

Lines of Thought: Diagramming in the Margins of Philosophy

Key words: outline, underline, drawing, diagram, reading, research, marginalia, philosophy

Abstract

This critical reflection emerges at a tangent from a concurrent creative practice-led research project into the diagram at the intersection of art praxis and post-continental philosophy. It was provoked by a realisation that the diagrammatic was in operation at all levels of the project and core to its methodology as well as its content.

The following is the consequence of a resistance to the assumed ‘transparency’ of the academic procedure of a literature review, wherein the process of reading is understood to be an instrumental form of information mining. It is a meta-inquiry into how drawing diagrams in the process of reading may open a new register for thought. The analysis takes an auto-ethnographic form, with my own experience of reading and autographic marking-up on paper-based texts - as forms of ‘drawing on text’ - offered as case-study for reflection.

Outline

‘Drawing is “a line around a think”.’ (Marion cited in Petherbridge 2010:19)

The idea that drawing and thinking are intimately related is so intuitive that a child is attributed as the source of this quote. The *outline*, as described by this assertion, is the line that surrounds the thought - a containing metaphor. It gives drawing a purpose that is not its own - to function as the frame for thought. To paraphrase Jacques Derrida’s analysis of Kant’s Parergon (1979) - it is both ‘of’ and ‘not of’ thought.



then, would the thought be without the line to circumscribe it?

It is the contention of this critical reflection that marginalia may function as forms of diagrammatic thinking-in-the act (Manning & Massumi 2014), performed through somatic and scopic processes of drawing.

Though methods of close or deconstructive reading are specific to certain forms of textual analysis for which training is often required, I assert that *all* forms of reading are complex. Invariably the act of reading is constituted by deviations and digressions, lapses of attention, scheduled and unscheduled interruptions, repetition and recursion, and the attendant circumstantial forms of embodiment of time of day or night, lighting, body posture, etc. No understanding derived from reading is purely a consequence of the text - but of the reader and their lifeworld, in and around that act of reading.

In reading texts on paper, I invariably have a pencil to hand. A ubiquitous portable tool applied in the functions of writing and drawing, used here to mark up those texts. The active use of the pencil in the process of reading primes the hand to think along with vision, making the body actively engaged in the otherwise physically passive act of reading.

In marking up text in this process of reading, my pencil marks activate the spaces between and around the printed words - surrounding, intervening, questioning, elaborating and underlining the reproduced texts with emerging, contingent thoughts. And these are first thoughts, or *schizo pensieri*, in that they are sketchy, pre-figurative, provisional, open to change and charged with intuitive import.

Often my pencil markings are themselves in the form of words - annotations, references and questions. But importantly they also take a 'visual turn', in the forms of horizontal *underlines*, circumscriptions, vertical *outlines* ('bracketings') of sections, small speculative *drawings* and *diagrams*, that may open- up further dimensions of inference in conjunction with the printed text. The forms and functions of these visual marking are the subject of my reflection here.

Underline

The most frequent form of mark-up for me is the *underline*. This 'emphatic' gesture sweeps along beneath and between the typographic text, moving most often in the direction of the prose from left to right. In so doing leaves behind a clearly intentional mark. Optically it creates a visual thickening in the textual space serving to catch the eye, which on a return reading, draws attention to the point of first notice, inviting reconsideration.

As a gesture, the vectored linearity of the *underline* is a ductus (Petherbridge 2011:102), following the eye in reiterating the movement of reading. Its forward motion is an assertion

of significance or understanding and as such, it may need no further qualification on the page. The process of drawing the underline may also serve to slow down thinking, allowing it to surface and find a form in the space of the margin.

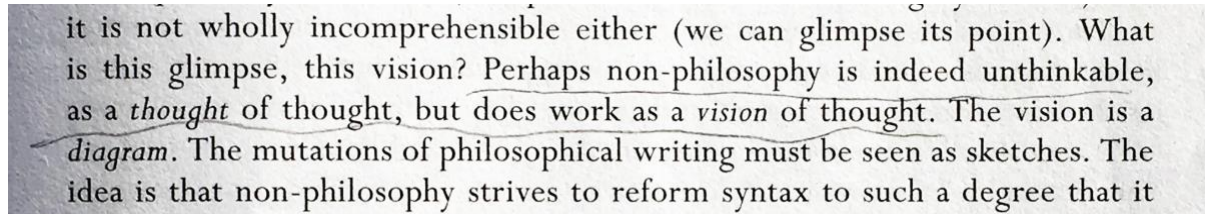


Figure 1: Author's pencil underlining of p153 from Mullarkey, John (2006), *Post Continental Philosophy – An Outline*, New York, NY: Continuum

For the purposes of recognition, legibility is dependent on the unimpeded passage of the eye as it scans that text. Meaning then, is experienced extra-textually - as if the author's voice were in the reader's mind. Thus, Lyotard suggests that reading is experienced more as hearing than seeing (1971:211).

