

Giving an Account of One's Jargon

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I feel like a ghost
who's trying to move your hands
over some Ouija board in the hopes
I can spell out my name.

-Aimee Mann, from "Invisible Ink," *Lost in Space* (2002, SuperEgo Records)

I.

In the early 1990s, when I was a PhD student, I submitted an essay to the annual Graduate Student Writing Competition of The Society for Cinema and Media Studies, which was then called The Society for Cinema Studies. I had written it for my program's required seminar on structuralism and poststructuralism. The essay is semi-autobiographical in that it uses an "I" along with what could be called, or taken as, personal disclosure. But it obviously works deconstructively: "introducing beforehand what it seeks to find out;" ending "prior to" its beginning; and generally trafficking in the "experience of the impossible" that is Derrida's "least bad" definition of deconstruction. In Barthesian terms, the essay periperipherally "weaves a garland of language" around a series of texts without, in the process, installing those texts as traditionally central.¹

One of these texts is the early 1970s Yugoslavian film *Bez Nazlova (Untitled)*. My essay takes as its own title this experimental short's, in English. As I mention in the piece, I have never seen the obscure film. However, I have read the following description of it—or something very close—in Amos Vogel's *Film as Subversive Art*:

This three-minute film consists of nothing but credits: director, producer, department heads, lawyers, consultants, accountants, administrators, executive administrators, assistant administrators and the end title. The perfect satire of bureaucracy.²

It is unclear if, when, how, and to what extent my essay disentangles itself from the same sorts of red tape from which this film does and does not extricate itself. That homology is emphasized by the essay's appropriation of the film's "title." In performing a demonstration, critique, and exploration of the production/counterproduction of knowledge and convention through film—as well as through interpretive and post-interpretive writing—my essay also moves through a number of adjacent means for the production of representation, experience, feeling, thought, and interiority. One of these is the apparatus of HIV testing. For a gay man in the early 90s, this apparatus was arguably an even more dreadful one than it is today. That dread—and a number of related affective articulations endemic to scenes of and for the materialization, dissolution, and re-production of knowledge, reality, fantasy, power, desire, identity,

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form, and judgment—is taken as partly generative of the overarching gestures, aims, and tones that more or less effectively govern the piece’s discussions, its digressions, and its relations between the two.

II.

A few months later, I received my results in the mail: a form letter telling me that I had not won the contest along with two anonymous judges’ reports printed on little slips of paper.

The first evaluation states that, “rather than being a scholarly essay” my submission seems to be composed of “notes written before and after film class.” Judge #1 therefore concludes, “I do not think the piece can be considered.” It is a mystery to me whether this last sentence means that this judge does not think the piece can be considered as a valid entry in the competition, as a possible winner, or both. The filaments of more than one type of ambiguity trail this Judge’s written conclusion, on more than one register of uncertainty.

The essay that I submitted ends with the sentence, “These are the notes I collect.” This matters because Judge #1’s assessment, in saying that my piece seems to amount only to “notes,” either: 1) takes my closing line extremely literally (i.e., aspires to reading it as factual, constative, true, and accurate—and maybe in isolation from the rest of the essay); 2) ignores/denies that closing line’s substantiality or significance; or, 3) both. In other words, the essay’s relationship to notes is already explicitly thematized in the essay, as an important component of it. Yet, Judge #1’s ruling does not seem to take this thematization as a relevant aspect of what that ruling—as written—produces as its object of evaluation, even though somewhere in its adjudicatory course that decision adopts from my essay exactly the language of this thematization.

III.

Almost in the manner of hauling off and insisting that someone “take a good look in the mirror,” the second enclosed judge’s report offers me some advice. “The author should count the number of times the phrase “I want” is used in this essay, as in the sentence ‘I want this dog to be a puppy again.’” Judge #2 concludes with the following dismissal: “I am sure this piece is purely hortatory.”

The exercise suggested by Judge #2 seems designed to force me into an encounter with my presumed narcissism or solipsism or “liberal individualism”—along with traits in the proximity of bad citizenship, enfant terribleness, and obliviousness. Is the implication that, were I actually to sit down and count the number of times the phrase “I want” is used by the conceptual persona of the essay that I submitted, its author might undergo some kind of salvational conversion as a result of which he might change for the better? To the extent that this is, in fact, implied by this judge’s recommended exercise, it is vaguely reminiscent of penance. As part of this sacrament one is assigned, in response to one’s confession, to go somewhere and recite “Hail Mary” a certain number of times, then do so many repetitions of “Glory Be,” or some equivalent set of prayers. The sincerity and intensity of these recitations—their implied level of faith—are supposed to affect the outcome despite the many ostentatious reasons, in Catholicism, that these do not matter at all.

