

Creating Kismet:

What artists can teach academics about serendipity

Abstract: *Formal tactics employed by innovative artists can influence and inform scholarly research as well. These include the mediating practices I call “disjunctive strategies.” Processes such as remixing, rebooting and deconstructing intentionally disrupt and rearticulate formal continuity, generating surprising juxtapositions and serendipitous epiphanies. In the digital age, artists and scholars can deploy these tactics with increased agility, conjuring fresh insights for our audiences and our selves.*

Jackson Pollock famously said, “I deny the accident” (Wright, 1990). Although he was often accused of haphazardly splashing paint on canvas, he insisted that there was a method to his madness, intention behind each seemingly random gesture. Pollock may also have been making a larger point about the relationship between art and the serendipitous. While every day life marches to a monotonously predictable drumbeat, art thrives on the unexpected. It flourishes in liminal spaces where mundane events are transformed into myths and legends (Turner, 1969). This alchemical process defies expectation and thus thrives on the unforeseen and, in some respects, the unknowable. When artists seek inspiration, happenstance is not just acceptable; it is compulsory. Thus, when Pollock denied the accident, he was not suggesting that each of his paintings was carefully mapped out in advance.

Instead, he was explaining that the impulse to resist such pre-mediation is itself a deliberate choice. Pollock's work is entirely non-representational, referring only to his interior world. The expressionist element in abstract expressionism involves the artist experiencing an emotional state at the moment of creation and spontaneously articulating this through the painting process. By insisting that his actions were intentional without being pre-mediated, Pollock was calling into question the standard definition of "accident," which Merriam-Webster describes as, "an unfortunate event that is the result of carelessness." He was suggesting that an act could be *both* spontaneous and intended. Serendipity occurs when a seemingly random event results in positive outcome that feels predestined. This resonates with another term of near eastern origin, the Turkish word "kismet," meaning "fate" or "destiny" (Merriam-Webster.com). Operating at the intersection of chance and destiny where the accident is transcended and providence is achieved, serendipity is the pathway leading to this happy outcome. Artists are kismet-hunters, actively seeking patterns of harmonic convergence. Filmmakers, writers, musicians and painters often value these chance occurrences too much to leave them entirely to chance. So, somewhat paradoxically, they develop strategies for creating kismet on demand.

While artists celebrate serendipity, academics may be less inclined to acknowledge that their carefully crafted arguments are influenced by mere chance. Still, scholarly innovation and artistic creation have a great deal in common. The supposed artist/academic binary is unstable at best, comprised as it is of two culturally contingent and mutually influential categories. The bleak philosophical

musings of Søren Kierkegaard (1986) informed Franz Kafka's dark absurdist prose (2006), which in turn, informed Jean Paul Sartre's existential philosophy (2007).

When Le Corbusier's began to design buildings that were a pastiche of classical and modern styles, he inaugurated postmodern architecture (2014). He also presaged the theories of Jean-François Lyotard (1984). And the work of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said (2003) and Gayatri Spivak (2006) are certainly indebted to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (2006), a novel that challenges the cultural hegemony of the west by focusing on a native Nigerian protagonist.

Artists and academics are engaged in an ancient reciprocally advantageous dialogue. When artists learn from academics, they come to see their work in relation to larger cultural trends and traditions. When academics learn from artists, they welcome the serendipitous rupture that occurs when premeditation is shattered and new insights emerge. While scholarly methods are carefully explicated at the outset of each research project, artistic methods are often veiled by a quasi-religious mystique. The artist as magical conjurer, answering only to an ethereal muse is a longstanding and, in some respects, alluring myth, but artistic methods are not as mysterious as they may appear at first glance. Because artists value spontaneity, they often employ methods that deliberately disrupt old habits of mind, forcing them to improvise and adapt. I call these techniques "disjunctive strategies."

The act of disjunction involves breaking and reordering continuity. This can allow audiences to make new and interesting associations via intuitive pattern recognition. Of course extreme disjunction, as with a hyper-cut film montage, can

lead to a sensation of pattern blindness in which the audience is bewildered by a onslaught of disjointed information. This may be precisely the effect an artist is seeking, but for longer works, it can sap interest and strain attention. The promise and the risk of disjunctive strategies reside in their capacity to shatter expectations. They do so in a variety of ways. Temporal disjunction involves a sudden leap forward in time, as when a bit of footage is removed from a single shot of film so that a jump cut occurs. With spatial disjunction, the continuity of time is preserved, but the viewer's perspective shifts to a new location, for instance, cutting between two cameras filming the same scene from different angles. Spatiotemporal disjunction involves a shift between both space and time as when an epistolary novel shifts from a diary entry written in the morning in the countryside to a letter written in the evening in the city. Syntactic disjunction involves shattering symbolic continuity as with the cut-up novels of William S. Burroughs, pages of linear prose sliced into sections and reassembled in a nonlinear fashion. Authorial disjunction involves shifting between authorial perspectives as with the "exquisite corpse" experiments of the surrealists, in which multiple artists created collaborative drawings and poems.

