

I

Useless Machine

Digital Video

When I consider my life, I am appalled to find it a shapeless mass. Most men like to reduce their lives to a formula, whether in boast or lament, but almost always in recrimination; their memories obligingly construct for them a clear and comprehensible past. My life has contours less firm...The landscape of my days appears to be composed, like mountainous regions, of varied materials heaped up pell-mell. There I see my nature, itself composite, made up of equal parts of instinct and training. Here and there protrude the granite peaks of the inevitable, but all about is the rubble from the landslips of chance. I strive to retrace my life to find in its some plan, following a vein of lead, or of gold, or the course of a subterranean stream, but such devices are only tricks of perspective in the memory....too many paths lead nowhere at all, and too many sums add up to nothing.

Marguerite Yourcenar. *Memoirs of Hadrian*

I sit at my computer, the cursor flashes, and I have no idea what the future holds. I once had the plan that I would write a story in which whatever I wrote the day before I would perform the day after – a sort of reverse diary. I never quite worked out all the problems with this methodology – particularly the problem with editing and proofing. What if you got the grammar wrong? Would the day following be similarly defective? Or similarly spontaneous? A trajectory is a fictive whole made up of an immense accumulation of fragments, an incalculable number of factors. If there is something we can say about the attempts to make sense of human life, it is surely that life is not singular, but multiple and complex in nature. Never has a person been one thing, or gone only in one direction. No line is adequate to peg the cleanly laundered days of a life. As Jeanette Winterson says, ‘there is no autobiography, there is only art and lies’.

Even without this reverse diary, my life has been built on the construction and interpretation of texts. It is filled with a sort of reverse snowstorm, one of black letters and numbers on white sheets of paper. It is filled to the brim with content. Small dark figures, crowded together, too far away to see clearly, too difficult to bring our attention to their peculiar nature.

I bent my last keyboard in half. Not in anger, but with a million small tiny blows that formed the several thousand words I wrote each month.

Conversely, the creation of nothing is a very difficult task. There is this temptation, always this temptation, to add something, to do something else, to move in a particular direction. More often than not I succumb to this additive directive.

I do not think I have ever managed to do nothing, but this work is as close as I have come. Now that I have been asked to write, I long for when my hands were still, and didn’t press down on these worn plastic keys.

Chance is a knife that rends life in its passage, and cuts time. Yet magic is not in causality (how could it be) nor is it in direction. It is precisely the manner in which life is

undirected that I most often find pleasure. In my list of ‘things that excite the heart’, chance is prominent. Chance is a cut, like an edit. It changes the state of things. So I sit behind my camera, and I look at things. Sometimes I catch them, like small insects in a net. Often I miss them, like I am missing a million small moments now, as I clatter away on my plastic keyboard. It is necessary to be still in order to catch time.

I sit at my computer, the cursor flashes, and I have no idea what the future holds. This is a happy story.

Graham Mathwin

