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Analogical Writing and the Practices of Collective Life

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The following text is an experiment in writing as a material practice, tentatively referred to as *analogical writing*. If analogical thinking is a process that uses what exists to order what is new, then what would be an analogical writing practice that uses existing texts and ideas as the material to create a new idea, a new text? It may be a way to rethink the drive for novelty, a form of critical production within and against the relations of cognitive capitalism and its knowledge industry, a type of associative thinking that transforms old ideas and practices into new ideas and practices, or an extrapolative practice that extends the individual and individual ideas into collective life.

Writing gives form to, and produces, collective knowledge. Writing is collective because it assembles the ideas and practices present in what has gone before and constructs them in new and inventive ways. Consequently, even if a single individual “authors” a text, that authorship is always shared and common. Existing texts are understood as the shared material for recomposition. Here, I explore the operations needed to produce an analogical text, such as combination and recombination, composition and recomposition, assemblage and reassemblage. I reflect on a shifting lexicon: assemblage, metropolis, subject, Anthropocene, media, event, nature–culture.

Nine texts are selected for this experiment and three statements from each text are used: a start, a middle, and an end. The statements are assembled with minimal adjustments, creating continuity through the rearrangement of associated ideas made adjacent to one another or through the substitution of key words. This process results in the use of words, texts, and ideas as material entities to be transformed, forging forms of association and disassociation. In assemblages, there is space for disorder, much like the disorder experienced in a city. Consequently, the writing retains a trace of the original voice and implies a sense of metropolitan life. The following begins with reflections on the city as an assemblage, then moves to paradigms that address assemblage as a concept and a practice. It concludes with a set of texts that resonate with the pressing issues of today: how to configure collective life under the pressure of the Anthropocene – the epoch that now envelopes the planet.

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Life–style, reality–TV, world–music, museum–store, food–court, health–care, waiting–lounge; a consumer assemblage. Petrol–road–rubber–driver–car; an assemblage held together by a socially motivated desire to reach the grocery store beyond easy walking distance. Gulfgate Shopping City, ‘Born to shop’, the stimmers spill off the freeway, evaporate in the parking lot; car–credit–store–

shopper; a shopping assemblage.¹ Smartwatch–Zoomroom–bedroom–Instagram–office. There are many of these assemblages and one nested mega-assemblage that gathers all the rest under the rubric of ‘city’.² Here’s another: Filling station, breakfast room, Number 113, ‘for men’, standard clock, come back! All is forgiven! Manorial furnished ten-room apartment, China, gloves, Mexican Embassy, to the public; please protect and preserve these new plantings, construction site, Ministry of the Interior, flag..., ...at half-mast, imperial panorama, underground, coiffeur, caution: steps, attested auditor of books, teaching aid, Germany, drink beer! Post no bills, Number 13, ordinance, first aid, interior decoration, stationers, fancy goods, enlargements, antiques, watchmaker, jeweller, arc lamp, loggia, Lost-and-Found Office, stand for not more than three cabs, Monument to a Warrior, fire alarm, travel souvenirs, optician, toys, polyclinic, these spaces for rent, office equipment, mixed cargo: shipping and packing, closed for alterations, stamp shop, *sì parla Italiano*, technical aid, hardware, tax advice, legal protection, doctor’s night-bell, Madame Ariane: second courtyard on the left, costume wardrobe, betting office, stand-up beer hall, towards the Anthropocene.³

The assemblage of humans, their machines, ideas, aspirations, and their connections to the metropolis is still the key to a better world, but at present the manner of these associations is in crisis. An assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from different orders, so that a book, or a city, or a subject or object, has no sequel. A single assemblage can borrow from different strata, and with a certain amount of apparent disorder; an element can join others in functioning in a different assemblage. The territorial assemblage continually passes into other assemblages. The important thing is the formation of new assemblages within the territorial assemblage, and this movement from the intra-assemblage to inter-assemblages by means of elements, chains of association, and relays, opens the territory onto the body, the multitude, and nature–culture.⁴ Restore, rearrange, reassemble, revamp, renovate, revise, recover, redesign, return, restructure – half of humankind pollutes to produce, the other pollutes to consume.⁵

