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Steve McCaffery Remixed:

“great poems are read from the bottom up”

Abstract: The following essay is a work of Recombinant Theory. To write this essay, I have performed an elaborate cut-up and montage of Steve McCaffery’s poetic and critical writing, producing over 4,000 recombinant aphorisms that extend from McCaffery’s own poetics, while also refracting his theoretical concepts. Of these 4,000+ aphorisms, I have compiled several in the linear sequence that follows. This essay is an original work of narrative and theory, and it is also fully indebted to McCaffery’s own work. Recombinant Theory is constraint theory, producing critical writing by means of poetic technique. This strategy resonates with the first mandate of the Toronto Research Group Manifesto (written by McCaffery and bpNichol), which states that “all theory is transient & after the fact of writing.” In Recombinant Theory, the essay’s ideas minimally precede the writing process; the cut-up and montage techniques are predetermined, but the process itself determines what recombinant aphorisms will emerge, and what theoretical arc will be produced through the sequencing of these aphorisms. Recombinant Theory chooses not to assess a text at arm’s length, not to summarize any part of a text, not to paraphrase, not to speak on a text’s behalf. Instead, Recombinant Theory speaks *with* the text, geomantically realigning its energy patterns, infecting the text’s energy while also being infected by it, foregrounding the direct physical impact of material language, waging an attack on the categories of author and reader.

Keywords: Recombinant Theory, remix, Language writing

Introduction

The following essay is a work of Recombinant Theory. To write this essay, I have performed an elaborate cut-up and montage of Steve McCaffery’s poetic and critical writing, producing over 4,000 recombinant aphorisms that extend from McCaffery’s own poetics, while also refracting his theoretical concepts. Of these 4,000+ aphorisms, I have compiled several in the linear sequence that follows. This essay is an original work of narrative and theory, and it is also fully indebted to McCaffery’s own work.

Recombinant Theory is constraint theory, producing critical writing by means of poetic technique. This strategy resonates with the first mandate of the Toronto Research Group Manifesto (written by McCaffery and bpNichol), which states that “all theory is transient & after the fact of writing” (*Rational Geomancy* 23). In Recombinant Theory, the essay’s ideas minimally precede the writing process; the cut-up and montage techniques are predetermined, but the process itself determines what recombinant aphorisms will emerge, and what theoretical arc will be produced through the sequencing of these aphorisms.

Recombinant Theory chooses not to assess a text at arm's length, not to summarize any part of a text, not to paraphrase, not to speak on a text's behalf. Instead, Recombinant Theory speaks *with* the text, geomantically realigning its energy patterns, infecting the text's energy while also being infected by it, foregrounding the direct physical impact of material language, waging an attack on the categories of author and reader. These goals respond to McCaffery's position in *North of Intention*:

Language today no longer poses problems of meaning but practical use; the relevant question being not 'what does this writing mean'? (as if meaning was somehow a represented essence in a sign the activity of reading substantially extracts) but 'how does this writing work'? (148)

The recombinant essay simulates a clinamen effect upon the McCaffery oeuvre, destabilizing the "original" material in order to demonstrate not a *correct* reading, but the very potential of *multiplicity* in readerly activity. Recombinant Theory moves from an ideology of *word order* to an ideology of *world flux*, integrating this ideology not only into its process, but also into its visual surface of signifiers (linguistic repetitions, strange punctuation, abrupt shifts between upper and lower case, and rigid paragraph lengths). In writing this essay, my own zigzagging movements through the text have become inscribed as a (necessarily reductive) map of this non-self-identical textual terrain. But what does this map indicate? the terrain of McCaffery's work, or of my own? As McCaffery (or perhaps bpNichol) says in *Rational Geomancy*, "A measure of the success of this method is the present inability to decipher whose thinking was whose" (11). In reading this essay, you must also (and equally) become the reader/writer of this perception.

The essay's section headers are all direct quotations from McCaffery's texts, as are the individual sentences in the essay's first section. All other sentences are splicings-together of fragments from his texts. This essay has been written with the permission and of Steve McCaffery. This essay is part of *Inhabitations: A Recombinant Theory Project*. Micro-reports from this project are regularly published on Twitter: @remixtheory.

