

The Vanishing Art of Disappearing

Written by Alex Baer

Thursday, 18 June 2015 12:42

We are all time travelers.

I have come to this conclusion in a roundabout route, my usual method of making way from A to B, via a few scenic-tour handfuls of multi-cultural alphabets wrought from pen, paper press, and cuneiform tablet.

Art is the key. It is in art where most of us spend our free time, from soaking up opera to hand-tying flies for fishing, or whatever our fancy. We are consumers of all things, now that we make almost nothing in this country, and art -- popular culture, if you'd prefer to call it -- is part of our voracious appetite.

(Even today's old-fashioned broadcast radio and television counts -- although, I am often unsure what it counts *as* -- *buh-dum-dah*.)

Art is where we go for relief from the routine world in which we find ourselves. And, if we have any energy left over from just trying to survive, and have any interests to do so, we choose art as a platform on which we hope to stand, better understanding our world, ourselves, and trying to make some sense of this journey and this place -- maybe even other people, although we shouldn't get our hopes up too high.

Some of us feel a need to enter into this conversation of what it all means, adding broad strokes of interpretation and meaning to our canvasses, whether we use oils or finger paints, music notation or instrumentation, photographs or moving images, sculptures or shadow boxes, line drawings or computer renderings, pens or keyboards.

The searching conversations we have can be clear or confused, statements or questions, intimate or vast, personal or universal, immediately understandable or ominously impenetrable.

Whether doer or experiencer, we all seek some answers in the way-station of art, hoping to find some relief, some release, some sense of rest.

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We try to find a different place, a place that is not here -- a vacation spot from the stressful and mundane -- a place which helps us make better sense of the world to which we all secretly know we must return.

In my mind, this makes us time travelers, trying to move through ethers of various media, transporting to places which are not here, not now, someplace else.

- One more thing ties us all together, every human alive now, every human ever alive: *The need to disappear.*

It's one reason why we dream, I believe -- a reason to stop bearing the weight of who we are, take a break, roam freely into whatever nooks and crannies of being we are curious enough to find and try out.

In the old days, way-way-way back, even before 8-track tapes, almost as far back as woolly mammoths, we had to do our disappearing with the help of stories told from around fires. We could also vanish in our dreams, be somebody else for a while, be somewhere else for a time.

Later, cave paintings helped tell the stories, then shadow puppets, and on and on, to disembodied voices traveling through the air and coming out of a box, and on to photographs, slide shows, moving images. Books were in there, too, helping us transport to brand new worlds, or back again to favorite haunts.

This is where my thinking about this time travel business originally started, many years ago: reading books. Somehow, it dawned on me that we were, and are, all of us, restless beings, who, even when this world is going wonderfully well for us, prefer a night out once in awhile, to somewhere else.

How much more the need when life is *not* going so wonderfully well? Could be this was my first experience with double-sided coins, where this one coin was labelled

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entertainment
on one side and
escape
on the other.

- *Recreation, escapism*: Re-creating, escaping. Strange parallels, I remember thinking, as a kid. Stranger bedfellows, I keep thinking, now.

For me, reading is always where the easiest travel takes place. (Music and film both offer vast access for me as well, as does all art, but reading has always seemed magical, in its ability to make impersonal, abstract symbols on a page dance, becoming such full, personal, palpable experiences. And, once the rules for reading are understood, the framework never changes, so nothing mechanical interrupts the process or snags the conscious flow -- aside from tired eyes, bad lighting, sneaky typos, or the improbable motivation of assembled characters.)

The busiest travel agency is in my own mind, booking me passage to all manner of locales, timelines, alternate universes. Reading is also the mode of travel for my most memorable journeys, second only to where I go when I dream.

(I like to think of my consciously making various reading selections as my dictating a highly-anticipated itinerary to my travel agent, whereas dreams are more my way of strolling in, collapsing into a chair, and telling the agent, "Oh, I dunno -- You pick a place this time, would you? I'm all done in today, fresh out of ideas, and would appreciate some suggestions." My travel agent is remarkably flexible and creative, having a sense of humor and notion of adventure as broad and outlandish as my own, and even as fiendishly, *eye-winkingly* ironic, too.)

- *Making marks on paper, tickling characters into a computer screen dance, chasing squiggles off the edge of a pad with a pen, directing software to juggle letters into guided galleys and blind alleys of words...*

Kurt Vonnegut once remarked the process of reading is itself remarkable, and magical, given the limited number of characters writers use on a page, and even fewer marks of punctuation as helpful road signs. Yet, thoughts and feelings still seem to move from writer to reader, and across time and regardless of location.

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You can still read a hundred-year-old book about Africa while in the Antarctic, if you like, no batteries required. Magic, indeed.

Even today, nothing starts before something is written on a page somewhere, by somebody -- usually one person, with a *headful* of notions, at least at first, before battalions of studio rewrite experts show up, before the Creation Committee starts rearranging the perfectly fine, healthy animal into an improbable, asthmatic, stationary beast sporting multiple humps, beaks, and trunks.

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Small sidebar:

This *Creating by Committee* business is where things go sideways, of course. With writing, just a few people can handle the task -- writer, editor, maybe some others to help guide the process -- so the ideas stay fairly intact, and the voice remains mostly personal, conveying the ideas of one person only.

