebrated observation that every really new work modifies, however subtly, the equilibrium of every other term in its traditional matrix. Indeed, at its most fecund, a drastically innovative work typically calls into question the very boundaries of that matrix, and forces us to revise the inventories of culture . . . to find out again for every single work of art, the manner in which it is intelligible.

Our examination of the process of composition must radiate from a close scrutiny of the ways in which artists have anatomized and transubstantiated the

assumptions of the several arts. Rather than simply postulating the existence of this compound activity as an undifferentiated field, we should attempt at the very outset to construct an explicit paradigm of the ways in which axiomata are transformed. The revision appears to transpire in one or another of two modes, the first of which we might agree to call reading and the second, misreading.

The mode we call reading entails a correct extrapolation of the axiomatic substructure from the artist's immediately apprehensible tradition. Once the set of axioms has been isolated and disintricated, the artists may proceed to modify it in any of four ways: by substitution, constriction, augmentation, or by displacement. A single example will illustrate each of these ways.

1. When Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg received the tradition of music into their hands, a norm of composition stipulated that the deforming criterion of tonality must be superimposed upon the centerless grid of the chromatic scale. Reasoning that the extraction of a subset of diatonic intervals from that scale amounted to the acceptance, *a priori*, of a nucleus of melodic material, the serialists deleted entirely the axiom of tonality and *substituted* for it another: that every work must be generated in its entirety from melodic material that would guarantee its access, at any moment, to an unconstricted field of compositional options. Only a row that comprised the entire chromatic octave could do this.

2. In reply to a publisher who demanded that he expunge or modify certain portions of his *Dubliners*, James Joyce wrote that it was not possible to change or subtract so much as a single word. He had written his stories, he said, according to his own best understanding of the "classic canons" of his art. But every serious writer tries to do as much; and yet very few may be construed as setting such store by these single words. If it is self-evident that the canons of writing may be derived from the works that make up a tradition, nonetheless what works and what authors are included in that tradition is by no means obvious. For his own purposes, Joyce has *constricted* the axiom: the works from which he has derived the laws that govern his writing are those of one author, Gustav Flaubert, the encyclopaedic comedian who once spent six days on the engineering of a single paragraph that imperceptibly negotiates a transition from the active to the passive voice . . . and who dreamed of writing a novel about *nothing*.

3. From Fielding onward, it is a discernible assumption of prose fiction, understood as a homeostatic system, that no element that enters the work may exit until it has been accounted for. Prior to Joyce, this assumption had not been extended to cover very much beyond the *dramatis personae*. In *Ulysses*, Joyce seizes upon this axiom, and *augments* its force, applying it without exception to every detail of the work, both structural and textural. On the structural level, the title of the book is no casual allusion; rather, every episode in the voyage of Odysseus has its precise counterpart in Joyce's palimpsest. Early on, among Bloom's ruminations, we hear him mindspeak: "Potato. I have." What about potato? We are sure to find out, some three hundred pages later.

4. It has been customary to assert, of words interacting with one another,

that each word is, as it were, segmented into a dominant part, or denotation, and a subordinate attenuated series of connotations. Some have reasoned that writing consists in joining denotations, in such a way as to suppress connotations; others have been content to let the connotational chips fall where they may; and a third school proposes to fabricate the connotational subtext and to let the denotative text take care of itself. But if we examine words, whether as a system of marks ordered upon a surface, or a system of sounds disturbing the air, we can discover no difference between the manner in which they denote and the manner in which they connote. It is possible, then, to view the denotation of a word as no more than that particular term in a series of connotations which has, through the vicissitudes of history, won the lexicographical race. In a word, a denotation is nothing more than the most privileged among its fellow connotations. In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce, while implicitly accepting the assumption that words are made up of parts, *displaces* the privilege of the denotation, making of the word a swarm of covalent connotations equidistant from a common semantic center. Which such connotations will be identified with the notation, then, is decided in each case not within the cellular word, but through interaction with its organic context.