Each of these disjunctive-types can be created via the following three disjunctive strategies: remixing, rebooting and deconstructing. Operating as disjunction generators, these methods deliberately shatter and reassemble continuity in a variety of ways. The mere act of naming these tactics suggests that they are, in some respect, stable and coherent categories, but this is misleading. The taxonomy is porous. Characteristics overlap and bleed into each other often in

interesting and productive ways. Still, this article will attempt to identify some general features of these techniques in order to suggest ways in which both artists and scholars can successfully deploy them. The common thread linking these diverse signifying practices is serendipity. Each approach conjures intriguing new juxtapositions of content and form, challenging expectations, consciously denying the accident and actively creating kismet.

Remix.

At times, academic discourse can seem oddly antagonistic. Scholars construct “arguments,” raise “objections” and “defend positions.” But research is more than a zero sum game in which self-interested individuals arrive at a fixed position and refute any ideas that complicate or contradict it. Actually, the most productive modes of inquiry are far more fluid and exploratory, and the most productive scholars are talented remix artists contemplating a set of core concepts while constantly adding and subtracting elements and altering emphasis. Karl Marx is a prime example. Throughout a long and highly prolific career, his thought was anything but static, hence the necessary distinction between classic early Marxism (1998) and the more nuanced later work. (2009). Marx was so resistant to the idea of being pinned down and narrowly defined, he once told his son-in-law Paul Lafargue, “If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist” (Marx & Engels, 1971). This tendency to eschew self-imposed ideological constraints is the remix artist’s default position. Her worldview is a shifting constellation rather than a codified whole. By constantly breaking the mold, while combining and recombining ideas, she creates ample opportunities for new insights to emerge.

Russian formalist filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein believed that when two independent strips of film are edited together, a "tertium quid," or third meaning is created (1969). In this respect, the art of cinematic montage is similar to the gestalt of the fine art collage, which combines disparate elements that, in turn, suggest various subliminal associations. Whether organized in terms of montage or collage, the power of the remix primarily resides, not in element A or element B, but in the *relationship* of A to B. Fine art studios and film edit bays are hot beds for creating this type of kismet as diverse elements are conjoined, cut and relinked in all sorts of different ways allowing artists to suggest moments of powerful synergy.

Screenwriters do something similar quite early in their creative process, jotting scene summaries on index cards then experimenting with different narrative sequences.

As historian and literary theorist Hayden White points out, rhetorical tropes organize information in a manner that privileges certain modes of interpretation (1985). Because disjunctive strategies can potentially influence perceived values and meanings, proponents of remix theory view the remix as a political act affording opportunities to disrupt and reimagine the status quo (Lessig, 2008; Navas, 2014; & Sonvilla-Weiss, 2010). Thus, scholars organizing book chapters, literature reviews, journal collections or article sections can and do challenge entrenched views by simply considering multiple remix combinations and organizational structures. Shuffling the deck in this manner is a way of seeing the larger structure with fresh eyes and looking for interesting and unexpected patterns and associations.

Scholars can also remix by cross-pollinating entire disciplines and juxtaposing the perspectives of diverse collaborators. The Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico is a remix of the entire notion of a traditional research culture (Bonabeau, Theraulaz, & Dorigo, 1999). There are no disciplinary silos and think tanks are comprised of scholars from apparently unrelated fields. These somewhat unlikely colleagues search for fresh insights related to highly complex issues. Thus, a group consisting of a physicist, a novelist, a botanist and a computer programmer might discuss topics as diverse as climate change, terrorism and drug trafficking. The scholars interacting at the Santa Fe Institute reject specialized jargon and methodologies and actively seek out unexpected and highly fruitful patterns of conjunction, the hallmark of the serendipitous.

Reboot.