The drawn line on the other hand, has an autographic energy which is significant for its plastic qualities and rhythmic affect - the eye must come *in-line*, as it were, to take notice. Unlike the typographic text, the line's meaning is therefore immanent to its plastic form on the material page.

Drawing the *underline* may then become a way to undermine the eye's tendency to habitual over-sight in reading, destabilising the expectation that the cognitive work is completed in the text as read by creating an intra-text within the text.

So, whilst the typographic words of the text provoke an 'overseeing' in the form of the activity of reading, the *underline* as gesture introduces an active form of 'underseeing' (Massumi 2011:93) in the reader's perceptual field. To underscore the typographic text with a drawn line is to set off a reverberation in cognition produced by a perceptual oscillation between printed words and drawn line. In this oscillation, we move between the informational space of the text, the figural space of the drawn line, and the material page on which the plastic line is 'inscribed'. In effect *underlining* draws attention to the space of inscription, whereas the text in its reading is paradoxically lost to sight in being made legible.

In other words, drawing in the process of reading enables cognition to be multi-modal.

Diagram

Moving beyond the horizontal underline and single or double vertical outlines of emphasis, I have found myself developing my drawn lines into small marginalia diagrams. As my study into the philosophical diagram proceeds, the lines I draw become reflexively engaged with the content of the texts, creating an intra-textual language of figures and notation alongside. Drawing in this context can be a way to visualize complex or abstract ideas, in a heuristic process of learning.

In my experience as an artist, the range of forms in play in this process are *indisciplined* (Citton 2012) and function through a relatively unconstrained signifying logic or meshwork, comprising more or less recognizable diagrammatic iconography. Marginalia of this sort are largely private notational systems, unconcerned with any communicative function beyond the reader's own purpose. This internalisation of purpose may liberate the reader/drawer to invent new forms without strict recourse to conventions, giving rise to the possibility of fresh thinking, which may, in turn lead on to new communicable insight.

In effect, in deviating from the convention of written word marginalia, my use of pictographic motifs creates an opening in which a new rhetorical register comes into play. And it is here that the diagrammatic materialises both as a mnemonic synopsis, making use of symbols to aid memory and as an opening onto thought - as a process of 'observation'.

As with typographic text, the conventional linear diagram floats in the white space of the page, sharing the omniscient viewpoint of an ideal reader. But while text floats in parallel to the picture plane of the page, some (topographical) diagrams may use an orthogonal perspective. Word and image then appear before the reader in a different orientation, and with a different dimensionality, with the topological drawing making use of a shallow perspectival illusionism to push beyond the planarity of the surface to stage the conceptual. This offsetting of the image-thought to the word-thought again creates a disturbance in the linear momentum of sentential logic. The topological character of these small drawings echo the format of the encyclopaedic image by making evident the notional spatiality of the white page, but as the drawings appears alongside the text in the margins, rather than in the

conventional sequential arrangement for illustrations or in parallel- as plates, the configuration appears to side-step the word-image dualism. In this way text and image come to share the same space but from a differentiated viewpoint.

We can only make headway with these questions if we give up the narrowly historical point of view of before and after in order to consider the time rather than the history of philosophy. This is a *stratigraphic* time where “before” and “after” indicate only an order of superimpositions. Certain paths (movements) take on sense and direction only as the shortcuts or detours of faded paths; a variable curvature can appear only as the transformation of one or more

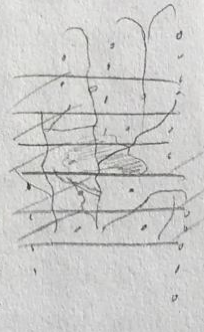


Figure 2: Author's pencil diagram in margin of p38 of Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix (1994) *What Is Philosophy*, trans. ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press

These ‘observations’ as drawings can exploit the full range of material signifiers mobilised by the ‘autofigurative’ (Cazeaux, 2017:136). potential of the chosen medium, whether it be pencil or highlighter pen. As suggested previously, the line ‘figures’ itself in being a record of its own making as gesture, and is qualitatively different from the printed text in its materiality. Diagrammatic drawings are therefore autofigurative, in that they speak of themselves as much as they refer to ideas.

