

KYLE SCHLESINGER

BOUNDARIES OF MEMORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH NICK PIOMBINO

Nick Piombino's books include *Fait Accompli* (Factory School), *The Boundary of Blur* (Roof), *Theoretical Objects* (Green Integer), and *Hegelian Honeymoon* (Chax). His weblog [::fait accompli::](http://faitaccompli.com) has appeared regularly since 2/11/03. This interview is the second half of *The Boundary of Theory*, a chapbook of Piombino's I published in 2001. The first section is an essay he presented in Charles Bernstein's "Blank Seminar" on Thursday, September 28, 2000. After class, Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry, Thom Donovan, Bernstein and I dined with Piombino at Steak n' Sirloin in Buffalo, NY.. A few days later, he generously agreed to continue the conversation by way of an e-interview.

KS: In Buffalo, you read an essay entitled, "The Boundary of Theory" wherein you suggest, "When there are no longer words or concepts that describe our deepest, most repressed longings, we can turn to visualizations to regain access to routes of liberation." This thought reemerged incessantly in my mind after the reading, perhaps because it accurately addresses the complex, yet reciprocal nature of writing and memory. It seems that the relationship between memory and narrative are longstanding points of fascination in your poetics.

In your essay "Writing and Remembering" you wrote, "... the text (and its corresponding thought process) is momentarily liberated from its history (memory) and from its history-making function (remembering)." It seems that your work, and that of some of your contemporaries, has responded to a deep political critique of history as a "catalogue of endings" by asserting an alternate means of reading and writing memory through the reconstruc-

tion of narrative. When I read *Poems*, I can't help but feel the sway between the various constructions of narrative, such as "Anon" or "Phase" and "Manhattan" or "The Pyramids." In my reading, each of these poems, in various ways, approaches the question of memory. How has the relationship between memory and narrative evolved in your own work?

NP: I often think of the film *Blade Runner*, based on a novel by Phillip K. Dick, when I discuss memory. In that film, the male lead who is a kind of bounty hunter of escaped or out of control androids, falls in love with a female android, a human copy created in a laboratory. At one point the female android remarks to the bounty hunter that she has so many childhood memories that she must, in fact, be human. "Implants," the bounty hunter tells her. The memories were, in fact, implanted images taken from the brain of the inventor's niece. I've interpreted this as a powerful metaphor for the impact indoctrination has on all of our thinking, including remem-

bering. Instead of being taken as objective lessons to be confronted, frequently painful and oppressive experiences are forgotten or repressed on an individual and cultural level. So-called “narrative structure” like the structure of dreams, is profoundly influenced by the pleasure principle.

Early on, in my reading of poetry, I was strongly attracted to the transformational powers inherent in language. I observed that poetry embodied an exemplary manifestation of such powers particularly in radical works like Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Stein’s *How to Write*, Vallejo’s *Trilce*, and John Ashbery’s *The Tennis Court Oath*. I understood that poetry, like psychoanalysis, under optimal circumstances was capable of unearthing the frequently hidden or disguised potential of language to empower people on many levels: psychological, social, artistic, political. Certain poetry does this by means of innovative conceptions of how language represents and creates images heard and seen. These “defamiliarizing” techniques distance ordinary perceptions of memory and observation by laying bare the automaticity of assumptions and conclusions, the received organizing principles that determine what is believed to be possible in the imagination and in reality.

In the UB seminar I spoke about the “magic” of art and poetry. I was talking about the revival of ancient incantatory powers in language, powers that have been disguised, bidden and sometimes lost because of assumptions about the limits of rationality and language brought into play largely by the valorization of scientific and logical procedures. The many aspects of science having to do with the rhetoric of persuasion are as easily adapted to repressive forms of totalitarianism as they are to an authentic search for discoveries in ob-

jective reality. Many social applications of language, perhaps at times unwittingly, denature the process of discovery, while the progressive substitution of forms of propaganda are masked as forms of acquiring objective data.

Obviously, knowledge is to be distinguished from “facts” by the addition of contemplation, critique, and interpretation obtained by means of an openly shared analysis. There is a vast human readiness to openly release and share experiences and feelings and thus transform the status quo by means of innovative forms of communication, particularly through poetry and art. Nationalism, global corporatism, classicism, sexism, racism, frequently most effectively further their goals by means of denaturing language, perception and memory by transforming their powers via slogans and journalistic paradigms.