All axiomatic sets that derive by any of these four ways from the mode we have called 'reading' have one thing in common: they entirely supercede their predecessors, and thus, sooner or later, assume the historical role of all norms. In the moment that a new axiom vanishes into the substrate of an art, it becomes vulnerable. On the other hand, this is not true of those novel structural assumptions that derive from the mode that we have called 'misreading'. The incorrectly read or imperfectly disentangled compositional assumption invariably remains to haunt the intellectual space usurped by its successor. Thus new works building upon axioms derived by misreading from the structural assumptions of older works, must be forever contingent. Our experience of such works . . . that is, our recovery of the rules governing their composition . . . goes forward with the strain of a double effort, for we must ourselves simultaneously read and misread. In such a predicament, where the sum of compositional options never fully presents itself as a single figure clearly separated from the ground of cultural givens, the new work risks impenetrability, presenting itself in the aspect of an open set that elides, rather than emphasizes, the articulations among the elements and operations of which it is composed.

For an artist who would question the conventional boundaries of the artist's relation to the act of making, the risks consequent upon intentional misreading will seem justified. Crucial to one normative view of the relation between artist and artifact is the assumption that every trait of a work owes its presence to a deliberate decision made by the artist. The composer John Cage, by way of a constellation of intricate stratagems of abdication, has deflected the force of this assumption. The adoption of a whole phylum of procedures, called "chance operations," as a pathway alternative to rationalizing intentionality, has resulted in making the artist more conspicuous by his presumed absence. That Absence

which replaces the artist cannot, by definition, 'choose'; it can only make non-choices. To choose is to exclude; to negate choice is, by implication, to include everything. But to subvert the notion of choice is to invert the intellectual perspective within which choice operates. To make non-choices is to situate oneself, as an artist, at an intersection of inclusion and exclusion where, in the absolute copresence of every possible compositional option and every conceivable perceptual pathway, the notion of choice becomes irrelevant. For example, to inquire whether or not any particular realization of *Fontana Mix* is superior to any other, is to pose a meaningless question, for there is no fixed thing called *Fontana Mix*. Cage has derived seminal work from an intentional misreading of the axiomatics that have encapsulated the artist's task, contending that composition is the devising of ways to recognize, and annihilate, every test for distinguishing art from non-art. This is not to say that there is no such thing as art, or that everything is art; rather, it is to state that there can be no certainty, no final determination, about where we may expect to find art, or about how we are to recognize it when we do find it.

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That our examples, in the present writing, have been drawn either from literature or from music (an art that has had a long and various commerce with language) reflects doubly upon the state of research, and indeed upon the possibilities for research, in film. In the first instance, it is obvious that language and film subsist within incommensurable spaces. To render film accessible to written discourse, it is necessary that it be studied under conditions that permit random access to the text in both space and time. In the second instance, it is imperfectly obvious that film, an art that we might characterize as verging upon adolescence, remains profoundly conditioned by mutually contradictory or inhibitory axiomatic substructures derived by both reading and misreading from every literary type, from music, and from the more venerable visual arts.

If we grant that the goal of our research is to recover the axiomatics of composition in film, and to discover among them a dynamic morphology, then we must necessarily find the following conditions indispensable:

1. We must reject at the outset any suggestion that film, thus far, exhibits a coherent normal paradigm. Most especially, we must meet with skepticism the assertion that the narrative fiction film, with synchronous sound track, offers such a paradigm. Even during the heyday of its empire, the hegemony of the fiction film was seriously challenged on the axiomatic level by competing genres: instructional, documentary, newsreel.

2. We must have available to us, in a manner that encourages and facilitates deliberate investigation, the cinematic material. That is, we must be able to take the film strip in hand, at our extended leisure, and examine it frame-by-frame and splice-by-splice.