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Given my essay's more or less conspicuous deconstructive and post-Foucauldian moves, though—its continual acknowledgment of the work through which it produces its own objects (producing itself as one of those objects), and via which it produces the epistemological vistas through which all of its objects appear as such—the piece need not be read as particularly “confessional” at all. It could instead be read as thematizing confessionality, along with the desires and interiorities brought into being with it. The piece could thus be said to install into itself a “second confessionality.” Judge #2 might have made that second confessionality an aspect or object of their evaluation. But Judge #2's suggested exercise implies, in much more categorical terms, that the phrase “I want”—and/or its (repeated) use—is self-evidently, if not transcontextually, bad.

Implicitly leveling any charge bordering on narcissistic self-indulgence against an essay whose narrator presents as a youngish gay male, and against an essay that moves through the particular terrain that is partially described above, is not an uncomplicated business. If you want to do it, you really need to do it right, at least in order to come off as being somewhat respectful of and sensitive to “diversity.” This is especially true of an essay that self-consciously develops multiple analytic modalities out of the complications of this presentation. In other words, it is partially as an effect of its modes of self-extraction, and their tracked difficulties, that the piece's “I” can be pro- and retroactively “unified” in the first place.

As we know, an especially frenzied zeal for questionably administered multiculturalist redistribution had come to characterize certain U.S. academic institutions by the early 1990s. Here, however, the kinds of social difference on the table and their thematizations, stylizations, and difficulties—class, gender, ethnicity, and age are dealt with just as overtly in my submission as is sexuality—apparently did very little to get in the way of Judge #2's written dispensation of proto-punitive appraisal. Neither, evidently, did the whole difference-thing, even at that historical moment, put much of a stick in the spokes of Judge #2's willingness to risk implying that the piece's invocations of this difference-thing actually helped call forth that judge's shaming decree. Had the narrator of the essay I submitted been marked as female and/or as non-white, it is interesting to wonder how and whether Judge #2's verdict, and execution of it, might have differed.

Notice that Judge #2's concluding dismissal—“I am sure this piece is purely hortatory”—*might* effectively indicate my “soft disqualification” from the contest by Judge #2 as well as by Judge #1, as opposed to indicating that my piece was in fact considered, but was simply not selected as a winner. In both judges' reports, whether or not my essay was ever read *as an entry* in the competition remains nebulous. By implication, my interpreted intentions in submitting this piece to the contest—as much as, if not more so than, my inferred motivations in writing it—helped earn me these soft disqualifications.

A series of eminently asinine assumptions is entailed in Judge #2's concluding dismissal. First, there is the presupposition that a category of the “purely hortatory” exists, and that 20 or so pages of written text—which are by many standards highly conventional pages—could fall into this category of the *only* hortatory. Second, there is the

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assumption that, were such a pure category of hortatoriality to exist, all if not most academic writing and its dissemination—fuck, all if not most *writing*—would not automatically fall into that category. Third, Judge #2's decision, as written, not only implies that His or Her Honor knows this reassuringly pure category of hortatoriality when they see it. The decision acts as if this judge can discern, and rule upon, the boundaries of that category with delirious *certainty*. "I am *sure* this piece is purely hortatory."

IV.

Of course, there are many pickled positions in which putting this to the page potentially places me. These positions collude to discourage the publication of tales like these.

It may look as if my petty gripe is that I did not win an award to which I felt, or feel, entitled. It might appear that I think my own "work" is more interesting, valuable, praiseworthy, original, or inventive than I should—or that I delusionally underestimate my signature obnoxiousness. Putting this on paper may well make me seem like a creature of badly repetitive, and lingeringly unproductive, postmodern resentment. ("*That* old story, still?!") It could appear that I am out for an oddly pathetic sort of vengeance or exoneration, or that I am trying to exorcize what is ultimately my guilt or regret. In other words, putting this in print could retroactively prove me worthy of various charges that comprise the two judgments. Writing this, now, is not unlikely to consolidate suspicions that the problem on the table can and should be understood as having to do mostly with me.

Here the recent craze for an affirmative, or immanentist, ethics can be of some help. This reminds us that remembrance is not conceptually identical to repetition. Remembrance can be an act of imagination, so it need not be thought merely as re-activity. It can instead be approached as the labor of manufacturing creative affirmations of the material positivities of difference and singularity.

The many idiosyncrasies of this story—including the distinct ways that it is likely to evoke eternally irrelevant suspicions that there must be "more to it" (of course there is more to it!), and including its author's inevitable but unique failures in giving an appropriate account of it—rather than just serving as evidence against the story's representativity, are constitutive of that representativity. The impersonal forces, mechanisms, and conundrums that are involved are so generally serious—as public items—partly because of the utter irreproducibility of their involvement in the "personals" of any given case.

