Poetic Incommunicability
An 'Efficient' Creative Force

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Abstract

Amidst the hysteria for constant connectivity, transparency and 'efficient' creativity which belies the current crisis of creativity, this paper asserts the value of *poetic incommunicability*—to creativity and to society. The role of the poet-artist-designer is vital in constructing structures of *multivocality* which activate the dynamic relations between communicability and incommunicability. The paradoxically 'efficient' mechanisms of these structures can be understood through theories of poetry depicted by Viktor Shklovsky and André Breton.

The 'black box', a figure of incommunicability borrowed from science, represents the possibility of *temporary disconnection*, a critical precondition of creativity. Conceptualizing and valuing such spaces while designing the interruptibility of their reciprocal relations with communicability—the architecture of their porosity—becomes the primary task of 'dialogical design'.

These themes are explored, conveyed, delayed and complicated through the device of the metalogue, which collages and connects, often in a more physical narrative sense.

Keywords: incommunicability, multivocality, creativity, dialogical design, black boxes, opacity

Hysterical Creativity

Could one productively *self*-destruct while writing a conference paper—that wonders about inner well-worn design of coherent self-construction—for the sake of efficiency in drawing out the reader's incomprehension? If one advocates for the aporias inherent in the *multivocality* of dialogue, hopefully so.

A whole range of tropes—flattening, hollowing, liquifying, diffusing, smoothing, soothing—have been deployed to criticize the forces of homogenization so prevalent today. Art sociologist Pascal Gielen wields nearly all of them in *Creativity and other Fundamentalisms* (2013), which sees the contemporary artist confined to a 'flat' or 'wet' world where creativity has been replaced by 'creativism' (95), a fundamentalist ideology demanding an incessant rush of superficial flux.

The spatiality of the metaphors is important.

Transfusion and redefinition of creativity began in the 1970s slowly, accelerating in the 1980s. Especially with financialization, 'creative capitalism' operationalized creativity, valuing only excerpts it could control and measure, especially in the short term. Gielen finds artists today thus commanded to use their creativity 'efficiently':

wonders about inner
black boxes,
burrows into the city,
asserts the Right of Window, to be seen and to sleep,
to see 'blind
spots'
with
or
without...
...and so on
...and something else...
dreams
a worm's
bed,
behind a

modestly, directly (in the 'real world') and always towards entrepreneurial 'lu-creativity'. The lingering 'ethical turn' in art and politics (Rancière 2004) provides an flimsy alibi.

This modesty pairs strangely with the impassioned hysteria (from both neoliberal and artistic discourses) which would have us believe we live in a veritable golden age of creativity. Peter Murphy refutes this in "The Creativity Collapse" (2013), citing the *declining* rate of creativity in OECD countries since the 1970s. Gielen links the current mania for creativity with the recurrent cultural tendency to 'rediscover' a romanticized version of some quality just as it disappears.

Hysteria also characterizes the Post-Fordist condition of the new creative subject who must constantly connect to and expand their network, self-promoting in competion to improvise their own security via the next project. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), art critic and essayist Jonathan Crary describes this frantic, 'always-on' condition which reimagines the world "as a non-stop work site or an always open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions" (17). Just as a hysteric's streaming and uncontrolled emotion overwhelms any variety in expressed content, the omnipresent brightness of Crary's 24/7 erases any "inherent structure of differentiation" (13). The hysterical becomes habitual and vice versa.

Charles Moore's foreword to Jun′ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1977(1933)) sheepishly admits to the Western architect's obsession with light.

Illuminated transparency—Crary's "fraudulent brightness"—implies the eradication of "any mystery or unknowability" (19), enabling myths of predictability, control and efficiency (Rothbard 1979). In the view of the enlightened, the first machines were made of glass, as it were. Le Corbusier instructs: "The lesson of the machine lies in the pure relationship of cause and effect." (Foster 2013, 59) The lesson learned was the too-tempting possibility of knowing all—*omniscience*.