KS: Your turning of the phrase “denature” intrigues me, insofar as I think of a departure from “nature” or, “natural language” perhaps even “natural memory.” As in an instance of the denaturalization of memory, I think of what has been referred to as “false memory syndrome” which, if I am reading you properly, might be a poignant illustration of the impact of “propaganda” over individual determinations. On the other hand, perhaps you are using the term with a more specific referent in mind?

That is to say that there is a memory, or “implant” (as in *Blade Runner*) wherein the media has romanticized, sensationalized, glorified horror, or ensconced terror, so to speak—wherein the portrayal of repressed memory is equated as an inherent source of the “natural” or seemingly traumatic reactions to our everyday conditions. Perhaps our everyday language has become

a byproduct of desensitization? Does false memory suggest that there may be an equivalent (or byproduct) of denaturalized language? It seems that certain departures from narrative serve as a counterpoint to false memory by asserting that denaturalized language is, perhaps, the stability we find in narrative structures?

NP: The false memory syndrome, wherein a psychotherapist suggests memories to the patient to satisfy theoretical expectations of repressed memories of childhood abuse is a very good example of what I was getting at in my discussion of *Blade Runner*. And yes, what I meant by “denatured” language does have to do with desensitization. Desensitization implies a loss of emotional responsiveness. Right now we are all watching and listening to a considerable amount of political discussion during a presidential election year. One of the most noticeable aspects of these discussions is the unbelievably rhythmically rapid pace of the interactions you watch and listen to. Often, aside from theatrical bombast, what is missing is emotion I can empathize with. I associate slick coolness with hucksterism.

One theory I noted for the (suggested) successes of Bush during the televised debates was his lack of surface anger. Aside from the familiar McLuhanistic theories of the “coolness” of the television medium, perhaps a more basic explanation for this apparently persuasive lack of emotion is the manipulative power of remaining “cool.” Coolness, in our culture, implies self-control, conviction and confidence. Perhaps one of the most familiar images for indoctrination during the Second War were those clips of Hitler and Mussolini’s frighteningly rageful speeches. I think indoctrination in our time has more to do with talk that is so lacking in listening, introspection and

respect for the speaker that the give and take of discussion is reduced to the effect of canned dialog, complete with laugh and applause tracks. This is where narrative structure comes in, for me.

I associate narrative structure with predictable outcomes, even when the outcomes are predictably unpredictable. The more predictable outcomes become for the practiced viewer (and we are all now incredibly practiced viewers) the more outrageous the endings have to become, in their own soon to be predictable ways. I’m thinking at the moment of the “surprise” ending(s) of the (relatively) recent movie *Reindeer Games*. I feel that with Bush, the cooler he is, the more frightening the implied violence becomes. Thus his popularity with U.S. males. So perhaps what is being repressed, better yet, disguised, is the relationship between emotional reaction and violence, thus the heightened effect of ruthlessness. Only a truly ruthless person can be trusted to be predictably violent.

What appeals to me about disrupting narrative structure is the transgression of automaticity. The “automatic” and the machine gun are apt contemporary images for the internally terrifying sensation of violence exactly because “reaction time” has been effectively eliminated. No time for pity or sympathy. *Just plug’em*. Simply stated: narrative structure = violence. Or, as I put it in *The Boundary of Blur*: “The cutting edge of narrative often turns to blood and is fascinated by monsters.”

KS: I agree that the narrative implies a certain underlying violence, and is in fact “predictably unpredictable”—which makes me suspicious. The use of the first person and other proper names adds an interesting twist to the fine line between humor and horror, as I noticed last night

at Brenda Coultas' reading. She frequently writes in the first person, and sometimes refers to herself in the third (Brenda). Her narrative structure borders on the surreal, the obscure and phantasmagoric, yet her poems are often times so true to the life or culture of the Mid-West, that when "serious" words or images arose, the audience didn't always know just when, assuredly, it is appropriate to laugh.

We talked after the reading, and it was interesting to us both to note what a precarious line is walked when one writes from memory, in alternative narrative structures. I'm wondering how taut you consider the reflexivity of autobiography be in your own poems, and how the humorous and the deadly serious aspects of narrative work for, and against one another in creating this (perhaps binary) tension?

NP: A good example, not so recent, of humor offsetting the deadly serious aspects of narrative is *The Sonnets* by Ted Berigan. I can think of few other authors, other than Charles Bernstein, who have employed parataxis and humor side by side, in poetry, with such effect. One point about humor versus narrative is that most narratives contain a thread that builds towards a climax, while humor remains mostly anecdotal, which can be interwoven with parataxis to gain a contrapuntal effect or an effect of acceleration or amplification of ideas.