I am talking about nothing short of the ferocious mechanisms that institutions of academic disciplinarity, such as film and media studies, have developed for devouring their own—especially their young. These operate partly through language. They involve incredibly complex concatenations of impulses, acts, and events that stretch as well as recline upon the limits of representability, responsibility, fidelity, disciplinarity, and taste. The issue of jargon is entangled in a panoply of ways. To the degree that I can, I want to try to avoid analytically excising the matter of jargon from these knots. Instead, I want to attempt to welcome the shadowy complications that this avoidance

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will import, since it is at the thresholds of jargon's shadow worlds that these devourings transpire.

V.

As another contributor to this issue discusses in different terms, jargon is the language of a given people's everyday. It is the language with which the everyday of a people is articulated. This is one of its connections to the English sociological term "argot." But linguistic socio-logics tow the concept of subculture. In doing so, they insufficiently emphasize jargon's continuity with other types of language. In particular, I mean jargon's relations with the repetitions of all language, and with the endlessly self-propagating species of newness produced by the general machinations not only of linguistic form, but also of linguistic force.

Those ubiquitous, resident office computer people who were once so astutely satirized in a series of *Saturday Night Live* sketches are fierce as all hell with their jargon. They are stereotypically well skilled at involving people who are not "their own" people in jargon's enforcements. The same is true of auto mechanics. Even at Jiffy Lube, I have only the most tenuous grasp of what these people are talking about. They must know this, and that this is how their jargon's rude forms and forces involve and affect me. This makes me very angry. It makes me feel helplessly vulnerable to being bamboozled, especially since their inability or refusal to translate into the language of the entitled-customer—who knows nothing about cars and, at this stage in the game, does not really care to learn—is clearly related to class and gender. [Possibly relevant author's disclosure: My father was a mechanic. —RC]

So, certain individuals might be more vulnerable than others to the insulting forces of a given jargon. These forces cannot only make you feel like an outsider. They can make you feel as though you are being flaunted and taunted as such. And you might be right. At Jiffy Lube, the scene of your encounter with this people and their jargon—and of their encounter with yours—is even staged so that it can occur in front of the other mechanics, as well as the other customers. This is war, at the thresholds of those shadow worlds where all of the involved tools are more or less primitive weapons.

VI.

In academia and its shadows, different peoples speak in differently foreign languages. Each of these allegedly special languages is supposed to be capable of transportations that ordinary language cannot handle. When one encounters such languages and does not feel fluent in them, notable frustration, suspicion, insult, and anger can be produced—along with a litany of other sentiments. All manner of personal and collective back matter is drudged up by these encounters with languages and their peoples. Much potential affective intensity and professional antagonism therefore adheres to these scenes of encounter with foreignness in what, on some level, one would probably like to think of as one's own territory.

Just what constitutes such languages, and such scenes? Today, this question is made fundamental—and implicitly answered, if always provisionally—partly by that equally wicked institutional stepsister of the disciplines: scholarly publishing. Here I should

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note that the winning essay of the annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies Graduate Student Writing Competition is, in fact, published in the Society's *Cinema Journal*. The fraught contemporary calculi of this industry often commission the notion that presses, even many journals, have little incentive to invest in what they deem to be difficult works—read: by some standards “incoherent,” “poorly written,” or “untranslatable” ones—that are written for what they dub ultra-specialist, or niche, readerships. They can probably get away with this very “realistic” routine more easily with relatively nameless scholars. This is partly because the nameless, as a class, is populated largely by the junior ranks, reliably suffused as they are with anxious pressures to publish.

By what standards, though—including embedded notions about what markets are, how they operate, and where/why/when/how/if they are to be plausibly and rationally taken into account—can a painstakingly detailed book about, say, the social history of silent cinema in some country, because it is written in common English words and relatively simple sentences, be judged less difficult, less niche-oriented, and less distantiating than, say, a monograph that painstakingly works with advanced psychoanalytic theory or deconstruction and uses, without abandon, the tools at its disposal? I myself find the former sort of book not only much more troublingly opaque, difficult, and jargon-ridden than the latter, but much more generally “traumatizing” too: I can't I read it, I don't understand it, and I can barely even *see* it.

This is not simply a matter of viewpoint. Nor need it automatically invoke the bugaboo of “relativism.” My point is that the socio-logical will tend to present it that way, though, thereby freezing the involved multidirectional forces into precisely the sort of map of social antagonism that we know to be impossibly static, grossly inattentive to detail, and sketched from a viewpoint that is just as problematic as any other because this particular viewpoint actually strives against reason to present itself as a non-existent one: totally outside, if not completely above, the fray at which it glares.

The resulting interpretive stalemate suggests, to complicate things further, that another question might arise along with the question of what constitutes these languages and scenes of encounter: What constitutes fluency in such languages? More pointedly, what validates the assumption that the people who use a given jargon are themselves fluent in it?