No wonder that science moved away from the serendipity of discovery (Murphy 2013), avoiding the "sensation of surprise" which Albert Einstein held to be "one of the primary motives for scientific thought" (Shklovsky 1970, 64).

That this knowledge could be fully and efficiently communicated was an adjoining conceit. Literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* (1925), which introduced the idea of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization (also 'estrangement'), argued that the poet or artist does not nor should not dutifully imitate reality as it is. Rather, they *design* a process of perception that is intentionally delayed, drawn out and often complicated by "a number of parallel structures" or worlds (metaphors with multiple meanings, riddles, analogies, loose ends, etc.) (117). Shklovsky associated the demand for 'efficiency' in poetry—that it should become more prosaic— with the expanding 'automatization' of society, or, as Gerald L. Bruns puts it in the introduction: "modernity begins with the discovery that the book of the world is written in prose." (xi)

The omniscient disposition behind technocratic approaches can quickly escalate, an observation made by the art critic and art historian Hal Foster in his commentary on Norman Foster's architecture: "...sometimes the holistic slips into the totalistic." (Foster 2013, 47). Delusions of *omnipotence* follow those of omniscience, providing another

m...
of intent.
no land
to sail
to.

pauses,

draws the
shutter
to
dream,
happy to
wake
as a figure
at the window,
—at the window-view—
(certainly behind this unseen barrier)
opens the window, each time newly constructed,
Jamesian 'flights' and 'perchings', Proustian *moments bienheureux*,
closures and missed communication,
clouds obscuring
the sun from
fussy
hysterics
hysteria
wants
glitter and
shine.
No wonder that finance moved into fiction,
and faith.

. ..ships passed.. .
"...he could paint only when surprised"
by all-at-once
streaming
meaning
though "we can still only fully
develop one
mental 'path'
at a time"—the single logical
line,
the single
voice.

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route to homogenization—the funneling towards and strengthening of a single voice.

Applied to the social, the myth of total transparency and total communicability leads to a similar monovocality.

As if built in to our human nature, idyllic, utopian visions of society in perfect harmony are regularly summoned, and zealously. Political philosopher Iris Marion Young reads this 'ideal of community' or communitarianism across philosophy, sociology, politics, public space and the city in "City Life and Difference" (1990). She finds it exemplary of the 'logic of identity' widely contested by postmodern critics, whose reductive unifying force "denies and represses difference" (98;227). It reveals "a longing for harmony among persons, for consensus and mutual understanding" (229), predicated on the valuing of and aim for an illusory "social transparency" (230). She quotes Michel Foucault's description of this 'Rousseauist dream':

> a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogative of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men's hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles, and that the opinion of all reign over each. (Foucault 1980, 152) (229)

Likewise, discourses and practices of art and design which invoke 'dialogue' tend to overvalue its *unifying* and *clarifying* mechanisms and associated communitarian benefits: increased mutual communicability—'social transparency'— eases us closer to univocal consensus.

Young notes further that the apparent absence of mediation in face-to-face social relations—their 'immediacy'—is seen to reinforce the utopian desires for "purity and security" threatened by the *distancing* (both temporal and spatial) which comes with the abstraction of mediation. (234) The reality of the latter resists all attempts at unification. It structures experience with multiplicity.

Echoing Richard Sennett's definition of a city as "a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet" (1977, 39), Young's 'ideal of city life' proposes a 'politics of difference' framed as a "relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and distance." (234)

Very little creativity takes place in utopia, though there is much 'happiness'. Utopia ignores the human condition. There are no strangers. We may be living in this utopia, among others.

Prefiguring the paradoxical contiguousness *and* atomization of our Post-Fordist network culture, the philosopher, writer and journalist Vilém Flusser, in "To Scatter" (1985), warned of the heavy toll taken on society in the preceding decades by mass media and the 'happiness' of 'mass culture': "The present dispersal of society has resulted from a general wish to be happy." (65) This 'mindless happiness' was reinforced by the distribution structure and pervasiveness of 'technical images' which enabled a canceling out of Hegel's 'unhappy consciousness' by a superseding of the distinction between public and private space, between inside and outside. 'Consciousness' was linked to not just a psychological architecture of contrast and contradiction. Whether by "dispers[ing] themselves" (as in Flusser's context) or by uniting themselves in

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the waters call us to participate *in* the world, but we also look— in a double action —*on* the world.