The pencil is the democratic tool of mark-making par excellence, in its ubiquity, ready-to-hand-ness, economy, and significantly, erase-ability - especially important should the marginalia fall into other readers’ hands.

Nevertheless, some marginalia can add significantly to the value of a text, and not always for the expected reasons;

As an artist, I have been engaged in an on-going postcard project exploring the place of drawing in the relationship between reader and writer. The project, which is perhaps better described as an anti-project (in that it has no foreseeable end) has an intermittent temporality driven by the happenstance of lived experience, in which chance encounters take on the significance of events through a process of synchronicity. The circumstantial components of each of these experiences is represented by a postcard, together they form a series (*Desultory*

Objects). Each postcard acts as a compressed document of the greater story it represents. One of these stories is pertinent to this discussion, and I offer it here by way of illustration.

In 2004 I was browsing my university library when I came across a book entitled *The Return of the Reader: Reader-response criticism* (1984) by Elizabeth Freund. What I found inside in addition to an erudite introduction to literary Reception theory, was a gift from a previous reader in the form of some very finely drawn marginal doodles.

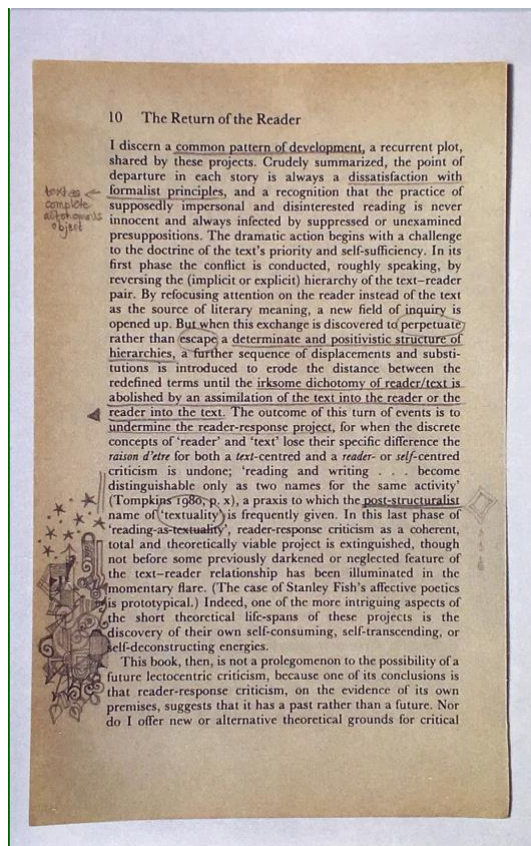


Figure 3: *Desultory Object 3* Postcard (2004), Claire Scanlon

My discovery of these doodles set off a reverberation - in their reflexivity to the subject of the text and their conceptual resonance with my project. This was a provocation for action. The ensuing work, which involved the careful (if illicit) removal, copying and replacement of a page of the book (thus altering the book in form but not in content for subsequent readers), nevertheless needed copyright permission for its reproduction as a postcard artwork. The publishers informed me that the book was out of print and I would need to contact the author directly for permission.

Dr. Elizabeth Freund was gracious, delighted and a little embarrassed by the prospect of her already dated thesis becoming the subject of a work of art - albeit by way of another reader's marginalia. Living in Jerusalem she could hardly believe she was addressing her correspondence with me to a place called Peacehaven, despite my assurances that it was no utopia! But that, as they say, is another story...

There is not the space here to account for Dr. Freund's embarrassment by rehearsing the epistemic shift from New Criticism to Deconstruction that had occurred subsequent to her book, except to briefly demonstrate how this sample of marginalia might have been variously interpreted as a consequence:

For instance, a semiotician might say the reader's interjection of this visual doodle into the linguistic register of the text is merely a case of 'aberrant decoding' (Eco 1972 in Chandler) - an incommensurate response to the communicative function of that text. An inter-textualist (Kristeva 1980 in Chandler) might claim that the doodle 'graphically' illustrates the de-centred authority of the writer in post-structuralism and re-codes the text appropriately with a 'reader-response'. A deconstructionist might argue that the marginalia is itself a generative contamination - a détournement of the intellectual work of 'understanding' demanded of the serious reader, by the work of 'desire' at play in this reader/doodler.