Ordinary language is supposed to have the virtue of providing plenty of individuals who are qualified to judge anyone's fluency in it. With jargon, there are supposed not to be so many qualified individuals. In addition, since the members of a jargon's dubious little cabal are taken to be in cahoots, why would anyone trust judgments about such fluency that are made by and about a jargon's own people for the purposes of transmission to another people? One obvious reason is this: inevitably, there will be tensions and rivalries within a people, and these tensions will pragmatically contribute as much to the validity of outward-directed expressions as to that of any inside-directed expressions. However, the existence of those tensions will also contribute to the *distrust* of any assessment of fluency directed outward and translated into language that is supposed not to be that people's own. The act of translation itself will also contribute to this distrust. Furthermore, different jargons involve variant forms of fluency, and of

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“literacy” as well as “translation” and “tone.” Different jargons also seem to come with differing estimations of the validities and values of fluency, literacy, translation, and tonality. Their ethics are built in differing ways around differing principles and practices for calling out all of these, and for measuring/assessing them.

But these differences return us as much to the continuities between jargon and ordinary (or everyday) language as to their discontinuities. They shine another set of spotlights on a number of operations shared by jargon and ordinary language, and on the ways that each depends upon the other for its identity. In this light, it appears that *phantasmatic* differences between ordinary language as jargon and jargon as jargon—and between the operations of both—are constitutive of the scenes of jargon’s encounters, the thresholds of those scenes, and related ideas about fluency, literacy, coherence, eloquence, and translation. If post-structuralism has taught us anything, it is that such differences and operations are as much about the opacity of the relationship between oneself and one’s language—as well as between oneself and the language of others—as they are about anyone else’s relationship to any language. This is because it is partly through fantasy, and only through the language of others, that one can “have” one’s “own” language.

Given all of that, we see that the “targeting” of jargon, as well as the “fighting” of it—both of which are bound to produce more jargon by occurring in and through jargon, partly because discourse is contagious—are convenient ways of confining to ostensibly delimited realms of language and its workings (and to what are thereby delimited as distinct sectors of the *socius*) something viral and toxic against which discourse is defensive, but which it is not very good at quarantining. The captures of jargon and ordinary language, taken together, help produce and reproduce academic-institutional power—and to (re)produce it partially as non-vectoral power. The continuities between the two, together with their discontinuities, raise: 1) specters of the opacity of one’s relations to the work and words not only of others, but of oneself; and, 2) specters of the opacity of relations among work and words and whatever work and words might *do* socially and politically (i.e., multidirectionally, and from sites that are not centers).

This is to say that jargon creates its trouble through *everyone’s non-mastery of everything*, and through the mobile, acentered, and chaotically multidirectional splatter-forces everywhere of *that*. The shadow worlds of jargon, in their double genitivity—jargon as shadow worlds and jargon as having shadow worlds—are the immanent thresholds, everywhere, of this generalized and disseminated *incompetence* at scenes of language. For a number of reasons, this last observation necessitates that we not reduce jargon to language in thinking it. That may seem impossible or counterintuitive. This is not only because jargon is language, but because—as we have just established—jargon is even quite ordinary as language. Yet, on another hand, this necessity creates few, if any, consequential problems. This is because jargon is always already more and less than language at the thresholds of its shadow worlds, which is to say anywhere and anytime whatsoever.

VII.

The incident with The Society for Cinema Studies Graduate Student Writing Competition involved an essay composed mostly of short and simple sentences, and of

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ordinary language. My submission integrates few of the theoretical, philosophical, and/or anti-philosophical words and languages that, elsewhere, I sometimes enlist *en masse*. Nor is that piece strewn with the long and winding sentences that often accompany them in my writing.

Due to that, the responses of the judges seem to involve less the jargon of the piece than its overall project—or the forms and forces that the piece interrogates, together with the distinct ways that the essay dramatizes the ins and outs of these interrogations. In particular, the essay I submitted questions and dramatizes: the politics, ethics and aesthetics of thought's inscription; the repercussions of affiliating with certain venerable intellectual lineages as opposed to others; the porosity of traditional methods in film studies, including textual analysis; the highly debatable ends of film studies as they inhere in the means that are its methods; relations between moving-image styles and styles of scholarly writing; and differential sympathies toward “creative” forms of interdisciplinarity and counterdisciplinarity.

