NEW TECHNOLOGY FOR OLD IDEAS

My practice has become increasingly text based. Works might consist of alphabetised lists of verbs in the infinitive - eg ‘to do' words - derived from newspaper reportage and organised by concordance software; or of sets of books containing timed diary entries written by an unreliable, unstable, "I" that migrates across texts copied and pasted from various sources. Two preoccupations drive the work: how mimicry (linked with identification) occurs in speech and writing, and how the first person operates as empty ‘shifter’. [1]

Some time ago I began working with a neurologist investigating ways in which language use could be modelled or diagrammed. [2] Once you can do this it becomes possible to index change. This can occur as the result of illness - which is what interested the neurologist - or as a result of technological innovations such as the invention of photography - or, before that, the printing press; external phenomena that shape the way a person thinks about and expresses selfhood. This is what interests me.

In my *Concordances* (2005-going), which evolved out of my discussions with the neurologist, I focus particularly on how language use is influenced - perhaps even directed - by the words and phrases reproduced in the media, which we go on to reproduce ourselves. The word cliché, which we might take to mean a boring, worn out or over-repeated statement, is in fact derived from the sound made during 19th C printing processes. That is to say, the word itself is an echo of the sound of something being reproduced. [3]

Used as a noun, a cliché also refers to a pre-prepared chunk of language that was cast in advance by the typesetters - a stereotype. As a quicker and more economical way of working, stereotypes became widely used from the 1830s onwards, with the advent of cheaply produced and widely-circulated newspapers.

More recently, cliché has been linked with the term ‘thought terminating’. Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has suggested that cliché is part of the language of “non-thought”. [4] A thought-terminating cliché (also known as a semantic stop-sign, a thought-stopper, bumper sticker logic, or cliché thinking) is a form of loaded language, commonly used to quell cognitive dissonance. I just copy-and-pasted that from Wikipedia.

Some people repeat clichés, Wikipedia goes on, *even to themselves, out of habit or conditioning, or as a defence mechanism to reaffirm a confirmation bias.* Thought is imprisoned, perhaps even killed - by these words. It’s a kind of entrapment in language. Why would anyone choose to think, or to speak this way? I’m interested in the relation of this to the unconscious, but also to the conscious subject’s belief that something simply *is* one thing or another - ‘because that’s just the way the story goes’.

Cliché is also the word used in French when you want to say that you are going to take a snapshot: *prendre un cliché*. However, there may be a more direct cause-and-effect link between the cliché - the mass produced word - and the mass produced photograph, particularly when you examine changes in (or reactions to) novels that were written after the invention of photography.

Gustave Flaubert for instance, who had a particular hatred of newspapers, wrote the novel *Madame Bovary* in a style intended to criticise society’s endless repetition of ‘received ideas’. [5] But he himself was criticised for writing ‘literature in the age of the machine [simply] because the photographic apparatus has been set up and everything must be reproduced’. [6] Flaubert’s refusal to take a moral position - to offer a viewpoint on the scenes unfolding - ended with him being put on trial for obscenity. Such was the disturbance ‘to civilisation’ that his novel caused. [7]

The novel itself, the flat, empty, sentences within it (famously, Flaubert declared his intention of writing a book containing 'not a single word' of his own, 'done in such a way that once one had read it one would not dare to speak again, for fear of uttering naturally one of the sentences in it') expresses, through mimicry, a dissatisfaction with language, with having no words but the words of others. As film and literature theorist Stephen Heath suggests, Flaubert's style involved 'a strategy of imitation involving an assembly of stereotypes'. [8]

Flaubert is one a group of writers who had noticed that a camera produces an image that a human plays no part in - the photograph leaves the 'self' out. Another was Virginia Woolf. Like Flaubert, Woolf employs italics to indicate words and phrases in her novels, especially in *The Waves*, 1931, that appear as if written by a machine, or recorded by one. Thus certain sentences operate like images made by a camera - as if the viewer (or writer) was simply not there.

