

Erik Hagoort - Free Literacy

Once the ploughman has arrived at the edge of the field, he turns around and resumes his course beside the plucked furrow, now in the opposite direction. It would be strange to go all the way back to where you started in order to pull the furrow from the same direction as the last furrow. This way makes sense and is simple enough, or so thought the Ancient Greeks when writing, who on having arrived at the end of the line would resume on the next line by writing the other way, rather than always starting from the same side in order to keep writing in one direction.

In ancient time the Greeks read according to the 'Ox-turning method', which is a literal translation of the term that the Greeks employed, called 'boustrophedon'. In this manner texts were written and read, turning like oxen in ploughing. Writing and reading boustrophedonically may sound difficult and heavy, but at least the logic of it is sound.

If one had begun writing from left to right, one would resume writing on the next line underneath from right to left. After having arrived at the left margins, one would reverse the direction of writing and start on the next line from left to right. This way one wouldn't need to interrupt the furrow of writing. Besides, for the reader it was useful because they wouldn't have had to make a leap with their eyes to the other side of the margin, and in doing so risk ending up on the wrong line. The Greeks wrote upon a writing surface without lines, an open field that facilitated different approaches to writing and reading. One wrote as if one were ploughing the earth, like pulling a furrow. The writer left a line of meaning behind and invited the reader to follow that line. In which direction or from which side did not matter: it allowed you to go various ways.

The boustrophedonic text has fallen into disuse. For most of us, to read htiw hguohtla ,ruovaedne elbissopmi na mees dlouw rennam siht ni etirw dna a bit of practice, it is possible; as long as you don't also have to reverse the letters, in which case it becomes really tricky, that is, for the lexicographers among us...

For Katja Mater, herself fiercely dyslexic, it is not difficult to read and write in various directions and to flip or reverse any letters in the process. For her it is quite simply one of many ways to approach a text and work with it. "I can turn words around without it making much of a difference", she tells me in a conversation about her two most recent films, "I can read both upside down and inside out. From left to right and from right to left. I discover my own logic of reading. Words are for

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me shapes that can make an entrance from various angles: front, back, or from the corner. Writing is for me equivalent to making an image, it is creating a representation, with the help of letters.”

Mater does not fear letters, as long as she can approach the letters and sentences in her own way: from different sides, from different angles and in different directions. With her two recent film works, Mater invites us to read and look with her *not* just from one side: *Dear Sides* was shown during the fall of 2019 at P////AKT, and *Dare Not - Read On* was on during the summer of 2019 at Chapelle de la Trinité in Cléguerec in Brittany.

The film is projected against a vertical screen that hangs in the open space, allowing it to be seen from both sides. With Mater's procedure the films came into being by superimposing multiple recordings on top of each other. In the *Density Drawings* she investigated the sculptural. Now Mater concentrates on the flat surface, the writing surface, that can be seen and read from two sides. We see how her hand paints letters slowly with a paintbrush over a most round-shaped writing surface that has been painted. She repeatedly forms short phrases with few words that refer to approaches to the writing and the reading. By subsequently repainting over the letters or adding them, sometimes the words are flipped, depending on the point of view. Because the process is also visible from the other side of the screen, the phrases interchange intermittently. It doesn't need to be inch-perfect; it isn't too much of a stretch to accept a q for a p, and to read a b as a d and an I as an N. After some effective changes in letters, 'Dare Not' is flipped into 'Read oN'. At the other side of the screen a letter can appear differently but retain the same signification. The same letter can change meaning on the other side of the screen without changing appearance.

In the Chapelle de la Trinité in the Breton village Cléguerec the projection screen of *Dare Not - Read On* was hung for good reason in the space around the *rood screen*, one of the few extant early Gothic rood screens. The rood screen, also called a jubé, is a partition that separates the chancel area, reserved for the choir and clergy, from the nave. Before the Reformation all rood screens north of the Alps were standard constituents of every church building. During the Reformation most were removed, not only in Protestant churches, but also from most Catholic churches. The Counter-Reformation, also called the Catholic Reformation, put an end to the barrier between the nave and the choir.

The rood screen resonates with the Greek doxa. Doxa can mean 'appearance' as well as 'suggestion', or 'intimation'. The rood screen

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deprived the believers of the view of the high altar. It also deprived the believers of the sight of the performance of the liturgy in the choir. Only episcopal servants were granted access to the choir. Mass was conducted from there, away from the view of the churchgoers. The mystery *appeared* to an exclusive group confined within an enclosed space. For the bulk of the worshipers, there remained nothing but intimation. This bifurcation between appearance and intimation coincided in large part with the divide between literacy and illiteracy. Paradoxically, literacy gave access to that which could not be understood in words.

The two domains that were partitioned by the rood screen were, like the dual faces of Janus, inextricably bound to one another, without mirroring each other. At the side of the nave, the rood screen was painted with biblical scenes and decorated with images of saints and apostles. The Rood screen translated the mystery that was being staged on the other side. The rood screen deprived sight to the people and offered a representation in its stead. On one side was the domain of the word and on the other, the domain of the image, both looking away from each other.

Mater let the visitors to the chapel gaze straight through such barriers and walk around them too. 'DID You Wonder' flipped into 'did You know'; 'it is no secret' changed into 'i sit on this'. It is a manifesto of sorts, albeit a friendly manifesto: free entrance to image and scripture, self-manage one's own writing and reading, from both sides, towards either side.

It was good to linger over Mater's work. Sitting on the bench on one side of the projection screen and then on the other, I was reminded of learning to read and write at school. Especially the start of the process: that point in time when letters are about to become words, but do not have to, or *not yet*; when words let you glance through them, while they are still draped and folded; when the paper upon which you are writing gives itself as a space to be approached from all sides: a cherished memory that does not admit nostalgia. On the contrary, looking at Mater's work the memory becomes an infectious futurity: a rumination on what possibilities would arise if we could use writing so freely. Cheerfully I walked home from P////AKT as I was able to wipe the philosopher Cathérine Malabou's thought from my mind, that we are witnessing the dusk of writing.

Translation by Daniel Vorthuys