The piece's tones also appear to have been part of the problem. The unembarrassed acknowledgement that the piece *has* tones—and its casual acknowledgment that, like all criticism, it is “narrated”—seems to have helped make the essay, and its author, available for redressing by Judge #2 as self-involved (or as excessively so). Furthermore, rather than proceeding as if it has no tones worth taking note of, the essay that I submitted takes its tones to be some of its most crucial instruments. Perhaps the fact that so much of the piece's work resides in its tones also contributed to Judge #1's ability to imply that the essay is “undercooked” by saying that it has not been transformed from notes into a scholarly essay; that is, to imply that the piece's work has yet to be conventionally re-placed from tone to some other aspect of academic form—or that the piece has not been sufficiently purged of tonality's excessive, problematic, or proto-primitive workings. In fact, writing about me in a letter of recommendation a few years later, someone who I do not think had ever read this particular piece stated that my work sometimes looks more like that of a creative writer than that of a “critic.” Regardless of its accuracy, I find this a weird statement to think significant enough to include in a reference letter, based as that statement is on a set of distinctions that were themselves long ago thematized, and complicated, to high heaven.

But rather than taking a transdisciplinarily influential development like that one as background against which new writing in film studies will be read (along with any other new writing that deals with “objects” taken to belong to this field), the field of film studies apparently preferred to proceed on these occasions—at least as this field was embounded and represented by its letters of recommendation, The Society for Cinema Studies, and that Society's Graduate Student Writing Competition—as if a development of that magnitude had not become broadly relevant to the field's defining conventions and concerns, and as if it had not already been rigorously integrated into those conventions and concerns while remaining available to memory and other kinds of archeological or genealogical insight.

It does not require great acrobatics to show that, to this day, this continues to occur with this and other fields as they are instituted as “fields:” that is, as having borders.

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VIII.

Nevertheless, in attempting to find something, perhaps anything, to say about my submission, the two judges' reports do—with their hesitant and unhesitant quarantines, their flaccid disqualifications, and their opprobrious dismissals—target “my” jargon: my “I,” my “notes,” my “I want.” They also end up contracting some of that jargon—my “I,” my “notes,” and my “I want”—in the process of inventing their own jargon as defense against it: their “I do not think,” their “purely hortatory,” their “I am sure.”

It is the relations of these judge's reports to their own jargon, and to mine, that initially makes the jargon of stupidity seem most apt for describing them. (Though these relations are inseparable from tone, they cannot be wholly collapsed into tonality.) However, I cannot rest with the jargon of stupidity for that purpose. One reason is that I am trying to illustrate something about institutions here, and resting there would allow a very valid objection to be raised. This is the claim that the actions of individuals and the components of those actions—for example, stupid actions and their components—are not necessarily characteristic of the institutions on behalf of which individuals act, and on behalf of which components of their actions function.

Now, there is a standard retort to that objection, and it is especially well worn where something like stupidity is concerned. This is the assertion that, because institutions oversee the selection and appointment of individuals to act on their behalf in specialized offices and capacities—and thereby monitor the execution of these offices and capacities by the selected individuals—stupid actions in specialized capacities are *precisely* the sorts of actions that can be taken as symptomatic of systematically metastasized institutional pathology. Such actions and their components, this counterargument claims, can even be taken as representative of institutional “will” or “character” to the any extent that we might speak of such things.

I am confounded by this crossfire. This is partly because I am not sure that institutions can be stupid anyway. Conversely, it is possible that institutions are *inherently* stupid, and that this could even be said of them regardless of the degree to which “will” or “character” might be attributed to them. Therefore, I cannot rest with stupidity.

The next most applicable jargon seems to me that of irresponsibility. But there are a number of problems with this one, of which I will discuss only two. First, to say that the judges' reports that I received, as executed, are irresponsible—especially if they *are* irresponsible—calls the good question of how they might also enact responsibilities in the course of enacting their irresponsibilities, and *to what* they might enact those responsibilities. Indeed, both of the judgments enact responsibility to the institution of film studies in that, independent of their content, their execution effectively institutes film studies as an institution responsible for its judgments.

Both of these particular judgments, in the process, happen to position my submission as liminal to the institution of film studies as it is instituted by such judgments and, by extension, by other operations of an organization such as The Society for Cinema Studies. Here it is worth remembering, though, that this liminality is an interestingly redoubled one, and that it is instituted both as a more staunch and as a more dubious form of liminality through its redoubling. Because neither judge actually goes so far as

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nominally, or otherwise definitively, positioning my submission as liminal, the notable equivocality of my essay's liminality (even as liminality!)—that is, its supra-effectively instituted imbrication with the limits of the institution as “limits” in the strictest sense—comes into play primarily as an “in effect,” or “virtually,” equivocal liminality.

Secondly, it is through the jargon of irresponsibility and its opposite—according to which, in its more normative forms, both can finally be located somewhere and ascribed to someone or something—that irresponsibility and responsibility can be transitively returned, one way or another, to the narrator of the submitted essay, and then again (via yet another redoubling) to the teller of the whole tale. For this whole tale is not the entire tale. Partly for that reason its teller is, alas, both potentially responsible and potentially irresponsible. The inevitable, aforementioned sense that I myself must be responsible and/or irresponsible as an individualized actant—or, at very least, must be *as* responsible and/or irresponsible as is any involved institution—arises directly from the co-operation of responsibility and irresponsibility that is the institutional force of the judges' reports, quasi-independently of whatever those reports might happen to say.