...in caring in- difference.

possession and immediacy

characterizes the romanticization of the 'view from the window'.

Novalis wrote: "Everything at a distance turns into poetry" why not autonomy of difference?

"*Séparés, on est ensemble* [Apart, we are together.]"

the "impossible togetherness" made 'possible' if "men's hearts...communicate" we may be sleep-walking after the end of history.

"...I am only an experimenter... ...I unsettle all things."

communitarianism, Flusser's observation holds: "People want to...

> "People wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."

...lose consciousness, to become happy." Though in a different way today, people are "so completely socialized" (64) that there are no more strangers.

To be a stranger is to be highly creative.

This was Flusser's determination a year earlier, in "Exile and Creativity" (1984). To the outsider, the exile, the stranger, "everything is unusual" and they must decipher, process and transform this 'data' into "meaningful messages" in order to make sense of, navigate and inhabit their unsettled condition—'data transformation' being a "synonym for creation". (104) In time of course this becomes habitual, so the deeper question of "human dignity" and freedom is the right "not of coming and going, but rather of remaining a stranger". (108)

The hysteria of the 'creative city' repeats that of market fundamentalism: we are mandated not to coexist or collaborate, but to 'play on the same team' (Peck 2005, 741).

Teammates are never strangers.

> "But is he who opens a door and to he who closes it the same being?"

Chiaroscuros of Incommunicability

With only lenses of transparency, the value of *incommunicability*, of opacity—to creativity and to society broadly—is not seen.

In contrast, chiaroscuros of incommunicability (or communicability) come into view. Amit Pinchevski, senior lecturer in communication and journalism, takes issue with the tendency of discourses, particularly in communication theory, to view imperfections in human communication "as a problem". (2011, 27)

> "From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light-- his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate even the minutest shadow."

Instead—working his argument through the literary figure of Bartleby— he finds that paradoxically "it is the interruption of communication that breeds communication". (54) This dynamic reciprocal relation between the two polarities of communicability animates a stirring, morphing, flickering palette of brightness and darkness, consisting in large part of in-between shades. Incommunicability forms an "underlying indeterminacy ripe with creative possibilities". (48)

> Well, "a well-stocked mind, perhaps, but a vagrant mind. "...Tanizaki does wander..."

> ...through the landscape in view, re-instantiating fragments "of time in the pure state"

The inverse of excessively bright images, excessively dark images would be equally unstimulating in their uniformity or monologism. It was the mistake of the post-critical, for instance, to rationalize the abandonment of constructive change based on a romanticization of the insurmountable complexity or 'incomprehensibility' of society and the city.

> nexuses of sensations wonder with Nadja. "...because it's only the beginning."

These chiaroscuros—which change in relation to the subject's perspective (whether poet-artist-designer, theorist-critic-historian, reader-participant or some combination)— can be viewed across the mechanics of poetry theorized by Viktor Shklovsky and André Breton.

> ...of structured digressions "to evoke the underlying associative network indirectly"

The theme of Shklovsky's *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar* (1970) is a nuanced extension of his concept of estrangement: the reciprocal relation between the similar and the dissimilar as the fundamental mechanism of art. We experience the 'contradictoriness' of life through the "collision of structures" constructed by the poet-artist. (285)

> voluntarily and involuntarily vivid *moments bienheureux* or 'fortunate moments'

In focusing on the similarities of structures (e.g. genres and forms), Shklovsky argues literary theorists miss the point. The frustration with Shakespeare's surprising 'illogical' use of canonical models *is* the point: "it was Shakespeare who engineered the contradictions". (189)

"dialogical, rewired images"

