

Epilogue

I came across *The Neutral* quite serendipitously the winter before last, listening to a talk by writer Brian Dillon on the photographic artist Uta Barth, and since then it's been an ongoing source of reference and inspiration. Some sections I've read over and over again, noting them down and copying them out. I still have the numerous scanned digital files, and pages of photocopies, that I used to make a series of slides and prints from one particular extract. "A kind of proxemy", screen-printed onto a pale grey paper, hangs in the room that I work in at home. Sometimes I almost prefer the un-framed, plain xerox version which occasionally I put up too, blu-tacked on the opposite wall. But in any case, both seem to have had an ongoing applicability and relation to the other bits and pieces that I have put up periodically in the space. Other sections of the book I've read only once – on a trip to Prague, sheltering from the February cold over most of a day in a café. And equally, parts of the book I've not read at all: those 'figures', descriptions or digressions – indicated on the page by headings or marginalia – which on first glance didn't seem of particular interest or relevance. Very early on in the text, though, in his description of the "skimming" view via which 'nuance' can be found, Barthes makes this selective approach to reading quite permissible, even preferable. ("I want to live according to nuance", he writes.) I like this idea of reading something, assimilating it in the way that feels appropriate at the time. Assembling together little suggestions of the text, or "fragments", in a logic that's both thematic (implied and projected), and individual (nuances which differ from person to person). Locating them within our own interior frame of reference, with all its concomitant associations, structures and "intervals"...

Thomas Clerc, in his Preface to the edition, notes that Barthes would often remark on his unfamiliarity with a text, or body of work, from which he was drawing a point of parallel. Clerc also notes – in parentheses – that whilst Barthes was intimately familiar with the work of Marcel Proust, in a similar form of "secondhand erudition" all his references to him in *The Neutral* come via the 1959 literary biography, by George Duncan Painter. Re-reading the essay again, this inclusion particularly struck me. There is much about 'biography' that can be aligned with the numerous forms of preliminary text – preface, prologue etc. Both provide introduction and commentary, and a sense of the essential character of a work, without compulsory requirement to engage with the original. (Beautifully and cogently written, and very informative, there is an accessibility about Clerc's essay that is appropriate to Barthes' lyrical yet engagingly personal style). But likewise, both also facilitate an extrapolation outwards – to function as a related, but independent, interpretive layer. Just like Barthes' citations of Proust 'by Painter', Clerc's preface is in itself a kind of filter: articulating, reflecting – and transforming – some of the functions of the actual text.

Similarly, many of the methods and rituals that were integral to Barthes' preparation of the manuscript are maintained within in the production – some faithfully transcribed, others adapted or reconfigured in a slightly different, printed, form: The even density of the text on the right, for instance, next to the wide but delicately demarcated space of the left-hand margin – punctuated by names of authors, references or 'encapsulating' words in rounded sans-serif. The punctuation symbols and marks: brackets, colons, numberings, arrows – aesthetic as well as functional linguistic devices. Paper quality and page format: light to medium weight, with pages slightly more square than standard, and text oriented to the upper right... All of these visual "directions" are just like any other lens through which we

read, assimilate or create meaning. And Clerc's essay, in articulating and exploring some of these features, reminds me that what I love about *The Neutral* (as text, edition, and 'production') is to do with, as much as its content, its overall approach. For me, it's a book that articulates and takes pleasure in a kind of *transference* – of ideas, language and material. This transposition is a process: one that is temporal, personal, physical, and even – in its concern with placement, surface and register – 'superficial'. It's an action or gesture, done at a particular time via a particular medium or perspective. It relates to the "*angle*", at any one moment, "*of the subject's gaze*".

Reference:

The Neutral, Roland Barthes. Columbia University Press 2005.

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