Out of this force also scampers the intimation that I could or should have known this or that. If I did not know this or that as the neophyte that I became by entering this contest for neophytes—again: the reports have the force to make this determination without necessarily giving content to the involved knowledge—it is my own responsibility or irresponsibility, as either part of the institution (even as that part sometimes called its limit or outside) or as one who aspires to becoming part, to learn and/or not learn whatever is thereby instituted as being there to be learned by the contest, the society, the disciplines, the higher educational process, and the institution of contemporary knowledge tout court.

This is how I arrive at the jargon of incompetence, and the incompetence of jargon—generalized and disseminated through language, though not only there. Incompetence adheres to the relationship between oneself and one's institution or offices, and lodges itself there differently, than does either stupidity or irresponsibility. Its self-installation there makes it easier to imagine as extensive, so that in imagining individuals, institutions, and their actions we are *participating*—*ipso facto* and without the inhibitions of the two previous jargons—in *the machinic violence of the institution's incompetence with and in history*. We are not, in other words, necessarily imagining the power of institutions as excessively centered, vectoral, or unidirectional. Nor are we necessarily detaching ourselves, or our thoughts or actions or strategics or languages, from institutions. We are not participating in the manufacture of the power of the institution, and the institution of power, as collections of forces relative to which we can be cogently opposed—or located either safely outside of or, more precariously, at the limits of. Instead, the jargon of incompetence can help imagine “incompetence” as produced in and by the encounter, anywhere and everywhere, between its own multiple, propagating assemblages of form and force and other equally tentative, volatile, and phantasmatic movements and unities.

Compared with stupidity and irresponsibility, incompetence falls back to an individual via different passages through institutions and their offices (including the institutions and offices of individuality itself), and with different leftover valences. Incompetence is

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of an order different from that of stupidity and irresponsibility in that it organizes itself—given the distinction of its passages between oneself and one’s offices, mandates, and judgments—out of the repertoire of relations *among* stupidity and irresponsibility, as well as that of relations amongst the elements of both: stupidity without irresponsibility; stupidity with irresponsibility; irresponsibility without stupidity; x aspect of one with y aspect of the other, or with z compound-aspect of both of them; and so forth.

This institution of incompetence, its machineries, and its extensibilities demand fidelity. We are already enacting such fidelities. This is because it would be stupid and irresponsible, as well as incompetent, to assume that this demand and/or its institutions can be done away with—even if stupidity, irresponsibility, and incompetence might themselves be done away with. It is for this reason that we need to imagine ourselves as living the essential vitality of both this demand and these fidelities (the latter of which, naturally, already assumes the occasional infidelity): i.e., as living with and through the material positivities of the differences and singularities of this demand and these fidelities, in addition to the deterritorializing functions that ride shotgun with all of their territorializations.

VIX.

Although it sounds like the sort of thing a high school teacher would say, and I am no fan of high school teachers, I sometimes tell distressed new graduate students who have enrolled in my advanced seminars—where the theory-jargon is really flying—that they need to learn to read the subtitles.

In explaining that, I refer to the famous scene in *Annie Hall* wherein Alvy and Annie meet for the first time. As their nervous conversation proceeds on a Manhattan rooftop, their “other words” appear at the bottom of the screen, in subtitles. Advising these worried students to read the subtitles often does just the needed trick to induce the ones who probably should to withdraw from the course at the first available opportunity. This strategy has another advantage too. Anyone monitoring the conversation from the rafters can be assured that I am being as benignly good-humored, and mildly avuncular, as I am supposed to be.

Looking a little further into the shadow worlds of jargon through their bloody thresholds—at the jargons of incompetence and the incompetencies of jargon—involves similar procedures.

Obviously, I tend toward recumbence on the idea that the essay that I submitted in the early 90s to the Society for Cinema Studies Graduate Student Writing Competition is not an incompetently manufactured one. It may not have been a winner, and it may not have been a very good piece of work. But it is tough for me not to retain an insistence on its documentation of competence. Yet, especially once you find yourself acting in various institutional capacities wherein you regularly have to find something, anything, to say about other people’s writing, your relationship to your uncertainties about your own writing has been instituted as a changed one. Partly because this has, in fact, happened to me since—i.e., because my institutional positionings have shifted a little—but also for many other reasons, I am now willing to let go of that recumbence.

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I hereby affirm that my submitted essay—including the act of having submitted it to that contest—partakes no less heartily than does anyone or anything else’s thought, writing, or action in generalized and disseminated incompetence. Furthermore, I affirm that my reimagination here of the whole, if not entire, tale is equally incompetent: the present revisitation and reevaluation of the judges’ reports is just as defensive, contaminated, vulgar, violent, and shot through with perverse contradiction in its certainties as well as its uncertainties as are the institutional/agentive vagaries of which I have here displayed those same judges’ reports as evidence.