Like works of art, scholarly creations are never wholly original. It is exciting to think of a new theory bursting forth like Athena from the head of Zeus, fully formed and with no historical precedent, but academics are always in debt to their predecessors, even those they disagree with. The evolution of any scholarly enterprise is not a teleological progression or a random free-for-all. It does not automatically refine or reject established trends; it does both at once. Schools of thought are fractal patterns, distorted echoes, retaining much of their original form, yet changing a bit with each iteration as new local and historical particulars inflect their unfolding evolution.

In the world of comic books, story sequences have a limited shelf life. After several years, when a narrative pattern appears to have run its course, it is

overridden by a new approach, one that interrupts the continuity of its predecessor, returning readers to the origin of the tale and proceeding to impart a reimagined version of the previous story. This type of radical reinvention is known as a “reboot” (Proctor, 2012). It occurs when an entire franchise, or sequence of stories is reimagined from beginning to end. While a remake reinvents a single stand-alone work, a reboot reinvents an entire *body of work*. Unlike the remix, which reconfigures the original source material, the reboot wipes the slate clean, creating a new origin story with new foundational concepts to build upon. When a comic book franchise is rebooted, it may even switch to a new genre. At the very least, the tone is substantively altered. Tropes derived from the original text are appropriated and incorporated into this retelling, but they are *not* sampled directly from the source material. In other words, a reboot is not the deck reshuffled, it is a new deck altogether, albeit with some clear similarities to the early model.

In an academic context, a reboot can involve the reinvention of an entire discipline or school of thought. Likely reboot targets include any body of work that has become so canonical a sort of intellectual paralysis has set in, inhibiting its ability to generate fresh insights. When this occurs, classicism is rebooted as neoclassicism and Marxism is rebooted as Neo-Marxism. Some scholars are more in debt to the reboot than others. While Sigmund Freud’s theories draw on a variety of influences with no single dominant precursor, French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan spent much of his career rebooting Freud in relation to structural and poststructural theory (2007). Lacan took many liberties with Freud’s thought, nonetheless, he felt so indebted to the master, he rejected the idea that he had spawned his own unique

school of thought, telling followers, “You can be Lacanians, if you want. As for me, I’m a Freudian” (Clifton, 2012). Rebooting involves equal parts irreverence and fidelity. While it affords ample opportunities for disrupting familiar patterns and exposing novel insights, it also requires a degree of devotion to the source material it means to reinvent.

Deconstruction.

In popular parlance, the word deconstruction is used interchangeably with remix. According to this perspective, the process of deconstructing a text involves nothing more than taking it apart and reassembling it in some new form. But the original concept of deconstruction proposed by Jacques Derrida operates in a more complex and indirect way (1998). Deconstruction, in this sense, is the act of looking past the structure of a text to discover what it conceals. Like the Surrealist technique known as grattage, in which an artist flips her brush and uses the handle to scrape paint from a canvas, deconstruction strives to uncover a text’s hidden potentials. Just as there are endless ways to scrape off paint, there are endless ways to deconstruct a text. This led Derrida to explain that deconstruction is not a strategy in the traditional sense, capable of yielding predictable results, “a final goal, a telos” (1982). Instead, it proceeds by the strange anti-logic of “blind tactics” and “empirical wandering” (1982). Any text can be deconstructed in this manner, often with interesting results.

The book *Wicked* (1995), is a Derridean deconstruction of *The Wizard of Oz* because it gives voice to the so-called “Wicked Witch of the West,” a character marginalized and vilified in the original text. *Wicked’s* author, Gregory Maguire has

written three other revisionists novels based on L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), focusing on characters from the original text such as the cowardly lion, *A Lion Among Men* (2008), as well as characters of his own invention, *Son of a Witch* (2005) and *Out of Oz* (2011).

A fan-edit is a cinematic scene or trailer recut to create a genre-jumping deconstruction. The horror film *The Shinning* becomes the feel good family romp, *Shining*. *The 40 Year Old Virgin* shifts from a farce to dark psychological thriller. The mediating practices that allow artists to create cinematic fan-edits afford scholars similar opportunities to restructure and reimagine canonical scholarly works. For instance, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's *Phaedrus* (2005), titled, "Plato's Pharmacy" (1983), is, in some respects, a scholarly fan-edit. Throughout the text, deconstructive tactics challenge philosophical assumptions. In this instance, deconstruction serves to destabilize an ancient text, yet this disjunctive strategy can also be deployed to critique more recent works. What would a fan-edit of an article by Judith Butler, Henry Jenkins, or even Derrida himself look like? What hidden potentials might be realized and what unstated biases might be exposed?