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's lovely quote: *Every living creature having vanished, the camera can still record the reflection of the mountain in the lake or that of the Café de Flore crumbling into dust in total solitude.* [9]

Armand de Pontmartin, complaining about Flaubert's writing style: *"If machines were created in good English steel in Birmingham or Manchester to narrate or analyse, machines which would run all on their own thanks to some unknown laws of dynamics, they would function exactly like M Flaubert.''* [10]

Perhaps it's possible to think of my diaristic work in relation to Virginia Woolf's investigations into the first person, her attempts to describe 'a world seen without a self'; [11] and my concordances in relation to Flaubert's attack on 'received ideas'. [12] In the former body of work a text builds accumulatively, unpredictably; while in the latter it is generated by running found copy through software that organises it according to various selected criteria. However, the age of mechanical reproduction, which Flaubert and Woolf's writing practices engaged with, has past. I liked author Kate Zambreno's question about writing that takes into consideration the state of *dérive* of the average smartphone user. "Can a work of literature contain the energy of the internet, its distracted nature?" [13]

Also: Jennifer Roberts's comment on Instagram, about how the captions posted along with her image(s) can shape form: "I will be posting preliminary thoughts and notes occasionally as I prepare [my new essay/paper] - oddly, *writing in Instagram format helps me distill my thinking*." https://www.instagram.com/p/CKCt_PwF2Kh/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

I am currently working on a new diary. I intend to keep recording for a year. My hope is that I end up with a text that has evolved by a kind of accretion, where all threads are connected, spiderweb-like, to other threads from many sources. This is a shift from literature 'in the age of the machine' to a writing only possible in the age of the internet; of copy and paste, of text predict, hypertext and algorithmically directed 'influencing'. Literature in the age of the screengrab or Twitterthread.

For example, this morning I started typing 'I have', and text predict suggested 'checked my Instagram'. This was exactly what I wanted to say! This was exactly what I *was going* to say – but text predict leapt ahead of me. By the end of the year, perhaps, text predict will be writing the diary entirely by itself, without my involvement altogether. The same entries at the same time every day. Minor variations introduced by algorithm to reflect concurrent newsfeed or instagram updates, etc.

This to raise the possibility that what comes out of my mouth may not be as original as I think it is, may not in fact originate from 'me' at all. Just as my a high percentage of my unconscious bodily gestures are merely repetition or habit (something I explored in my Motion Capture Drawings) so might be my speech and especially my writing - as is writing in general. Because isn't it the case

that all of us, in our everyday speech, use clichés? Every word I utter might already be a ready-made, might have been filched from someone or somewhere else; a found object that I have adopted through various processes of identification - with only slips, lapses, silences or hesitations indicating the possibility, the presence, of a wordless *being*.

SOME DATES: A SPECULATIVE LIST (WITH OMISSIONS).

From stereotype to copy and paste, to algorithms that track your activity:

If you liked that, you'll love this…

1822: Heliography, or 'sun drawing', invented by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce.

1825: Cliché / Stereotype: a precast print block that could reproduce type or images repeatedly. Useful in book publishing, vital in newspaper publishing.

1826: Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826 or 1827). Earliest known surviving photograph from nature. Made in a primitive camera.

1830: First 'penny press' newspaper came onto the market: Lynde M. Walter's Boston *Transcript*. Penny press papers cost about one-sixth the price of other newspapers, and appealed to a wider audience. Newspaper editors exchanged copy and freely reprinted material. By the late 1840s, telegraph networks linked major and minor cities so news could be transmitted from a wide range of locations and sources.

1833: Charles Babbage develops ideas for his 'Analytical Engine'. Input of data via punch cards - a binary number system used in Jacquard loom technology.

1838: Daguerre, *Boulevard du Temple.* By 1839 the Daguerreotype was in popular use, before being superseded by the collodion process in the **1850s** and after that by the gelatin process (contemporary artists such as Liz Deschenes still use this process).