Nevertheless, my essay should have been read as a legitimate entry in the competition! More specifically, I should have in my possession judges’ reports that read and evaluate my essay as a valid entry, instead of performing the ambiguous hand-wringing about its status as an entry—ambiguous even as hand-wringing—that we see in the judges’ reports of which I am, in fact, in possession. This, to me, is the most infernally incompetent aspect of both of the reports: the wimpy ways they institute their judgments largely through maladroit and infelicitous evasions of reading and judgment themselves, which are not unlike my own essay’s.

A deconstructionist’s objection could here be raised by invoking the fashionable aporetic of decisionality: “But that’s what judgments do! That is how they work!” Well, I am not saying that the two judgments, or their modes of operation, are particularly unconventional—even if their execution in a given case amounts to an irreducibly singular event, especially when you put more than one of them together. On the contrary, I am talking about conventions of incompetence, of which there are plenty. But I am trying to simultaneously emphasize that that the unique and singular are fabricated with, and through, the institution of precisely such conventionalities.

The development of incompetence’s dynamic conventionalities involves a number of histories. It is through these production histories of specifiably conventional passages between agents and their offices that multiple, acentered forms and forces of incompetence and its jargons are instituted in their singularities. In the case of the judges’ reports, these generative mechanisms help produce *my own* highly conventional, as well as singular, relations with the involved agents, institutions, and offices. It is these relations of the “own” with the incompetencies, jargons, institutions, histories, and demands for fidelity in question that become more unique to any extent that they might be produced as conventional, and more conventional to any extent that they might be produced as unique.

X.

At the time I wrote the essay that I submitted to the contest, I was a Ph.D. student in the Critical Studies division of what is now called The School of Cinematic Arts at The University of Southern California. Then called The School of Cinema-Television, the place occasionally billed itself as the only “free standing” film school in the U.S. The free-standingness of the building in which the school is physically housed represented, to some, a unique victory in having wrested film away from fields such as literature, philosophy, art history, and communication in order to construct new and distinct

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disciplinary formations around film for the production of knowledge—and, of course, for its marketing and distribution.

During my graduate studies, the high poststructuralism that had been associated in particular with the journal *Screen* in earlier years—theoretically jargon-laden, difficult, and extremely opaque—stood for a fast-fading apogee of that project in one of its more transcontinental forms. Relegating many of that project's remains to the ashcan in the process, a number of people were turning at the time toward sometimes fetishistically “empirical” methodological constellations, including cognitivism and new historicisms, in attempts to keep the study of film—and, by then, television too—territorially cordoned off by some, any, brand of recognizably embankable expertise.

Yet, there was also a lot of lip service being paid to interdisciplinarity. This was partially a result of the then relatively recent influence of British Cultural Studies on film and media studies in the U.S. British Cultural Studies was commonly credited, rightly or not, with the rampancy of sociological and (micro-)historical critiques of the allegedly “transcendentalist”—read: sexist, racist, heterocentric, Western, colonialist, and bourgeois—assumptions of high poststructuralist film theory. British Cultural Studies was also being pinpointed as a source for the contribution of new energy to already existing pushes toward the stylistic accessibility of scholarly writing and speech, the idea being that the fundamentally contextualist and conjuncturalist work of cultural studies should be as publicly available as possible so that this work can be as broadly inclusionary, open to contestation, and publicly accountable for itself as possible.

In Stuart Hall's famous formulation, this interdisciplinarity is not the same thing as cross-disciplinarity or transdisciplinarity. It is not about combining a bunch of assumptions or methods or vocabularies from different disciplines, or about building bridges across disciplines. It is about working in the “cracks” between disciplines and, by extension, between interdisciplinary formations. This is an impossible mandate, since there is no “there there” in such cracks. How, then, do you get to these cracks, and work from or in or with them? The probably interminable difficulties of that last, open question makes interdisciplinarity an inherently creative and open-ended project in this scholarly tradition: one predicated on a willingness to be perpetually in the dark and tentative about one's means and ends, and about the status of one's grasp on them. That said, it becomes clear that there can be intense, and arguably insoluble, sibling rivalries between the mandate of interdisciplinarity and the mandate of accessibility when they are taken as twin mandates—as they are taken, or once were taken, in some scholarly lineages.

The incompatibilities and contradictions of all of these different responses to an institutional and disciplinary “situation” will make for serious tensions. Ph.D. students enmesh these tensions differently than do others by being born into them, through them, and out of them one way and another. Plus, the above sketching of the situation is only part of the story. To fill in just a few more colors, I could add that Deleuzian neovitalism had also already embarked on its way to becoming the U.S. cottage industry that it is today. A new resurgence of Heideggerianism was in the works. And people were talking, as they will, about phenomenology. While it would be idiotic to remember

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the resulting tensions primarily as tensions between individuals or between factions, those kinds of relationships were indeed ripe with related, unpredictable complications.

