Annotating, or The Experience of Shared Writing

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> "Faced with a written text, the reader had a duty to lend voice to the silent letters, the *scripta*, and to allow them to become, in the delicate biblical distinction, *verba*, spoken words – spirit. The primordial languages of the Bible – Aramaic and Hebrew – do not differentiate between the act of reading and the act of speaking; they name both with the same word."
>
> Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (1)

1. Institutions as a Way of Life (IWL)

"Institutions as a Way of Life" was a research project organized by Bernhard Garnicnig, Lucie Kolb and Jamie Allen in the Critical Media Lab of the Institute of Experimental Design and Media Cultures, which is attached to the School of Arts of the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland, in Basel. The aim of IWL was briefly to "elaborate and explore perspectives on *institutional practices*" (2) by focusing on several specific themes which, at the outset of the project, included feminism, technology, individuation, dividuation, performance and publishing. Besides addressing these topics, Garnicnig, Kolb and Allen also set down some basic guidelines for the research. One or two collaborators were invited to compile a selection of bibliography that would offer insightful perspectives on each one of the selected themes. Compilers were expected to present their bibliographic selections before a small group of participants who would join the discussions that followed as part of a workshop. The goal of this three-step procedure – selection, presentation, discussion – was not only to share sources within the group and evaluate their relevance, but also to produce "annotated" versions of the chosen essays.

From the beginning, however, the answer to the question about what specific method(s) of "annotation" were to be used was left intentionally blurred and, therefore, open: annotating might take many different forms – known or as yet unknown – as long as it enriched every essay with new layers for interpretation and productive comments. Likewise, although every selection of "annotated" essays around the themes at play was indeed expected to be disseminated at the end of the project, it was equally vague what form these compilations of essays – or "readers" – would eventually adopt in their process of being divulged, that is to say, of becoming public.

IWL consequently embarked along a set of well-defined guidelines, the outcomes of which had yet to be established. Or, in other words: it took off from precise departure points that would lead down unknown paths. I had the pleasure to be invited as curatorial editor. Although my role was initially almost as blurred as the meanings of "annotating" and "making public" were in this context, some things were obvious: I had to monitor the development of IWL and the workshop discussions and produce input which, hopefully, would anchor the resulting compilations of essays

to reality by helping to define what their material shape would be.

The project unfolded into four two-day discussion sessions, held between May and November 2019 at the Critical Media Lab, in Basel. During each session, a small group of people gathered around a large table at the Critical Media Lab and explained, talked, questioned, discussed, commented, argued, played and experimented with annotating the successive sets of texts brought in by the compilers. Throughout these sessions and the accompanying research, the original themes under discussion grew ever more complex, so that by the end of 2019 the list of topics that IWL had explored had almost doubled: feminism, fiction and performance, publishing, print, decentralization of ethics and care, graphic design, instituent practices, unbuilding infrastructures and art schools.

As we perused the selections of texts that every compiler brought to Basel, it became evident that "making public" could mean publishing the outcomes of IWL at least in digital form, and that the resulting "thematic readers" would ideally include one annotated version of every selected text and also, where possible, every independent text in its unannotated version, so as not to cancel the potential for viewers external to the project to come up with new groupings of essays – to produce, in other words, new "readers". A list of references for every theme, inserted in the art school library catalogue as a Zotero bibliography, would be the third – and last – of every reader's materializations.

Session after session, we realized that there could actually be many different annotating methods adopted by each group of compilers. Therefore, the definition for "annotating" continued to be open all through the development of the project: some of the compilers designated "annotated", as "commented on the margins", while for others it meant "highlighted in different colors", or "transformed into dialogues between invented characters which would incarnate opposite intellectual positions", or "modified so as to change every semantic word by its opposite, and see what the resulting text read like", or "transfigured as a map, even an unconventional one". Every compiler simply chose their own, and for this reason the resulting readers present heterogeneous annotating modes that are often quite dissimilar from one another.

