Unbinding the Influences on the evolution of CAT

I am undoubtedly dating myself in mentioning that a formative influence on my aesthetic and literary upbringing was discovering *Mad Magazine*. Shifting in my pre-teens from the heroicized fantasy-violence of comic books to the adolescent eroticism, satire and cartoonish parody of current movies represented in *Mad Magazine* was a sure indicator of my maturing (?) taste and perception (really!). 'Getting' the politics embedded in the jokes, appreciating what I took to be better quality drawing, and even recognizing that novelty features like the folding back page (that transformed one drawing into another to more-or-less humorous effect) combined silliness with experimentation in magazine form. All of this felt like growing up to me. Together they marked an entertaining but also significant benchmark in developing my identity as a visually critical being.

Something as simple as folding a page of a magazine to see what happened may not seem like a big step toward unbinding the narrative structure of a print publication, but that permission, combined two critical elements: that the magazine as a form was not fixed or 'sacred', and that respectful manipulation or re-ordering could reveal alternate readings. If Lacanian theory points to 'the mirror stage' as a first indicator of self-consciousness and a step toward language, I would argue that I experienced a 'Mad' stage where I first recognized myself as critical and political.

This critical/creative attitude combined with a predisposition toward editorial cartooning (at the teacher's expense) in the back of the classroom became my art education (in the absence of any formal instruction). It wasn't until much later that art became something I did (and taught) at work rather than just a spare-time experience. Significantly later, while working on doctoral research into the ways that various media studies curricula taught (or didn't teach) the visual, I came across another print publication that fundamentally altered my perception. The text, *Picturing Women: Scottish Women in Photography* edited by Eddie Dick and Susan Moffatt (1990) was created by the Scottish Film Council and offered as a textbook designed for secondary classes in: Media Studies, English Literature, Psychology, Social Studies, Health or Art.

The very current call for interdisciplinary inquiry-based education (Humes 2013) built around student learning goals defined as "Big Ideas" (UDL 2016) rather than the regurgitation of narrowly defined facts was anticipated 27 years ago by the form and content of *Picturing Women.* Combining 4 commissioned photographic portfolios, each supported by the artist's work journal and a curatorial essay by a professional art critic, *Picturing Women* investigates a range of themes (Women working in schools, being a 2nd generation female immigrant, the consuming and producing the beauty industry, and parental control of family history and childhood representation). Surprisingly, the book was delivered unbound in a clear plastic sleeve, with instructions to avoid reading it in order. In addition, any pages featuring photographs were only printed on one side. The result is that, spread on the floor, students could see the entire book simultaneously and draw visual comparisons between the artist's work. The text contains no facts to be memorized, instead offering original art and critical

writing, and an invitation for students to curate the contents according to their critical understanding. Unlike bound books, *Picturing Women: Scottish Women in Photography* really didn't offer an ending. If anything, its opened form invited readers to add to the stories.

A more recent and ongoing inspiration for me is the Canadian art magazine *BlackFlash*, one of the longest running art magazines in Canada http://blackflash.ca . Along with thoughtful writing, editing and curation, BlackFlash consistently produces magazine issues that demonstrate a playfulness with the physical form of the magazine that is critical, creative and fun. Sometimes issues have included 3D glasses and a wide array of papers and innovative approaches to binding. One idea that I 'stole' was from the 2001 issue (19:1) featured a catalogue within a magazine. Rather than inserting the catalogue as a separate object, the bottom 1 ½ inches of the magazine was a separate publication that, with a flick of the wrist, broke away from the larger magazine to become its own entity. Suddenly one publication became two, and as reader, I was implicated in both the creation and the destruction. To see how I adapted that great idea (on a limited budget) in CAT see V3N2 in 2004 featuring a catalogue based on a national exhibit of Canadian Art Educator's studio work curated by Dr. Bill Zuk.

Most recently, I have been inspired by the work of Haida artist, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas. Merging his lifelong activism with a very playful sense of the meeting of cultures, Yahgulanaas' book *Red: A Haida Manga* (2014) tells a traditional story that teaches lessons about community and conflict. Bound as a book of 118 pages, and presented as a graphic story that visually references both Haida and manga aesthetics, the narrative moves forward through comic book pictorial frames that evoke what has been called the 'formline' vocabulary of Haida art. Significantly, at the end of the story, after the lessons on community have been shared, a second, significant lesson begins when Yahgulanaas instructs the reader to cut up the book. Reading shifts to unbinding, an almost ceremonial process of destruction and discovery reveals that, unbound, and viewed simultaneously, the sequence of pages becomes a single image with 118 parts. The abstract formlines become the framing for a single, large mask, that reveals (between its black, weighted lines) the whole pictorial story. As it shifts from a book to a mural, we experience a transformation from one epistemology to another: time works differently; narrative works differently; the roles of reader, viewer, teller and artist all shift.