This intrusion threatens not life on earth itself – microbes will adapt, to put it mildly – but threatens the liveability of earth for vast kinds, species, assemblages, and individuals in an ‘event’ already under way called the Sixth Great Extinction. The Anthropocene, the nature–social–culture assemblage that wraps the planet, entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities–in–assemblages, including the more–than–human, other–than–human, inhuman, and human–as–humus. It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Spatially, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematise systems.⁶ It matters what constitutes an event and how events are constructed and interpreted. Interpretation is intervention.

Nobody knows exactly how it will play out. Perhaps that's how it is with the Anthropocene. The moment it happens, it appears outside the frame of conventional narratives, and work is involved in finding the narratives into which it fits. It calls a world into being. It is a particular event, yet one which unveils an abstract, connected world, and which collapses deep time into our everyday devices; techno-fossils thrown away tomorrow. It is an event in its apparent singularity. But in the moment when it happens, the Anthropocene announces the presence of an unstable, ineffable world. A world, perhaps, immune to interpretation. For an instant, we gasp, confronted with the inexplicable. Perhaps the perspective on the world, on the city, on the Anthropocene, its space of potential, is revealed by such an event. It forces acts of experimental practice: critical, creative, writerly, urban.⁷

When we are hooked up to our Zoom rooms and smart phones, talking–swiping–scrolling–flicking in different locations, the city is working through us rather than between us. Cities have always represented and projected images and fantasies of bodies, whether individual, collective, or political. In this sense, the city can be seen as a collective body–assemblage or boundary that entangles, frames, protects, and houses, while at the same time taking its own forms and functions from the imaginary bodies it constitutes. Simultaneously, cities are assemblages that produce, regulate, and structure bodies.⁸ Cities are inside us. Subject extends into object; object extends into subject. It's a type of extrapolation.

Extrapolation opens the door to creative and speculative ways of producing collaborative knowledge across very different fields and assembling corresponding social movements. It could be a way to think about the materiality of analogical writing. It could be a way for assembled subjects – workers, individuals, collectives, multitudes – to think and act as a class, producing not only collaborative knowledge but also experimental prototypes of an alternative collective life. Extrapolation opens possibilities for thinking and acting collaboratively to build another civilisation in the here and now. It's the question of how to think both the continuities and partitions between nature and culture – nature–culture. Articulating this possibility seems timely, given that one thing the Anthropocene might imply is that there is no taking for granted any perceivable separation between natural history and social history, between the nature–urban assemblage.⁹

At a time when collective life is under pressure by multiple crises, not least the interlinked crisis of capitalism and climate change – Capitalocene – we need to develop ideas and practices that help us think about this collective experience differently. One task is to find productive techniques of intervention that channel ideas, practices, and subjects into chains of association that cross scales and levels. Analogical writing may be one interpretative practice of intervention. It operates within and against the relations of production. It uses the commons of knowledge to bind individual authors and individual ideas into collective authors and ideas. It is a type of collective action that generates new

ideas by turning intellectual culture and the information political economy upon itself, using past ideas and practices, and articulating them for uptake by others that may create new patterns of organisation and habits of thought. It uses ideas not as abstract entities, but material configurations. Analogical writing begins to suggest a way of thinking and practising the assemblage and reassemblage of text, to city, to territory. Without interpretation, there is no imagination; without imagination, there is no thinking otherwise to act otherwise.

Endnotes

¹ Lars Lerup, *After the City* (Chicago: MIT Press, 2000).

² Lars Lerup, *The Continuous City: Fourteen Essays on Architecture and Urbanisation* (Zürich: Park Books, 2017).

³ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street* [1928], trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1987], trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵ Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October*, no. 100 (Spring 2002): 175–90.

⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁷ McKenzie Wark, *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture & Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

⁹ McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London; New York: Verso, 2019).