

THE SOLITARY ECSTATIC

Becoming Barthes

I neither know, nor care, whether Roland Barthes ever intended to write a novel.

*What matters, is, if he had (if he did), what would (does) it **look** like?*

Research Proposal
By Project

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Overview

In 1978, two years before his death, Roland Barthes held a lecture course at the Collège de France.¹ Entitled, *The Preparation of the Novel*, it was a series of lectures, seminars, exercises and experiments seeking a new writing practice that would culminate in the realization of the Novel.²

The course is in two parts; Part 1, *From Life to the Work*, which ran from December 1978 to March 1979; and Part 2, *The Work as Will*, which ran from December 1979 to February 1980.

I propose to follow Barthes's course for two years, applying his methodology both textually and visually, (specifically film), with the intention of, (*as if...*), spending the third year producing a visual manifestation of the Barthesian Novel.³

¹ In February 1980, Roland Barthes was run over by a laundry van and died a few weeks later from injuries sustained in the accident. *The Preparation of the Novel* was Barthes's last writing project.

² I use Barthes's upper case throughout when referring to the Novel, 'Novel' should slowly expand to include Absolute Novel, Romantic Novel, *poikilos* Novel, Novel of the Writing-Tendency; in other words, all works of literature.' (Barthes 2011/144).

³ 'Will I really write a novel? I'll answer this and only this. I'll proceed *as if* I were going to write one. I'll install myself within this *as if*: this lecture course could have been called "As If." (2011/20).

Key research questions

I. Textual/Literary Utopia

The language of literature bears witness to social alienation, yet it also inscribes the dream of social liberation. Barthes's lifelong fidelity to literature (perceived in this way) forms the baseline of his own utopian project. (Knight: 1997/4)

If Barthes's texts are characterised by a lack of dogma/ideology through the use of fragmentation, ambivalence, contradiction and *slippage*, then it would appear paradoxical that he should state 'literature becomes the utopia of language', (Barthes: 1953/88), given that utopia is so often (again, paradoxically) shackled by ideology.⁴

This pursuit of literary utopia that Knight identifies as running through Barthes's texts may be seen as a precursor to the quest for Textual *jouissance* and its connotations of bliss and ecstasy.⁵

*Barthes supposes literature subverts language to produce utopia (freedom), is there an equivalent visual equation; what transgression is required to produce The Neutral?*⁶

If the outcome to Barthes's utopian project is freedom realised through transgression, (albeit of a very quiet, subtle kind), we can reference other writers such as Georges Batailles and Pierre Guyotat, both of whom risk their 'authorial subjectivity', through an 'ekstasis, an opening or laceration that allows for a true or essential communication', (Kilpatrick 2005/1). Barthes identifies this as an 'ex-stasy, a mutation' (131) that affects the writer and reader in equal measure.

Patricia MacCormack emphasises lack of temporality as suspension in relation to the ecstatic (being) and ecstasy, both in film in, *Cinesexuality* and in sculpture; specifically Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St Teresa*.

These 'lacerations' are arguably present in the large scale, back lit images produced by [John Russell](#), it is no great leap to imagine Barthes is describing one such image when he imagines the Novel as

⁴ '...by around 1970, he has ceased to be constrained by the role of mythologist or of political theorist, however impeccably revolutionary: "Hence utopia would be the taboo of the revolution, and the writer would be responsible for transgressing it; he alone could risk that representation; like a priest, he would close the ethical circle, answering by a final vision of values to the initial revolutionary choice (the reason why one becomes a revolutionary)." ' (Knight, 1997/3).

⁵ For clarification on the term, 'textual ecstasy/jouissance' please see [Textual Ecstasy](#)

⁶ The lecture course that Barthes ran between 1977-1978 at the Collège de France was entitled *The Neutral* which placed the method above the argument, 'a pedagogy of nuance' (de Villiers, Nicholas 2005/10). Barthes defines the Neutral as; 'that which outplays {dejoue} the paradigm', (2002/6).

'a vast extended canvas painted with illusions, fallacies, made-up things, the "false" if we want to call it that: a veil of Maya... (108)

II. Desire/Anxiety/Lack

The Sometimes painful, sometimes vertiginous confrontation between the desire to write...and the sociocultural mechanism that it usually has to be integrated into, that is, *literature* as an Institution or Commerce. (Barthes: 2011/141)

The desire to write is born of a pleasure (bliss) in reading, I am seduced into writing/working by the, 'bedazzlement of language'. (131) Yet, inherent within desire is disappointment; just as sexual desire is derailed by the actual act, so my Literary *jouissance* (the Novel), if achieved, will only confirm my lack.

*The question here is twofold; how to sustain the desire to write/work and how to sustain the reader's/ viewer's desire to read/watch, given that disappointment is inevitable.*⁷

Adrian Johnston and Slavoj Žižek articulate the paradoxical nature of desire/lack and the anxiety inherent therein. The English translation of, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X* is forthcoming in May 2014; however there is an unauthorised translation available online which I have referenced.