Another point, perhaps related, is that anti-narrative or nonnarrative aspects of texts put us in touch with some of the chaos which lies (closely) underneath the superficial order surrounding us in society. As Walter Benjamin put it: "Continuity in historical terms is that of the oppressors. History for the oppressed is one of discontinuity." Again, the outcome of the recent

(2000) presidential election will illustrate this to an almost grotesque, and certainly frightening, degree.

As for binary tensions, we desperately need humor, and even a little room for some degree of expressed insanity, to get us through times like these. When lies, hypocrisies and deceptions are so blatant on the part of our "honorable representatives" (witness the recent decision of the Supreme Court regarding the vote count in Florida) it becomes clear exactly why contemporary literature has had to learn how to reflect all this in the twists and turns of aesthetic formal structures. As a result, our culture tries to ignore many writers—especially its contemporary poets and this has effected the way they write.

I've tried to change the key of my work to include a way of incorporating these responses of annoyance, frustration, hilarity, confusion, rage, exultation, depression, etc., into my writing, since such feelings pervade so much of my thinking when I write. If you don't respond to the way you are being treated, eventually you must resort to unconscious defenses like denial, repression, projection, etc., which endanger some of the most important aspects of art, in my opinion, including the opportunity to reveal one's honest responses—exactly what everyday work and social life (for reasons of efficiency and hopefulness, to name but two) usually does not permit very much of.

I'm also interested in what you said about the reaction to Brenda Coultas' mixture of the true-to-life with the surreal. In Dada, for example, or the Theater of the Absurd such features as the tragic and the hilarious are often fused (Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* being the classic example). There is the famous story of Kurt Schwitters performing

a sound poem for an audience containing a number of Nazi officers in Austria before the outbreak of the Second World War. As he recited his sound poetry monologue to the dinner guests he gradually pulled on the tablecloth until he had deposited the full dishes onto the laps of those seated for dinner. You might say that a humor of disgust might mirror some of the horrifying contradictions of contemporary life. I remember during the 1960's when busses would arrive in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury, the so-called hippies would run alongside the tour busses holding mirrors to the windows so that the visitors could get a truly close view of what was really going on.

KS: I find your memory of the tour bus interesting, particularly, the act of raising the mirror. Hearing this suggests (perhaps in obvious ways) that the "hippies" wanted the passengers, or spectators, to make a "call to consciousness" or, that is rather, to recognize the problems, beauties, complexities, what-have-you, which were not to be found in the "scene" or scenery, but bad perhaps, something more to do with subject of seeing/recognizing the self. As if to echo the phrase, "Take a good look yourself in the mirror" or to literally "reflect on things."

Regardless of how effective or irritating this particular instance might have been at the time, the question it raises in my mind concerns the mirror. The mirror is a common domestic material, also sculptural, metaphoric, central to psychoanalysis, writing, fairy tales, etc. Perhaps a contributing factor for its sustained properties of interest, are largely due to the fact that it acts without the trace. Unlike written language, seemingly, the marks or images are momentarily sustained, then erased. The mirror is, then, a substance subject to en-

countering the object presented before it.

In various ways, writing and psychoanalysis relate to representation, reverie, reminiscence, etc. These activities aid us in getting at what is, "really going on" or, "ongoing" as Schwitters' performance suggests also, a formal confrontation. To confront, or literally, "come to terms" with a dynamic situation, is perhaps to make a distinction between the inscription of memory, as in the phrase, "that really made an impression on me" and acting as a passive tablet. As a pen to paper or wedge to a clay tablet, the language has become embossed in memory, those wax glands. The phrase, "it took some time to sink in" is distinct from passive reminiscence, illustrated by a reflection in the mirror. This sort of reflection doesn't seem to carry the same weight or emphasis—that is to say, there is no lasting impression on the mirror object. Why then, do we look "in" the mirror and not "on" the mirror, as one looks "on" the blackboard and not "into" the blackboard?

