

STEREO JLG / the editing of the trailer

John Lalor

06.05.2010

THE RED STRIP DISTRICT

The Irish Times on February 2, 2011 by stereojlg

When I first saw Lalor's red text in the Irish Times I have to admit I did not get it. Nor did I get it when I actually tried to read the red text itself. I was intrigued. Yes. I was impressed by the daring of the author. But I didn't know what in the world it meant.

But was it meant to mean? And can we really look for an author here? Is Lalor not rather playing the clown, the joker in the pack, what Levi-Strauss calls the bricoleur. Is he not playing the role of anti-author or posthumous author in the sense proposed by Roland Barthes in his landmark essay 'The Death of the Author'? For Lalor's red strips of text – might we call them strip-tease texts? – lure and frustrate us at the same time. The scarlet invites us to look, regard, take note, scrutinise, then fades into black. It beckons to the reader only to retreat into an incomprehensible night of tiny illegible writing surrounded by the very legible print of the newspaper itself. The Irish Times meets Scarlet and Black. Madame de Rênal plays hide and seek with Sorel the reader.

The paper seems to bleed, as if sense was hemorrhaging into non-sense. But this only heightens the whole question of what 'is' sense in the first place, what makes sense? In what sense should we and do we read newspapers when they are presented to us as 'news', 'reportage', 'narratives', 'the facts'? All different genres and styles. Yet we normally take them for granted, precisely as given. A quick read over breakfast or lunch, in the bus, train, plane. Writing as information first, connotation second. But there is also a 'Third Meaning', as Barthes points out in his essay of that name. And that is the meaning that Lalor is trying to make sense of by making non-sense of it all. A 'slippery trickster' who learns from Finnegans Wake and Lewis Carroll that there is a nocturnal unconscious at work in the play of words within words. Or maybe Lalor echoes Yeats' motto, 'words alone are certain good'.

Whatever it be, this is 'writerly' writing as described by Barthes: 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin....it is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (The Death of the Author). This can provoke a certain ludic jouissance, he says, where words become obtuse, impertinent, perverse, impenetrable: a text to be 'disentangled rather than deciphered' – 'run like the thread of a stocking at every point.... But there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way writing...by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text, liberates an activity that is truly revolutionary'. Why? 'Because to refuse to fix meaning is to refuse God and his hypotheses – reason, science, law'. In this sense, we can say that Lalor's non-sense is irrational, anti-scientific and illegal, in the most revolutionary sense of the term.

Lalor the outlaw, the subversive, the Nietzschean, Dionysian anti-Christ. Celebrant of what certain postmoderns have called an 'erotics of reading' (as opposed to a hermeneutics of interpretation). A young artist taking his cue from that other Dublin Parisian, Beckett, when he says, 'no symbols where none intended'. That's John Lalor for you. And if you were to take all the little discarded, disseminated red strips together and piece them into a plot or pattern you would not get a Little Red Book (Maoist or Jungian). You would get a higgledy-piggledy pile of little scarlet scatterings without beginning or end. Parody of multiple palimpsests – Joyce, Godard and more – but no

single book and no single message. As I look at one (or several) of Lalor's text-strips – often placed over comic strips – I cannot but recall Barthes' provocative description of what he terms the 'traumatic quality' of a certain postmodern writing which blocks meaning and belongs to 'the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche), it is on the side of the carnival'. Lalor rivals Magritte's 'This is not a Pipe' with 'This is not a Text'.

And yet none of this carnivalesque non-sense would mean anything unless it was placed precisely in the context of a national newspaper that serves truth, seriousness, reason and law. That promises to report the facts as they are – in black and white. Not red. To see red is to be mad. To go out of your mind. As I am sure many Irish times readers did as they watched the morning newspaper menstruate into their breakfast tea. Yet many too must have asked: what does this mean? And if they did ask that question the play with non-meaning was worth it – ultimately vindicating the wager the Irish Times took in letting an exiled Dubliner creep back between the sheets of their paper and infiltrate the national body politic with viral veerings of color and word. We should applaud their brave gesture to allow the Trojan horse into the city, come what may.

But there is sense to the non-sense in another way too. When I heard John Lalor tell me that when he was a child he would wonder why his father was more interested in reading the comic strip of the Irish Times than in talking to him, a light went on. The fact that Lalor's red text ran riot over the Irish Times comic strip was telling. That piece of biography mattered a lot to my appreciation of the work and I regretted that there was not an interview with Lalor printed in the Irish Times to coincide with his experiment. Lalor is a conceptual artist (or anti-artist) after all. So concepts matter, narratives count, his images are, as Deleuze put it, *des images pensantes*. They are meant to make you think. And there is much thinking to be done about the relationship between the death of the author and its simultaneous rebirth.

In short, I think Lalor the author is ultimately as important as Lalor the post-author. Barthes gets it half right. But only half. The other half is captured by Joyce when he said, 'It's a brave man would invent something that never happened'. The Irish Times experiment originated not last year but forty years ago when Lalor the son watched Lalor the father read the Irish Times comic strip when he came home from work. 'It's the father and son idea', as we are told in the opening chapter of *Ulysses*. Which is perhaps why that is Lalor's favorite book and why *Shane* is his favorite movie. The artist is dead, long live the artist.

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ESSAY from <http://stereojlg.wordpress.com>

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