Steve McCaffery Remixed: "great poems are read from the bottom up"

We entered a city consisting entirely of grey thursday mornings. And now we arrive at the actual construction of the space. The foundations of this new world are being laid right now. Get out of bed and go downstairs. Pick up the newspaper and immediately turn to the obituary columns. If your name does not appear go back to bed.

A meaningful language can only be a living language. As we read, see, or scan the poem, we come to feel syntax as the movement of a textual surface without a pre-determined destination. The writer simply delimits the choices. Show him the knife.

Force him to take up the pen and write some more. Cut to blank wall.

Unity can only announce itself in fragments. [with reading you absorb tradition / with writing you destroy it]. Put parentheses around the whole incident and leave quietly. The poet pulls out a gun and shoots a member of the audience. Writing never eliminates the need for action but action can sometimes eliminate the need for writing.

All theory is transient & after the fact of writing, the message being that we are all poets one and all as long as we have lungs. The audience applauds. The whole emergence is very complex: no form or technique exists separate from what is said. [there are no schools and no movements / simply techniques for living]

**“we both inhabit and inhibit an unconscious
that is structured as a language”**

We entered a city consisting entirely of grey language units, a city consisting entirely of obituary columns. What is important to grasp here is the language itself. A city consisting entirely of contemporary mainstream poetry. A city consisting entirely of grey meaning. We are all lost in a labyrinth. We both inhabit and inhibit the scene of the poem.

Continuous space is replaced with the substance of language. The scene of the poem is its “noise” and “static.” How do we decipher a random sequence of words? How do we decipher this profound discontinuity? My hope in this chapter is to move freely, as the language itself moves. The scene of the poem is the space of syntax.

People pass in the street as language itself moves. We are all signifiers whose signifieds are undetermined. Language units are placed within a city consisting entirely of non-linear paths. Rhythmic structures are translated into the streets. Commit to an interacting surface of signifiers. Let us assume a material prose. Let us assume the text’s destiny.

Grey appears as the mutilated memory of all theory (a city consisting entirely of grey material prose). What we need to establish is a constant stream of feelings and ideas. How do we decipher this stream-of-consciousness? How do we decipher the turbulence? We commit to elements pre-selected by the writer. We both inhabit and inhibit a dialogue.

“try to reproduce exactly all the sounds that you hear”

Grammar is a repressive sequencing on the reader’s part; let us assume that it’s

important to keep control. It's important to keep control of a random sequence of words. It's important to keep control of the book as a machine. Art should always intend to be an ultimate signified. My hope in this chapter is to perpetuate the repression.

First, define good writing as contemporary mainstream poetry. Content will consequently perpetuate the repression, simultaneously pushing towards, yet resisting, an ultimate signified. Ask a reader to try and guess an ultimate signified. The audience has no authentic properties; the audience boos absolute liberation.

It's important to keep control of all poets. Let us assume that classic authority. Grammar is a repressive sequence of words. Grammar is a repressive reading of the codes. We were words in poets. We were words in the street. We commit to the structures that perpetuate the repression. You must write NOTHING BEYOND THESE WORDS.

Alternatively, the entire text may be patterns of defective language, a profound discontinuity wrapped in a surplus of repetitions. Grammar is a repressive process of assembling. Art should always intend to be unintelligible, violent, and opaque. The meaning of the word is both feedback and aftershock.

“the whole torture translates the brain”

Abandoning the signified results in an entire demolition. How do we decipher this entire demolition? Our work reaches for a knife. One has already cut a deep wound into word and meaning. All poets cut and mix into a permanent wound. The audience applauds the whole torture. What is important to grasp here is a knife.

All theory is a kind of apocalyptic perspective. After the dark, we watched the whole torture of permutation, iteration, and erasure. I must hear myself in that series of commands: a series of commands that overlap, converge, collide: a series of commands superimposed against a blue sky. History, too, is essentially a linguistic torture.

This particular city reaches for a knife. We both realized that we had been cut. Ruptures occur in fixed binary oppositions. Ruptures occur in my own ego. Ruptures occur in this seemingly bizarre conceptual apparatus. We both inhabit and inhibit a label that reads “POET.” All theory is unintelligible, violent, and opaque.

A poem does not exhaust the whole torture. We are all poets in permanent revolution. We are all poets of destruction. This text functions as a pair of scissors. Reading becomes a mandatory pair of scissors. Let us cut and mix into a permanent wound.

The foundations of this new world in permanent revolution. Language breaks the knife.