This distinction is one of several concerns which seem to be a common characteristic in the works of Beckett, Berrigan, Benjamin, Bernstein, and to add another "B" I would say Brecht, also. In remarkable ways, their writings reflect, and refract experiences of horror, obscurity, and wit, in coincidence with the oppressive social/political conditions of their respective times. This parallels an affective world of perception and response. No doubt, these responses to political and social conditions were drastically altered after Auschwitz, which some critics argue was an attack, or war, against memory. This is a fissure, gap, a turn in post-historic reference, an attack—on the mass-erasure of memory. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* was a compelling investigation of memory after Auschwitz; here I'm thinking of the particular

nearness of the witness' face to the camera in his or her retelling/remembrance of the Holocaust. Adorno and Horkheimer's psychoanalyzing of anti-Semitism seems to correlate to many of the issues you have identified with in media today. They wrote, "Anti-Semitism is based on a false projection. It is the counterpart of true mimesis, and fundamentally related to the repressed form; in fact, it is probably the morbid expression of repressed mimesis."

Auschwitz's complication of the subject of recollection and representation, i.e. "How to represent the unspeakable?" seems to have, of course, complicated our understandings of alterity and difference. But to come back to the sixties, and the emergence of new materials of memory, or perhaps, more accessible materials, such as the home video camera, portable audio recording devices, four tracks, computers, the Polaroid, slides, simulcast systems, television, etc. This generation grew up with what might be considered, comparatively, a domesticated control over time and memory. Not only were mass productions more readily available in the home, but they offered the individual greater control over the production, and reproduction of what might be called "domestic memory." I'm curious if you see a correlation between the changes in writing that emerged in the years following World War II, and those in the wake of Vietnam—war in real time?

NP: A touchstone in formulating an understanding of this crucial issue is the essay, "The Second War and Postmodern Memory" by Charles Bernstein which was reprinted in his collection, *A Poetics*. In it, Bernstein writes about my generation of poets who were born in the shadow of the outbreak of WWII. He writes: "I find in many of the works of these poets an intense distrust of large scale claims of any

kind, an extreme questioning of public forms, a tireless tearing down or tearing away at authoritative/authoritarian language structures." I hear in their works an explosion of self-reflectiveness and a refusal of the systematic combined with a pervasive engagement with dislocation up to the point of personal terror: an insistence on the human scale of poetry on the human "crisis" in a culture gone bonkers with mass markets, high technology, and faith in science as savior.

As I discussed in my essay, "The Boundary of Theory" I have a horror towards the abuses of organization. For me, the essence of totalitarianism is the response of obsessive-compulsive organization to the manifestation of threat whether real or imagined. And most fantasized experience of threat (anxiety) is based on remembered or repressed experiences of actual threat. Growing up under wartime conditions, as Bernstein describes so poignantly, leaves a permanent mark. My generation of poets and its immediate forbears the Beats, responded to the militarism of the 1940s and 50s with a powerful awareness of the mind-numbing aspects of social uniformity: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked," as Allen Ginsberg told us so memorably.

As for issues regarding technology, I've discussed these in various ways in my essays in *The Boundary of Blur*, in a piece on the work of Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, "New Languages for Old" as well as an essay "The Aural Ellipsis and The Nature of Listening in Contemporary Poetry" in *Close Listening*. Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" tells us that ". . . the art of storytelling is coming to an end . . .". One reason for this phenomenon

is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness . . . never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds

On the face of it, it would appear that memory disappeared because it is a vestigial organ replaced by mechanical memory. This is only a small part of the story. These devices, meant to save time, actually facilitate the opportunity for humans to control the time of other humans. The cycle of communication, reflection, insight, further communication has been replaced by the constant bombardment of data. This bombardment contributes to an obsessive-compulsive trait of postponing future action until enough data has been obtained in order to make a decision. This factor, in turn, facilitates the creation of "experts" who then spare us the effort of knowing how to think for ourselves, in turn enabling them to take control, or to be used by others who wish to take control.

Secondly, this bombardment of data facilitates the control of global corporatism over everyday life by subjugating vast numbers of the population to the role of drones in gathering, organizing and transferring data and most importantly by systematically removing all time for reflection. The age of reflection was already coming to an end with the geometrically increasing rise of global mass religions and political ideologies. Freud's work was a powerful effort to counter this trend towards mindless conformity in matters of conscience and

social behavior. It is now starting to appear that Freud was essentially a revivalist of the Greek age of individual philosophy from the Pre-Socratics through Plato. Contemporary life banishes all possibility of individual reflection by means of isolation, indifference, ridicule, economic destruction, incarceration. The rise of technology is not the cause of the loss of memory. This is caused by diverting technology to support the war against individual initiative, intervention and power brought about by the war against individual reflection and critique. Where once censorship was facilitated externally by the burning of books and the jailing and execution of radical thinkers, censorship is now more effectively created by creating economic and social conditions that discourage individual reflection and encourage mass conformism.