Unbinding as creative Understanding

Pattern. A modernist 'principle of design' that resonates through art histories, finding expression in both personal and commercial visual forms, not to mention mathematics, the physical sciences and digital world. We seek pattern in hopes of understanding and even predicting our world. When we identify a pattern there is a sense of relief. However, as discussed by Rohwer & Rice (2013), one of the consequences of our obsession with finding patterns is the tendency to idealize and simplify the subject of our observation or reflection. Actual cells in out body are far more varied than the diagram of a cell in a high school biology textbook would suggest. But the simple drawing does help us understand a far more complex pattern. Books offer a kind of idealized pattern. The pages repeat a motif and guide our

attention along a specific and specified path. Actually living with or in pattern is messy. Many of us only recognize our lived patterns retrospectively – amazed and a bit jarred to discover how the art we have made, other work we have chosen to do, or even the loves of our life, our passions and the problems we create for ourselves often have a predictability to them (if not to us) that only becomes obvious over time.

In this (my last) issue of The *Canadian Art Teacher* I am confronted with 15 years' worth of evidence of the order and chaos generated in my dual roles as art director and editor. You will undoubtedly notice that the magazine you have just received, presented as Volumes 14 Number 2 and 15 Number 1, combines stapled and unstapled elements packaged in an envelope that also serves as the cover. This double issue of CAT is designed (sculpturally ?) as an unbinding, of 'the magazine' as a form and way of organizing ideas, as well as a celebration of key artists featured in the resource insert over the years. The short essay that follows will explore 'Unbinding' as a critical/creative gesture in art and art education.

Unbinding Discourses

The notion of 'unbinding' presupposes a bind, a structure (perhaps a useful one?) that has the power of a constraint. As art educators, we face a number of binds: the school as a structured institution, the primacy of language as literacy, measurement as the epitome of evaluation; a commercially-driven art world as benchmark of excellence for craft, aesthetics and purpose; the contest between the material and digital in art and art education. Grappling with each of these binds is the ongoing creative project that defines art education for teachers and students alike.

Part of developing strategies for unbinding education is the recognition of both the primacy and limitations of spoken and written language as the core of literacy as defined and taught. In her investigation of Peter Greenaway's adaptation of Shakespeare in *Prospero's Books* (1991) Ljunburg argues that not only does the film "self-reflexively perform the very process of adaptation but by 'destructuring' – or dislocating – the text into images, it also creates a visual vocabulary articulating a new order of reading and suggesting a new visual literacy" (2011). Art education shares that task: to work with our students toward emerging, visual literacies.

Philosophers of language and meaning have suggested other strategies for unbinding. Derrida's "deconstruction [was] an ultimately political practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains it force" (Eagleton, 2008, p.128).

The political understanding of language as a source of power and marginalization continues to be traced in research around decolonization. Kovach asserts that "the strongholds of language, writing and world view in generating "truth' creates difficulties for Indigenous people, whose traditional philosophies are held deep within constructs that are neither written, nor consistent with the patterns of dominant language. Most Indigenous languages are verb-based and tell of the world in motion, interacting with humans and nature (Cajete, 1999). This is in contrast with the noun-based nature of the English language, which accentuates an outcome orientation to

the world." (Kovach, 2015, p.52). Art Education should share allegiance with decolonizing methodologies in their sensitivity to epistemological diversities and complexities.

For Deleuze and Guatarri the unbinding of language is reflected as cross-cultural in a minority's subtly alternative use of dominant language (as in their example of the use of German with Jewish or Eastern European 'accents' that complicates and critiques the narrative in passages in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003) where these expressions of otherness produce a 'minor literature'. Through the accented voice of Kafka's main character, Gregor, we are asked to hear critique and insight and layers of cultural complexity and critique in the art of the narrative.

These perspectives present what Kinchloe might describe as the "multilogical rigour" (Thomas, & Kincheloe, 2006) of unbinding. Whether focused on disassembling dominant discourse, foregrounding and respecting alternative epistemologies, or the complex construction of a hybrid language that is enacted within the flow of discourse, the end of these unbindings is not the replacement of old language regimes but the development of a critical discourse that can sustain a challenging negotiation between voices. The shift toward Inquiry-based learning evident in some contemporary curriculum development is a practical response to the insights and imperatives reflected here.

Unbinding Art Education and the classroom/studio
In attempting to support unbinding as an aspect of education, the shift to the visual and material through art education offers some distinct advantages. Many studio processes (like drawing) involve the invention of marks and figures that only become meaningful (or encoded) through community exchange. The maker invents a language by sharing their marks with others. Other processes (like photography) bridge between very specific referentiality and free-floating signification. As described by Flüsser (2001), the merging of the experiential, the technical and the cultural possible through contemporary photographic 'technical images' represents a new millennium in communication that layers the traditions of the 'iconic' magical thinking of early culture, with the more recent lexical thinking in a new, third level of communication that combines elements of magic, with elements of system together. Though Flüsser celebrates the potential for photo technologies to break open the 'textolotry' of the last millennium (that has defined modern education) he also warns against becoming passive 'functionaries' to technology. He joins the voices calling for a critical, multi-layered approach to communication.

In the classroom/studio, along with the skill-building and understanding of materials that studio education can offer any student, strategies for unbinding language (and books) can support the creative thinking essential to learning. Unbinding can contribute to this by inviting curiosity, criticality, recognition of patterns as both system and constraint, and the imagination to fabricate new, layered understandings. As my last gesture in The Canadian Art Teacher V14N2/V15N1, this double issue combines past and present elements in a (partially) unbound form which serves as an invitation to each reader to disassemble, study, (enjoy!) and reassemble these materials in ways that are useful for you and your students.

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