1843 Ada Lovelace writes the world's first algorithm, making her the first computer programmer. Building on Babbage's ideas alongside those of mathematician LF Menabrea,

1856: Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was being published in serial form. (It appeared in book form in 1857, after the obscenity trial). Reproduction of 'types'. Refusal of a subjective point of view, or moral position).

1870s Flaubert compiles notes for what eventually became *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, first published 1911–13. Published as a separate work in 1951. (An English translation by Jacques Barzun published by New Directions, 1954.)

1882: "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts" [Unser Schreibzeug arbeitet mit an unseren Gedanken], Frederick Nietzsche, in a letter to Peter Gast. When Nietzsche began using a typewriter, 'a Danish writing ball by Malling Hansen that did not allow him to see the letter imprinted at the moment of inscription - he not only anticipated *ecriture automatique* but also began to change his way of writing and thinking from sustained argument and prolonged reflection to aphorisms, puns, and "telegram style."' Frederich A Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, 1999. (From the introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Micheal Wutz, pxxix)

1888: George Eastman releases the Kodak camera, with celluloid (instead of paper) film used from 1889. Customers sent the camera back to the factory for image processing and printing.

1918 '*Die Buribunken*', by Carl Schmitt, published in the journal *SUMMA.* In this piece of speculative fiction Schmitt discusses the future emergence of a specific posthuman – '*Die Buribunken*' – humans who have become integrated into a global system of continuous diary writing and dissemination as existence. Buribunken were 'scribes and record keepers who had merge[d] with the machines that they use and the documents that they keep'.

1922: James Joyce, *Ulysses* - included newspaper reportage, songs, adverts etc. Stream of consciousness, consisting, in great part, of cliché and readymade phrases.

1931: Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* - 'how describe a world seen without a self?' Sentences that omit the "I" of the first person. Influenced by the encounter with photography.

1936: Alan Turing, *On Computable Numbers.* Turing proposed a device he called a 'Universal Computing machine' (now known as the universal Turing machine). Principle of the modern computer.

1941: Konrad Zuse finished building his Z3. Designed in in 1935, it was the first fully-automatic, program-driven and freely programmable computer that used binary floating point computation.

1960's: 'Thinking machines'. Early AI. IBM's demonstrations of automated handwriting recognition and language translation.

1970s: Early desktop computers.

1971: Ray Tomlinson sends the world's first email (to himself).

1974: (approx) Lawrence Tesler and Tim Mott develop the copy and paste function on the Gypsy word processor for PARC (Palo Alto Research Center, formerly Xerox PARC.)

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, desktop computers come into common use - eg the IBM PC and its clones, followed by the Apple Macintosh. Shift to laptops in 2000's

1990: Photoshop released. First developed in 1987 by Thomas and John Knoll. Now industry standard, with the name itself describing the process, eg: a manipulated image has been 'photoshopped'.

1989 - 1994: English scientist Sir Timothy Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989. He wrote the first web browser in 1990 while employed at CERN near Geneva, Switzerland. The browser was released outside CERN to other research institutions starting in January 1991, and then to the public in August 1991. The Web began to enter everyday life in 1993-4, when websites for general use started to become available.

1992: First text sent. Neil Papworth, a 22-year-old test engineer, made texting history when he sent the world's first text to a cell phone. Subsequent evolution of SMS language, textspeak, or texting language.

1994: The IBM Simon Personal Communicator, first manufactured. Could send and receive both emails and faxes. Retrospectively named the world's first smartphone - though the term 'smart phone' or 'smartphone' didn't appear in print until 1995.

1996: Nokia 9000 Communicator: The first mobile phone with Internet connectivity.

1990s: Early netspeak. First emoji's appear, having evolved out of emoticons.

2001: First smartphone connected to a 3G network.

2006: Twitter invented. Twitter poets, eg Patricia Lockwood, working with the 140 character limit.