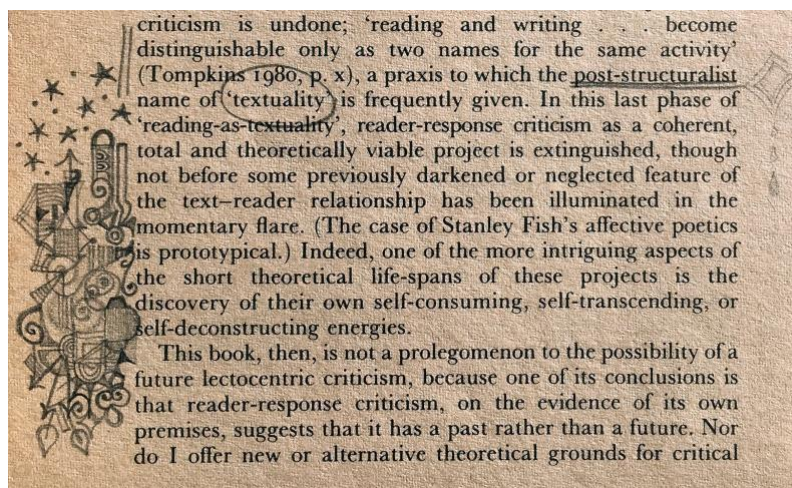


Figure 4: Doodle by unknown reader, p10 of Freund, Elizabeth (1987) *The Return of the Reader: Reader-response criticism*, London & New York: Methuen

At the time of this ‘chance’ encounter, this tenderly crafted doodle struck me not as the unconscious act of a drifting mind normally associated with doodling, but an ironically reflexive, post-modern gesture, which synched with my own interests in its affirmation of drawing as a critical practice- intervening here in the space between reader and writer.

Now, on reflection, another ‘reading’ comes into focus.

‘Diagrams conventionally bring together linguistic and figural means’ (Bogen and Thurlleman quoted by Gerhard Dirmoser 2014:158) and offer ‘a transactional space where heterogeneous or even incommensurate epistemologies come into relation’ (Rogers 2014). They do this not only to map existing knowledge but to work through abstract or complex problems, finding correlations or seeking out logical ‘inconsistencies’.

Sybille Krämer describes diagrams as hybrid forms between images and scriptural notation that make discursivity visible through interspaciality (Gerner: 2011: n.p). She suggests that images initiate not only aesthetic but cognitive experience (Krämer: 2009:277) and that in the context of the diagram this happens through the binary disposition of the drawn line.

As already noted, the drawn line has plastic and aesthetic qualities that are perceptible but when used in the process of notation Kramer suggests, the “stroke is valued as a one-dimensional line, representing a state that is therefore not perceptible, but rather only intelligible or ideal... Thus, as the line is both perceptible and intelligible at once, she continues “in a phenomenon we see a concept.” (Krämer: 2009:278)

What then, if we were to give as much credence to the cognitive work of drawing in the margins as we do to the linguistic in the printed text? Might it then be possible to see *and* read, observe and hear, as in a diagram with the *underline* and *outline* functioning as iconic vectors bringing component parts into relation?

Marginalia may then be understood less as a form of parasitic commentary on the text than as means to spatialize and reconfigure that text as a working object, like a map, with drawing in this context functioning as a way for the reader to navigate, orientate and formulate thoughts.

Perhaps this speculation on the cognitive potential of drawing marginalia strikes you as far-fetched and admittedly it seems a stretch to claim so much for such a humble and ubiquitous practice but perhaps not.

The meta-cognitive function of marginalia provides a rationale for a new online project from Princeton University. Entitled *Derrida's Margins* (Derrida's Margins Webpage 2017), the project aims to offer an online research tool enabling scholars to study the development of Derrida's philosophy by providing full digital access to his annotations, marginalia, bookmarks, tipped-in pages, and notes corresponding to the many hundreds of citations found in his ground-breaking philosophical work *Of Grammatology*.

Though the diagrammatic does not explicitly feature in this account of such an evidently important corpus, Marcus Steinweg observes of Derrida's deconstruction, that it was a way, 'to concede the utmost authority to a text by following its statements, idioms, and grammar into the most far-flung typographical corners, in order to reveal its inconsistencies and in this way to expose it a little [...]: loyalty through betrayal – and vice versa!' (Steinweg 2017:13)

If, marginalia in the form of the *underline*, the *outline*, and the *diagram*, in this respect extend the capacity of the reader to 'make a break' with the authority of the text, to begin to write another story, perhaps this is because they are deploying a form of diagrammatic thinking.

Drawing in this context, is then less about 'framing' thought, as the child's intuition first supposes, and more about its mobilisation.

In my struggle to make my case here in sequential writing (without recourse to drawing), the more pressing question I must return to, is whether or not that new story can be entirely in the form of a diagram?

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