Queer theory was also on its new roll at the time. For me, some of this work offered the best guidance in performing interdisciplinarity as an enactment of the political, especially given its lingering insistence that the personal, even the so-called autobiographical, be accounted for in and by any such enactment. Queer theory worked from the combined legacies of formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, culturalism, deconstruction, and new historicism. It thus seemed to me that there was something contextually conciliatory or reconciliatory about queer theory. This was especially the case in that thinkers like Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, D.A. Miller, and Michael Moon were, at least sometimes, working with film (and in highly refined ways too), and because they and others—including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—could be said to be playing ping-pong with the insides and outsides of narrativity in just about all of their writing.

Concomitantly, the heavily later-Lacan inspired writings of thinkers including Joan Copjec, Mladen Dolar, and Slavoj Žižek offered similarly useful—and not always that different—models for committedly political enactments of interdisciplinarity, while working not only with film itself but also with plenty of the same old intellectual saw horses, if differently dusted off, that film studies had worked with at the aforementioned transcontinental apogee of what had come to be called “*Screen* theory.” This was partly an effect of those newer psychoanalytic writings’ hardcore engagement with structuralist legacies along with an array of other Continental traditions—including, asymptotically (and with some hostility), deconstruction—while attending to popularity, geographic and historical specificity, forms of difference such as gender, and the peculiarities of postmodern epistemology.

Not only did both “queer theory” and this “new psychoanalysis” tend to combine high and low culture across various media and genres; they also adopted and developed modes of thought and writing that rigorously traversed the differences, though without ignoring them. Taken together, it now seems that these two projects even provided some (impossible) paths of access to the very “cracks” that were in those days more regularly inscribed by mappings of the distinctions between the two endeavors themselves—whereas today the two have come to be more commonly understood as somehow intertwined.

In our graduate seminars, notable effort was required to grapple not only with Screen Theory—as well as with preceding traditions and with alternatively available ones—but also with this bewildering array of afterdevelopments, and with relations among them and their elements. This involved reading (to name only some) Adorno, Althusser, Barthes (early and late), Benjamin, Butler, de Certeau, Derrida, Fanon, Fish, Freud, Foucault, Jameson, Kristeva, Lacan, Saussure, and Spivak—as well as a number of the writers who I have already mentioned (such as Sedgwick) and some who I have not (e.g., bell hooks). While works by such scholars were included on many of our syllabi, my required structuralism and poststructuralism seminar—the seminar for which I wrote the final paper that I later submitted to the Society for Cinema Studies Graduate Student Writing Competition—focused on the “primary material” that the dialogues of

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this litany of thinkers were taken to constitute for film studies and its undergirdings. Of course, our research for our final seminar papers lead us, in turn, to plenty of others who were not typically appearing on our syllabi. For instance, I vividly remember stumbling upon Agamben's *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* at the UCLA library, and slogging through some of that, in preparing to write that particular paper.

It did cross my mind, glancing at the final paper that I had produced for that course before turning it in, that the professor could declare it unacceptable. (In fact, I would later find out that another student in the class had actually handed in two separate papers because he was worried that one of them would be declared unacceptable.) But I immediately dismissed the thought: it seemed to me to deserve nothing more than fleeting status. First of all, I reasoned, that sort of doubt comes with the territory. Second, this was a very thorough seminar and, I thought, a particularly well-designed and useful one. Since this was a freestanding film school, weekly film/video screenings and discussions of the screened moving-image works accompanied our assigned readings and our discussions of those readings. Perhaps not surprisingly, the screenings for this course were unusually heavy on experimental work. Given the canonical, anticanonical, and "canonically questioning" forms and conventions that I was being made to encounter, and thus to "learn," through those screenings alongside the course's assigned readings—the latter of which included books like *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes—how could I have been doing anything transgressive, or unconventionally transgressive, in producing the seminar paper that I produced?

XI.

Educated in incompetence, schooled in fidelity to its demands, learned in its languages, institutionalized through its aporias, attentive to its histories and contradictions, and acquainted with the irreducible singularities of its materialization everywhere, please allow me to introduce myself.

I am trained in all kinds of violence.

I work the shadow worlds, watching the thresholds.

I witness devourings, including my own.

I endure them all.

I try to read the subtitles and I make a lot of notes.

I continue to multiply.

I learn to live, in Judith Butler's words, "the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation."³

XII.

Still it is the case that writing, as Michel de Certeau puts it, ceaselessly begins...

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Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth* (London: Continuum, 2005), 6.

² Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974), 149.

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 222.