2. Reading / Writing: Annotating

But what does to *annotate* actually mean*?* The definition given by the Webster Dictionary of English is quite simple: "To make or furnish critical or explanatory notes or comments." The Oxford Learners' Dictionary of English does not take the matter much further: "To add notes to a book or text, giving explanations or comments." All of us, however – although we never really stopped to discuss in much detail what we understood by annotating –, had a similar idea about the potentials of annotation as a research technique which are not to be found in these standard definitions of the term. Luckily, other explanations of "annotating", elaborated in contexts where it is encouraged as a learning or understanding strategy, are a little more productive. See, for instance, the depiction of *annotating* put forth by the Writers' Center of the Eastern Washington University (the italics are mine): "Annotating is *any action that deliberately interacts with a text* to enhance the reader's understanding of, recall of, and reaction to the text. Sometimes called 'close reading,' annotating usually involves highlighting or underlining key pieces of text and making notes in the margins of the text." (3) Annotating as a form of exchange with a given text, which involves a certain dialogical back-and-forth between such text and a reader, is definitely more in line with the way IWL understood this procedure. This idea of exchange is expanded a bit further in the definition of "text annotation" provided by Wikipedia: "Annotating is the practice and the result of adding a note or gloss to a text, which may include highlights or underlining, comments, footnotes, tags, and links. Text annotations can include notes written for a reader's private

purposes, as well as *shared annotations written for the purposes of collaborative writing and editing, commentary, or social reading and sharing.*" (4)

In terms of the IWL research, it was precisely this social, collaborative aspect of annotation which lay at the core: a collective process of knowledge production was at play, a process which would require sharing perspectives and sending feedback in order for the annotation proceeding to move forward. Regardless of how partial or obscure annotations might end up being, they would always be meant to capture and reflect reactions to the selected essays, make them visible and integrate them in the annotated texts as well.

Lastly, there was one more level of depth in which annotating felt like the right method to use in the IWL research. Scientific and specialized essays constitute one of the various incarnations taken by intellectual authority, that is to say, by approved knowledge which bears the seal of academia and is therefore consolidated. Consequently, the exercise of engaging with these essays through annotation was also a way of showing a certain resistance to the institutionality that such essays help to construct. And this resistance felt adequate for a research project intended to "change institutional life". (5)

3. Reading / Speaking: Sharing

As I started writing this introduction, in the first days of March 2020, the series of IWL workshops had come to an end some three months earlier. It felt like a good vantage point from which to evaluate how the research had worked and whether the *modus operandi* chosen for such research had fulfilled expectations. Looking back, all of the reasons in favor of selecting annotating were still valid. But, in retrospect, the focus clearly fell on a very specific aspect of the process: what mattered was not so much the knowledge encapsulated by annotations, but rather the ongoing reading, annotating, discussing and annotating again – that is, the continuing dialogue which had been aimed at finding shared, common epistemic grounds.

Seen in this light, the whole annotating issue seemed to be, above all, an excuse for us participants of IWL to sit down together and *read* – and thereby *think* – *collectively*. I could see that, all along, we had been understanding reading as the opposite to the private, intimate activity that it mostly is nowadays. Interestingly, the act of reading has not always been so private and intimate. Historical studies show that for many centuries it was almost solely conceived as a collective activity where a reader would read out to one or more listeners. The change from loud to silent reading is apparently connected to the advancement of writing – specifically, to the introduction of word separation (6) – and took place somewhere between late antiquity and the 15th century. Way before, around 1000AD, annotation had already become a popular way for scribes to pass knowledge about manuscripts on to the next scribes, that is: a way of sharing knowledge among the members of a community.

So maybe what we were doing, throughout the IWL preparations and annotating sessions, was just taking up these old threads and turning back to reading and annotating as the collaborative, communal activities that they were for a long time.

As I conclude this introduction, it is now the beginning of May 2020. In the last six weeks, our world as we knew it has been turned upside down by the expansion of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has confined millions of us to our homes, while cities and towns have now stood completely empty for weeks. Universities, shops, museums, libraries, restaurants… have been closed. Planes have stopped flying, trains have stopped running, long-dismantled passport controls have been reinstated. As physical separation has become a compulsory norm and we have radically stopped

meeting family, friends and colleagues, we have also been made brutally aware of our bodies' fragility and limits and, by extension, of how much human contact means to us. The emotional situation in which many of us have been set by this pandemic is complex – and so is our political situation as well.

In this light, the creation of the necessary conditions for dialogues and processes to be started feels particularly pertinent. These conditions are not just physical – a table, a room, a plane ticket – but also economical and intellectual. And the dialogues that they will give raise to, which are a way of encouraging participation as a tool for the definition of "new ways of life", are, in essence, deeply political. By way of picking up in a contemporary manner the long tradition of reading as *sharing*, the ultimate meaning of "Institutions as a Way of Life" gains a new weight, and the tentative process of collective knowledge production which it sparks could not feel more relevant to our present times.

Notes

(1) Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (from the chapter "The silent readers"). London: Flamingo, 1997.

(2) https://www.ixdm.ch/events/annotating-institutions-as-a-way-of-life/

(3) https://research.ewu.edu/c.php?g=82207

(4) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Text_annotation

(5) https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Manguel/Silent_Readers.html

(6) Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.