With film, for example, armadas of people have to be involved, owing to the vast array of specialties and equipment, which then requires vast shoals of cash to support -- and, wherever you see unfathomable amounts of money, mixed with intangible industries, you'll have lagoons of petty pursers firing shots across multiple bows, dictating any number of bizarre, zig-zagging, counter-warfare courses and speeds...

Once upon a time, in ancient modes, such as in painting and sculpture and writing, the failure or success of the ideas can generally be placed on one, or maybe two, sets of shoulders. In more modern enterprises, such as television and film, whole legions are involved, with each and every person available to sabotage the whole, knowingly or unknowingly -- even if every other person performs his or her speciality to perfection.

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And, of course, we all know what *Design by Committee* generally does for the end product. It's a wonder, really, that not all television and film products are not producing wares under a single banner of
Blind Leading the Blind Productions, Ltd.

Instead, we often get *Bling Leading the Bling Productions, Ltd.*

Occasionally, we get *Blink* or *Blip* or *Blimp*, or even *Bump* or *Blur*, *Leading the Blink-Blip-Blimp-Bump-Blur Productions, Ltd.*

Rarely, we get *Bliss Leading the Blissful Productions, Unlimited*. These rare successes, though, keeps us coming back for more -- which means we are forever hopeful and completely forgiving creatures, as a species, or else we are brain-damaged amnesiacs with no capacity for learning.

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Kurt Vonnegut, whom I am fond of reading and quoting, has summed it up nicely, fully, and succinctly (always a good sign of genius, to my long, doorknob-dumb, overly windy way of thinking and scribbling) when he said, "I believe that reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has so far found..."

I think he has something there. In meditation, as any Zen master will tell you, the trick is to disappear -- to have the meditating doing the meditating, so to speak. Any artists will tell you when they are in the throes of their arts, in their own personal avenues of escape, they themselves disappear and only the art remains.

When I write, and make various marks and letters juggle and contort themselves into words and thoughts, I, too, disappear. The only thing that stays behind is the writing.

This is part of the magic of our Muses, helping us go somewhere else for a while. For me, a

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word juggler, it's a sort of a *scribble-by-seance* session. I am embarrassed to take any credit for any sort writing I do, except, maybe, grocery lists. Otherwise, it always feels like I've been away, taking someone's dictation -- and it's really difficult, as a typist, to take credit for the ideas on the page after one of those rounds of taking dictation from the Muse.

(If you like, in the future, if we should meet, just tell me, sometime -- if you'd like to pass along a compliment -- "You tap a really mean 'return' key!" and we can let it go at that.)

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I once noted I have hypergraphia, probably, which is normally defined as an intense desire to write. I now suspect this is not actually true, for a couple reasons. One is that I do not fill up notebooks, or even Word document pages, with small, crabbed, cramp-handed, 3-point scrimshaw and sundry, chatty *chitterings*.

The other reason is that I am often completely unconvinced there is any need at all for me to write anything.

Ever.

Life will go on, after all. My life will not come to a screeching halt. There is no financial impact or incentive to my continuing to write, and no financial catastrophe linked to my stopping, and just dropping it, cold turkey...

... except that I have already treated my poor, patient Muse so shabbily over the years as to have been shamed into that realization and have reluctantly accepted my pleasurable penance of scribbling away, making words jump through hoops. (Guilt is always a strong force, even in former Catholics, where childhood instruction in confirmation and communion is plentiful, along with all the other rote, dogmatic catechisms, cataclysms, and assorted Apocalypse-Now classes.)

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No -- perhaps like you, by either reading or writing, my real reward is simple: *I get to disappear for a while, go somewhere else.*

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Brief aside:

Perhaps it will be helpful to know this: In the various near-death experiences I've had, whatever sense I've had of Things-that-Are-Next, the sensation shares quite a lot with the sensation of Disappearing with Art.

In a short phrase, it's like *Being Aware of Being, But with Far More Overall Contentment.*

That may sound odd like an odd description, but it's pretty accurate from my experiences, so far, at least. If nothing else, it beats previous scenarios of eternal flames, and even the ones about floating along on a cloud, clad in a toga, clutching a harp, balancing a halo on the head.

Better yet, it's an absolute improvement on a vivid, repeating, fear-based dream I have, in which the afterlife is a dingy, Woody-Allen-and-the-Cohen-Brothers-Meet-Joe-Versus-the-Volcano waiting room with buzzing florescent lights, sizzling and flashing randomly, while we all plod through well-thumbed, dog-eared magazines popular 54 years ago, seated in scantily-padded, straight-back vinyl chairs placed on a black-and-white-squared, chintzy linoleum floor, sipping coffee that could double -- *no sweat!* -- as battery acid, waiting for our number to be called, so we can get a fresh start, reborn into our new lives...

... realizing it's already taken what seems like *eternity* to get the last number called, Number 73, and trying to figure out when our own number will be called, Number 9231, with those seventeen thousand other place-holder figures tacked on to the end, like that...

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Yes:

I am glad to know Art is still with us, in all its forms, providing so many ways for us all to stop, whenever we like, and get outside ourselves, get off this planet, strip ourselves out of this reality, at least for a little while -- and no matter how good it gets, no matter how weird it gets, no matter how painful it gets around here.

Good to know Art still works for consumers, too -- or that it can, if they let it -- even if consumers seem to be doing all they can to stay in this world, desperately clutching at, and trying to suck down, every scrap of pop culture glitter they can get their scrabbling hands on.

Time travel?

Disappearing is a vanishing art, I guess, no matter which way you look at it.

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