But the finer point is that the old (the similar) is not altogether negated but in fact used to transport the new: "The innovator is a guide who changes the nucleus and fringe tracks but who also knows the old pathways." (423) This 'dissimilarity of the similar' is a an 'efficient' method as it works from within: "it uses the system as part of its new message without destroying the entire system." (57)

a paradox of 'self-determination and security'

"...through misrecognition, one arrives at recognition"

This dynamic could also be put in terms of order and disorder. Shklovsky highlights Stravinsky's reflections on his own innovative compositions, which were said to upend settled laws of music—but that were actually 'restrained' by his profound knowledge of those very laws. Without a certain degree of order "everything disintegrates", "degenerating into full blown exorbitance". (Stravinsky 1936) (228)

Returning to estrangement: it is not a single-purposed or standalone device. Although, as it propels towards incommunicability it "makes perception long and 'laborious'" (1925, 6), it also enriches the potentialities of 'communicability'. The "complicated and multilayered" structures of Alexander Pushkin are said by Shklovsky to "resemble a forest". But the poet both "creates such forests and gives suggestive paths that lead inside." (302)

"Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity."

"...a shift in emphasis away from an overly ideological adherence to clarity toward a more contingent, strategic orientation...

The surrealist discourse of André Breton in *Communicating Vessels* (1932) holds the task of poetry to be this linguistic suggestiveness—the generation of a 'vigorous communication' between two distant, apparently antagonistic realms. (109) Between these realms is the space of ordinary incommunicability, the space in which the poet strives to overcome and activate through poetic infrastructures of "conducting wire" or "capillary tissue" (139): complex interlacing, shifting, crossing, tangling...but also by oscillating between the polar realms—the abstract interior world (of emotions, imagination and mystery) and the concrete exterior world (of facts, reality and action). Breton's political aim was provisional unions of these realms—that of interpretation (poetics) and that of transformation (politics), respectively.

...explicit communication is a cultural assumption; it is not a linguistic imperative."

"strategic ambiguity promotes unified diversity"

ships passing

and

port and drift

At the same time, *incommunicability* "formed a mainstay of aesthetic experience for Breton", though this was primarily related to his political frame of reference (surrealism located the political at the scale of the individual psyche), his stance against exchange value—a viewpoint "matters to me only insofar as I have not yet managed to make others share it"—and his aversion to Dada's populism (its "Artificial Hells"). (Witkovsky 2003, 130)

"Happiness, like the idea of an ending, was impossible."

Shklovsky and Breton, both adherents to poetic approaches employing multiple often shifting meanings and believers in the power of poetry to activate the changeability of things, drew attention to Heraclitus's paradoxical-metaphorical constructs, particularly: "harmony consists of opposing tension, like that of the bow and the lyre." (*c*. 500 BCE in: Shklovsky 1970, 55; Breton 1925, 134) He was known as 'the Obscure' or 'the Dark One' for his "acceptance of the ontological status of paradox—an acceptance, that is to say, of the view that paradox lies inextricably at the very heart of reality."

"the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances". the physical *and* the

(Wheelwright 1959, 92) Accordingly, Shklovsky and Breton held the poet-artist's meta-physical role to be to rouse us from our slumber and facilitate our experience of the paradoxical nature of life.

the other day friendly strangers tried to force open the door, then the window, by "brute integrity".

    This role is all the more critical as our human nature (modulated by context) permits our consciousness to easily slide away—whether by force of habit or will. Murphy notes that whole historical periods—including our own—have succumbed to this slide into "something less enigmatic, less ironic, shallower and pettier". But, optimistically, he points to periods in Western culture of "intense creative impetus marked by a pervasive sense of paradox" (those of Luther, Shakespeare, Hegel and Kierkegaard). (21)

another sideway suggested by Gregory Bateson: a sort of metalogue of sorts,

    The twofold nature of the poetic mechanism is worth repeating.

    Shklovsky's poet-artist consciously constructs paradoxical, often self-refuting structures in order to explore the paradoxical nature of experience.