“are we passing into night or retreating out of day?”

We both realized that we had been scattered through a text, the scene of the poem un-hinged from context and drifting. Everything has disappeared in the midst of my own reading. What is important to grasp here is the material prose. The ground you stand on is a picture of defective messages. The ground you stand on is a provisional equilibrium.

The scene of the poem is the human pulse in language. A pair of scissors helps present the poet’s own perceptual framework. On closer examination we see a textual space as a lettered surface. The writer simply delimits the frame of reference: valuable frames that overlap, converge, collide. The ground you stand on is clipped with scissors.

Words were painted on the ground you stand on. Everything has disappeared in a random sequence of words. Cut and mix the heavens, because the heavens are the screen in front of us. THE WORDS THEMSELVES ARE superimposed against a blue sky. There are no schools and no heavens. The audience boos the frame of reference.

We both realized that we had been abandoned in the process of assembling. We both realized that we had become an echo. We commit to the erosion of meaning, because the heavens are constantly withheld and likewise never present. A poem does not exhaust the heavens, because the heavens are the vacuum of a vacant space.

“take a label that reads “POET” and hang it around your neck”

The scene of the poem is superseded by a method of writing: tiny molecules scotch-taped together, continuous linear syntax scotch-taped together. This text functions as a micropoetics of delirium: numerous discrete micropractices that overlap, converge, collide. The tiny molecules move freely, as the language itself moves.

Patterns of defective messages scotch-taped together. We are all poets of necessity and change. We are all poets superseded by a method of writing. We had failed to consider patterns of defective messages. All theory is transient & helps present the poet’s own perceptual system. All theory is transient & defective. All theory is product and machine.

We commit to a radically unstable practice, both reader and writer passed through and finally jettisoned, discrete units passed through and finally jettisoned. Art should always intend to be passed through and finally jettisoned. We are all poets and

nothing more. Poets must be physically released. History, too, is essentially a poetics of reading.

I'm still supportive of the desire for poets. We are all poets functioning as reader. We are all poets in this respect at least. Great poems are inscribed as micro-reports. The clinamen here takes the form of both reader and writer, the tiny molecules of reader and writer, the tiny molecules of a material prose. The potential scale of the project is atomic.

“write to neutralize / read to infect”

What is important to grasp here is the human pulse in language. The audience is not a neutral field. The textual role of the reader is not a neutral field. The substance of language is not a neutral field. Reading becomes a mandatory permutation, iteration, and erasure, a machine designed for the production of reader as perceptual participant.

Reading becomes a mandatory erosion of meaning. Reading becomes a mandatory counter-communication. You must write by means of controlled interference. You must write through nonlinear reading habits. The text's destiny is not a neutral field. The reader is always inhabited or inhabitable. A reader is always a network of influences.

Significantly, we chose to call our work perceptual. On closer examination we see the reader as performer, the book as a machine of perceptual sequencing, my own reading superseded by a method of writing, a “reading” of the elements by means of controlled interference, the reader, as perceptual participant, passed through and finally jettisoned.

What is important to grasp here is in your reading, the realignment of discrete units into certain reading paths. Reading becomes a mandatory process of assembling, whose heart beats loudly in patterns of defective messages. Reading becomes a mandatory critical discourse. We are all writing and reading. We are all “swallowed” into theory.

“the best way to become yourself is to stop being who you are”

The reader can only take effect through an interacting surface of signifiers, a machine designed for the production of random associations, and last night yes i dreamed a radically unstable practice. I dreamt i was a machine, that i was the realignment of discrete units, the text superseded by a method of writing.

The best way to become yourself is to take up the pen and write some more (the cerebral event superseded by a method of writing). I must hear myself in the book as a machine. I must hear myself in that profound discontinuity, my own personal & still emerging perceptual process, my own personal & still emerging machine.

These reports make no pretence to reflect my current thinking. These reports make no pretence to a pre-determined destination. What is important to grasp here is the interplay of chance and necessity. What is important to grasp here is BEYOND THESE WORDS. My hope in this chapter is to be experienced more than understood.

Poems were an attempt to produce necessity and change, and last night yes i dreamed instead of developing a thesis. I dreamt i was a machine, that i was a reading of the codes. I must hear myself in my own reading, my own personal & still emerging provisional equilibrium. What is produced is a product and machine.

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