2007: Apple launched the iPhone with a touchscreen and camera. Users could browse the web just as they would on a desktop computer. 'The day we lost our attention span'.

2008: 'App Store' launched with 500 apps. As Apple claims, apps 'democratised software distribution and transformed how we live' because anyone could design and sell an app on this platform. More and more done solely on the phone, through apps - from games, shopping, banking/accounting, tracking health to image editing. Apple's marketing: 'There's an App for that.'

2009: Google started using a new algorithm for its search engine, which tracks signals from individual users in order to present them with customised pages corresponding to who they are assumed to be, and what kind of things they like. A 'personalised search' for everyone.

2010: Instagram launched. In the same year Unicode officially adopts emoji.

2011: Apple added an official emoji keyboard to iOS; Android followed suit two years later.

2014: 700 million photos shared each day on Snapchat.

2021: The total number of tweets (Twitter) sent per day is 500 million. Instagram has 1.15 billion active users, with 500 million daily active users of Instagram Stories.

Literature in the age of the screengrab or Twitterthread: As one 'writer who tweets' puts it, this might take the form of *"a collaborative accretion around a central thread, like a crystal growing or a wasps nest being built." (@pangmeli 25 May 2020).*

Tom McCarthy, 'The death of Writing: If James Joyce were alive today he'd be working for Google', article in Guardian newspaper: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/07/tom-mccarthy-death-writing-james-joyce-working-google

Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing, Managing Language in the Digital Age*, Columbia University Press, 2011, and *Wasting Time on the Internet*, Harper Perennial, New York, 2016

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FOOTNOTES:

[1] See Krauss, R. (1986), 'Notes on the Index' in *The Originality of the Avant Garde and other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, USA, p69: *The shifter is Jakobson's term for that category of linguistic sign which is "filled with signification" only because it is "empty." The word 'this' is such a sign, waiting each time it is invoked for its referent to be supplied. "This chair," "this table," or "this . ." and we point to something lying on the desk. "Not that, this," we say. The personal pronouns 'I' and 'you' are also shifters. As we speak to one another, both of us using 'I' and 'you', the referents of those words keep changing places across the space of our conversation. I am the referent of 'I' only when I am the one who is speaking. When it is your turn, it belongs to you.*

[2] See Professor Peter Garrard's work on Iris Murdoch's novels and early signs of dementia/ Alzheimer's disease: http://www.petergarrard.com/media/iris-murdoch/

[3] Originating around 1825 in the printing workshops of nineteenth century France, it is the past participle of the French *clicher*, 'to click'

[4] Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China*, Norton, 1961

[5] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, published in book form in 1857 (after trial for obscenity). See also his *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* (published posthumously from 1911 onwards, and as a separate work in 1951. Translated and published in English by New Directions in 1954)

[6] Heath, S. (1992) *Madame Bovary*, Cambridge University Press, p 51-2. Heath is quoting Armand de Pontmartin in *Le Correspondant,* 25 June 1857. The quote about the novel 'as photographic apparatus' is on p303

[7] I'm quoting Roland Barthes here, from *Camera Lucida*: "Odd that no one has thought of the disturbance (to civilisation) which this new action (seeing oneself through the photograph) causes… the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity…." Barthes, R. (2000) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Vintage, London, p12

[8] Heath, S. (1992) *Madame Bovary*, Cambridge University Press, p27

[9] Lacan, J. (1991) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book Two: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, Norton, London, p62.

[10] Heath, S. (1992) *Madame Bovary*, Cambridge University Press, p50

[11] In Woolf's novel *The Waves*, one question is repeatedly formulated: 'how describe the world seen without a self?' Woolf, V. (2000), *The Waves,* Penguin, London, p221, and at other many points throughout the novel.

[12] Flaubert, G. (1967) *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, trans Jacques Barzun, New Directions Publishing (seventh printing), New York.

[13] Zambreno, K. (2020) *Drifts*, Riverhead Books, New York, p101