3. We must bring to our research into the working assumptions of film, a thorough grasp of the axiomatics of every discipline from which film has, willingly or unwillingly, borrowed . . . because, for our purpose, the whole history of art is no more than a massive footnote to the history of film.

It is only after we have accomplished these three conditions that we shall be able to attempt the most important:

4. We must invent a terminology, and a descriptive mode, appropriate to our object: a unique sign that shall have as its referent the creative assumptions proper to film and to film alone. The compound sign and referent is, of course, a closed system; and all closed systems, as we know, tend to break down and to generate discrepancies and contradictions at their highest levels. On the other hand, inquiry into the nature of film has reached its present impasse on account of contradictions at the very lowest levels of discourse, instigated by the casual expropriation of terminologies from other arts.

Hitherto, the study of film has been compartmentalized horizontally, in a search for diachronically parallel evolutions, and vertically, by a rough typology that distinguishes cinematic species from one another according to their social use. Such a morphology assumes that individual films, and indeed entire bodies of work in film, are isolated objects; it implies that understanding of film involves nothing more than determining its precise location on a predetermined grid.

We propose another, radically different morphology . . . one that views film, not from the outside, as a product to be consumed, but from the inside, as a dynamically evolving organic code directly *responsive* and *responsible*, like every other code, to the supreme mediator: consciousness.

We base our morphology upon direct observation of how films are actually made. The making of a film is an action which may be seen as comprising two stages. At first, the material of the film is generated. That material is nothing else but the image-bearing film strip; to generate it is to film a pretext, that is, to impress images upon the photographic emulsion. Then, the cinematic material is structured. To structure the cinematic material is to determine, by whatever means, which film strips shall enter the composition and which shall not; whether they shall enter the composition entirely or in part; and in what order the film strips shall be joined. This second stage in the activity of film-making is usually called editing; a number of film-makers have argued that the editing process, sufficiently generalized, may extend into, and even engulf, the gathering of cinematic material (filming). For some film-makers, editing is nothing more than the closure of a scheme that has pre-established every quality of the cinematic material, and every aspect of its gathering. For others, to edit is to decode into rationality the implications of cinematic material gathered in an intentional void. Between these two poles, as between filming and editing, there is no zone of demarcation, but rather a horizontally modulated continuous field.

Again, the process of film-making has variously been seen as independent from or contingent upon the imperatives of other codes. Where film has been seen as

subordinate to language, film composition has amounted to nothing more than the realization of a minutely specific scenario. Whenever the act of film-making has achieved full independence from language, a *découpage*, or metric shot-list, empirically synthesized after the fact of the completed work, displaces the scenario in a gesture of temporal inversion. Often, the scenario becomes rarefied, taking the shape of brief verbal directions, graphic sketches, or even numerical notations; at its most remote, the 'script' dwindles to a more or less complete previsualization within the eye of the mind. The intellectual space between these meridians of intentionality is, again, modulated continuously, and vertically.

From a cartoon of this alternate morphology, we may easily construct a model for detailed investigation, selecting four film-makers whose work suggests that they diverge from one another as far as possible with respect to the vertical axis of intentionality, and with respect to the distribution of their energies in the structuring of a work mapped along the horizontal axis. We might elicit from these four artists all the materials pertaining to a single film: such materials must necessarily include not only prints of uncut footage to match against the finished work, but also every retrievable scrap of concrete evidence relating to the **compositional process**.

Of course, if these four personages do not exist, then it is our humane duty to invent them.

It had something to do with lemon trees, or orange trees, I forget, that is all I remember, and for me that is no mean feat, to remember it had something to do with lemon trees, or orange trees, I forget, for of all the other songs I have ever heard in my life, and I have heard plenty, it being apparently impossible, physically impossible, short of being deaf, to get through this world, even my way, without hearing singing, I have retained nothing, not a word, not a note, or so few words, so few notes, that, that what, that nothing, this sentence has gone on long enough.

—Samuel Beckett, *First Love*

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