The June 2013 edition of [e-flux](#) is an excellent example of the anxiety surrounding art production and the provocative subject of accelerationist aesthetics; the anxiety/crisis is articulated in the opening lines of the introduction;

Where did the critical tradition of art go? Maybe that's the wrong question. Because we know the answer. It went into spectacle. It went into finance. It got privatized, democratized, scrutinized, defunded, bureaucratized, then professionalized. The critical stick became a seductive carrot. (Aranda, J. Wood, B.K. Vidokle, A. 2013)

⁷ For Lacan, pleasure/jouissance presupposes desire, whether his early account whereby the two coexist or later when he posits that desire is founded on the **absence/lack** of jouissance are acknowledged, in both, desire is an essential of jouissance (Evans, 1998, p.6).

II. Memory/Affect/Immersion

For Barthes, the Novel is built on a bed of the false, littered with, 'Moments of Truth that are its absolute justification'. (108) He equates these moments of truth with 'moments of pathos ... affective elements'. (108) The problem here, for Barthes, (though interestingly, he does not phrase it in the first person), is that this structure can be stultifying:⁸

...managing to write a novel...comes down to conceding to lie, to being capable of lying...Ultimately, then, the resistance to the novel, the inability to produce a novel... would be a *moral* resistance. (109)

If we translate Barthes's model for the Novel to the moving image, is there a moral (ethical?) imperative to distinguish between the false and the truth? Is a 'nonindexical realism' (Shaviro: 2007/63) possible, or even relevant?⁹

Steven Shaviro states that when Barthes refers to film, he does so only with reference to the still and 'rejects what is generally understood as the temporality of film.' (2007/75) But it is precisely Barthes's recognition of the photograph (and the film still) as a 'one-time presence' (76) that mean his commentary still resonates:

To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. (Barthes 82/89)

Shaviro believes that this 'is a formulation that applies more strongly than ever to the nonindexical digital images that surround us today.' (77) Their very ubiquity make the argument about reality/non-reality/truth in relation to the image certainly not obsolete, but less in thrall to critique, (dogma?): 'Images are themselves a constituent part of the "real world." They are as real as anything else, more real perhaps.' (65)

⁸ 'And maybe this, he wonders, is why he is still unable to write a novel: he has a moral resistance (such primness!) to this mixing of fiction and truth'. Thirwell, A. (2010).

⁹ The trajectory of Barthes's work between 1978 and 1980 is important in relation to The Preparation of The Novel and the writing 'project'. The most prescient publication in relation to this proposal is *Camera Lucida* (1980), (although it was submitted to his publishers in 1979), an intensely personal examination into the nature of the photograph, presence and absence.

III. The Speculative Novel

Much is made of whether or not Barthes actually meant to write the Novel, *la Vita Nova*.¹⁰ But *The Preparation of the Novel* is not the Novel/work of art as hypothesis, (however interesting that may be), it is the Work as suggestive suspension; a sort of positive nihilism.

April 15, 1978. Casablanca...Something like a "literary" conversion--it's those two very old words that occur to me: to enter into literature, into writing; *to write*, as if I'd never written before: to do only that. (8)

Can the writing/work only begin when there is, 'nothing left to lose'?(20)¹¹

Well before the financial crisis in 2008 and before the pervasive effects of neoliberalism saw art retreat into repetition (again), Simon O'Sullivan wrote that;

...the business of art history changes from a hermeneutic to a heuristic [go figure] activity: art history as a kind of parallel to the work that art is already doing rather than as an attempt to fix and interpret art; indeed art history as precisely a kind of creative writing. (2001/130)

Barthes's own desire for a new writing, a 'Pathetic criticism', which, 'rather than logical units (structural analysis), would start out from affective elements,' (2011/108) does just what O'Sullivan describes; but with a subtle intensity/urgency, born of his 'conversion'.

Though melancholic, the book is overwhelmingly affirmative and with his acceptance of 'losing face', (20) comes a generosity of (Literary) form that almost supersedes, (but never quite does), the content. When describing the enduring allure of Nick Land, Alex Williams refers to the '...libidinal pull of the text itself...worth reading simply for the exquisitely savage quality of his writing.'

Barthes is no Land, but his texts are unquestionably libidinal, and quietly savage.

¹⁰ *La Vita Nova* was what Barthes called his novel-to-be, it translates literally as *a new life*, but is also used after Dante's *Vita Nova* which saw a new form; 'the poem, the narrative, and the commentary'. (Leger, N. 2011/xxi)

¹¹ For further reading on writing as loss of subjectivity and nothing left to lose, please read [Textual Labour](#) specifically the chapter on Bataille, and the Conclusion.

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