    Kathleen Marie Higgins found Nietzsche's use of aphorisms as an "authorial strategy" to be "particularly good at provoking the ongoing activity of revaluation that Nietzsche encourages". (Higgins 2006, 416)

    These poetic structures or 'internal models of the world' (created by the poet-artist to 'recognize' and 'orient himself' in the world—but which inevitably fracture in some manner on contact) give us access to his artistic perception which is "formed on the basis of a strained perception, as if through inspiration". (Shklovsky 1970, 283)

conveying the incommunicable:
> "According to Proust, the function of the work of art is to permit the observer/reader
> to partake in the consciousness of the artist"

Ostranenie (estrangement) then becomes familiar to us both:

> *Ostranenie* is the sensation of surprise felt toward the world, a perception of the
> world with a strained sensitivity. The term can be established only by including
> the notion of "the world" in its meaning. (283)

In the account of Einstein cited by Shklovsky, a more spontaneous version of this mechanism was shared by science. It also triggered the scientist to *wonder*. As Murphy lamented, science has increasingly shifted away from this mode.

    Shklovsky observes: "Science avoids the act of wondering, it tries to overcome the element of surprise. Art preserves it." (284)

"...falling with the stone, flying with the bird"

Black Boxes Breathing

When science wants to forget that it can be surprised it formulates 'black boxes'.

    When scientists lack understanding of (or do not need to understand) some part of a larger system in their experiment, they schematize it as a 'black box'—it cannot be seen into. 'Grey boxes' are partially understood. The content of 'white' or 'glass boxes' is considered entirely visible and understandable.

    We increasingly live in one large glass box. Crary's '24/7' brightens it further with incessant surveillance and activity: "interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding, or processing within some telematic milieu" (15). This experiment—"the calculated maintenance of an ongoing state of transition" (37)—runs without pause, as we do. But we know:

> Every man supposes himself not to be fully understood... The last chamber,
> the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residuum
> unknown, unanalyzable. (Emerson 1841, 265)

    Considering this and returning to Gielen's metaphors—the endlessly open waters, the shapelessness and mist of the network—an apparently stark inside-outside dialectic is

called for. Both Gielen (90) and Murphy (2007, 22) underscore the critical importance of Jamesian "resting-places", critical importance to creativity of *disconnecting temporarily*. Gielen elaborates further, of citing Plato, Richard Sennett and Paolo Virno who stress "the importance of perchings, 'unsocial' behavior as a precondition for creativity." Echoing Flusser's 'exile', Gielen sees the key to generating creativity lying in "the oscillation between flights a social environment and isolation", in temporarily withdrawing from the dominant frenzy culture to 'islands'. (91)

One must breathe. you're hysterical—make a breath.

Starvation is not just the fate of those stuck on islands—nor suffocation that of those sealed in opaque boxes. Bruno Latour warns that "transparency and immediacy are bad for science as well as politics: they would make both suffocate." Latour points to the longstanding fallacy of full transparency in political representation— transparency: "How can architects continue to sell this line?" —efficient, flawless communication. New forms integrating opacity and delay are called for. (Latour 2005, 11;16) "Like all things in architecture,

The lesson of the poetic is that this will not come naturally—it will take openness and closure conscious effort, intentioned design and constant cultivation. only matter if they can assist man in his alternating inclination towards inside and outside."

Conceptualizing and valuing spaces of incommunicability while designing the .... *interruptibility* of their reciprocal relations with communicability becomes . . . . the primary task of 'dialogical design'. The challenge of brea t h i n g black boxes is the architecture of their porosity—the functionality and qualities of... . .. . their openings, their thresholds—their breathing mechanisms. objects

The poet-artist-architect adds a new vocabulary of black boxes. Internally- . . . . controlled apertures modulate visibility, autonomy, integration, counter-measure, hiding the formula, participation, observation, difference, indifference, otherness…—in ways . . . every day . . . reassembling the crooked timber.

. . . impenetrable to glass boxes.

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