Deconstruction is the most radical disjunctive strategy because it does not merely remix or even entirely reboot; instead it creates a compelling counter-narrative, a perspective framed in opposition to the source it means to dismantle. It is the anti-establishment impulse, the attempt to invert hierarchies, to reject normative biases and cultural commonplaces, to give voice to the voiceless and to unseat the ruling class. In ancient Rome, this impulse found expression in the Saturnalia, an eight-day long festival in which cultural norms were upended.

Masters and servants traded places. Women dressed like men and visa versa (Delanty, Giorgi, & Sassatelli, 2013). This yearly rite dramatically redrew social distinctions, but only temporarily. Scholars have debated whether or not this had some kind of cathartic effect or if it was merely a cultural anomaly serving no verifiable function. Whatever the case, the phenomenon known as the “counterculture” is a type of open-ended Saturnalia in which cultural norms are inverted in a far more sustained fashion. Inversion begets inversion as these deconstructions radically disrupt the status quo. When white male musicians grow long hair and sing the blues, they claim a kind of alternative subject position. By emulating women and people of color, they retain their privileged white-male status, while gaining the sense of exoticism often associated with specific oppressed groups. If this identification with marginalized others is viewed as successful, it can, paradoxically, raise their cultural status. At the same time, this type of boundary crossing can unsettle entrenched hierarchies and create opportunities for oppressed people to avail themselves of cultural advantages usually monopolized by social elites. For instance, at the height of Beatlemania, young girls aggressively chased after and screamed for the attention of their feminized idols. This behavior was far from “ladylike,” hence its subversive appeal.

The deconstructive move allows for cultural innovation that is spontaneous and, in some respects, unpredictable. It invites serendipity by flipping the script in a particular way. Outcasts become heroes and oppressed groups step into the critical spotlight. The process of deconstruction can be applied to the emergence of entire aesthetic and intellectual counter-movements, thus, impressionism, colonialism,

modernism and structuralism become postimpressionism, postcolonialism, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Like the reversals that advance a dramatic narrative, these dynamic transpositions serve to propel culture forward along unfamiliar pathways.

Coda.

In our hyper-mediated digital age, artists are remixing, rebooting and deconstructing in all sorts of playful and intriguing ways. They are creating transmedia story worlds distributed across multiple high tech platforms, gamifying real world settings, creating flash mobs, lip-dubs, mashups, fan-edits, diaporamas, podcast, vodcasts, mobcasts and livestreamed events with increasing frequency and fluidity. While it is impossible to predict exact what scholarly innovations will emerge in relation to this riot of creative experimentation, we may at least begin to glimpse the contours of some nascent methodological practices.

The three disjunctive strategies I have described are powerful catalysts of cultural innovation, highly nuanced and necessarily unstable. So rather than attempt to corral them, this final section gives them free rein, complicating and complexifying what has so far been said about these unsettling and unsettled tactics.

Digital artists not only manipulate media forms with impressive proficiency, they also mix and match disjunctive practices in all sorts of surprising ways. The always-porous categories of remix, reboot and deconstruction have grown increasingly permeable and this has been a boon to artistic expression. This trend has implications for scholarly research as well. As the strangle hold on intellectual property continues to slacken, more and more scholarly articles are migrating to

online forums. The shift from material to virtual venue affords new opportunities for multimodal experimentation, but to what end and by what means? If the primary goal of scholarly research is intellectual illumination, could there be an advantage to consciously deploying sophisticated disjunctive practices in the hope of attracting serendipity's lightning-bolt-insights?

Disjunctive strategies do more than challenge audiences; they also challenge authors. This is not a violation of authorial intent, provided the author has intended to systematically unsettle her initial assumptions, to deny the accident. In contrast, researchers who carefully avoid disjunctive strategies risk becoming data-miners, finding only what they seek as they cull thorough unmediated information, focusing primarily on evidence that supports their argument *du jour*. If research is to become a legitimate process of discovery, researchers *must* consciously adopt methodological strategies likely to complicate and even confound the intuitions undergirding their proposed agendas.

Few scholars in our post-post-modern era would claim an ability to locate anything they might confidently label "the truth," a statement of irrefutable fact, pure and unalloyed by ideological bias. We have learned to content ourselves with the quest for a far more modest goal, a search for contingent, context-dependent significance, yet even this may not be perfectly attainable. After all, notions such as determinism, relativism, postmodernism and modernism only make sense in relation to each other. Meaning is never located in a single fixed place or everywhere at once, or nowhere at all. We can only glimpse it at the moment when two perspectives collide and a third insight emerges, a spark of illumination: kismet.

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