

CLINT BURNHAM / The Dialectics of Erasure

In this essay I trace examples and practices of erasure in a wide variety of cultural artefacts: from book covers and a t-shirt and computer graphics to police emails and contemporary poetry and visual art. In looking at these instances, and with a little theorizing via post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, I make four related claims. First, that erasure as a gesture or practice is reified, readable, *legible*: ironically, that is, the practice of erasing or deleting or censoring results in a readable text. Second, that the meaning of erasure is *contingent*: it is both a matter of censorship and of poetic revision. Third, that erasure is *productive*: the gesture or its representation or trace produces meaning (this claim is related to the first). Finally, that the politics of erasure are *unpredictable*: cannot be determined in advance (again, this claim is related to the second). With the first and third claims, then, I am interested in how the examples I examine all assume the audience's (or reader's or viewer's or user's) familiarity with censorship, or erasure. That is, the gesture is not so much presented as a radical gesture but assumed as the terrain upon which meaning can be constructed. Erasure is commodified, reified: *been there, erased that*. And with the second and fourth claims, the very indeterminacy of any given politics of erasure means—or it may seem to mean—that context is therefore key. Put crudely, erasing is good if a poet does it, bad if a policeman does it. But we will see, I hope, how these certainties will be troubled a little in what follows.

So let us begin by thinking about erasure in a banal or quotidian fashion, by looking at book and clothing design. In two book designs of the past decade—one from 2001, the other from this year (2008), we have the erasure or deletion of text represented on the books' covers, as a way of graphically signaling the respective books' themes. Stan Persky and John Dixon's 2001 study *On Kiddie Porn: Sexual Representation, Free Speech & the Robin Sharpe Case* presents on its cover (designed by Vancouver's Judith Steedman), a two column excerpt from the book's introduction. The text is in two columns to emulate a newspaper or legal document; various phrases are blotted out as if with a felt marker. The message is fairly unambiguous: the authors are concerned with censorship and its impact on civil liberties, and thus the cover "telegraphs" that concern by pretending to censor their very text. Of course, this is a simulation in all its Baudrillardian sense: for not only is the text (Persky

STAN PERSKY AND JOHN DIXON

ON
KIDDIE PORN

Sexual Representation, Free Speech
& the Robin Sharpe Case

In this book we study the making of [REDACTED] and analyze the court decision arising from Robin Sharpe's constitutional challenge to [REDACTED] such an examination inescapably raises a remarkable number of issues, from the nature of justice and democracy to popular attitudes towards children and young people.

Our use of the colloquial term [REDACTED] in our title is not meant to suggest either flippancy or a disregard for the serious issues raised by [REDACTED] but to signal that the debate about the law occurs in a wider context of politics and culture which must be taken into account in any effort to understand the law's meaning.

Indeed, the very notion of what constitutes [REDACTED] is at issue, hence the use of the term "sexual representation" in our subtitle. You might think [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It's not. Though a phrase like "sexual representations of children" seems to encompass the concept of

child porn, it turns out that most of the elements of such a definition, as they appear in the Canadian child pornography law, [REDACTED]

When we talk about child pornography, do we mean strictly photographic [REDACTED] should we include

[REDACTED] and even written material — products of the imagination involving no use of actual children?

Should [REDACTED] by such a definition be limited to "explicit sex" or do we also intend [REDACTED] graphs or written advocacy and fictional accounts [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] th young people? Whom are we referring to when we use the word "children"? Eight-year-olds? Sixteen-year-olds? Twenty-year-olds? All of these questions are part of a debate that is further complicated by a political and social dimension in which various ideological views are in conflict.

As our examination of the issues makes clear, we view sexual assaults on children — as do practically all Canadians — [REDACTED]

and Dixon's introduction, from which the cover copy is drawn) *not* censored—that is, you can read the actual text on pages ix and x of *On Kiddie Porn* and not only are the deleted words themselves innocuous, but the book's cover text itself erases, or deletes, or censors the very message it carries over from the introduction. That is, the cover reads, under the title, "In this book we study the making of ..." followed by the first two swipes of heavy marker, which obliterate "Canada's 1993 child pornography law and" (actually, part of the "n" and the "d" of "and" are readable on the cover). But the introduction reads: "In *On Kiddie Porn* we study the making of Canada's 1993 child pornography law and ..." (ix). The design, that is, censors or erases the book's title, *On Kiddie Porn*, and replaces it with "this book." Most likely this was done to avoid repeating that title on the cover, the title being displayed immediately above the "censored" excerpt from the book's introduction.

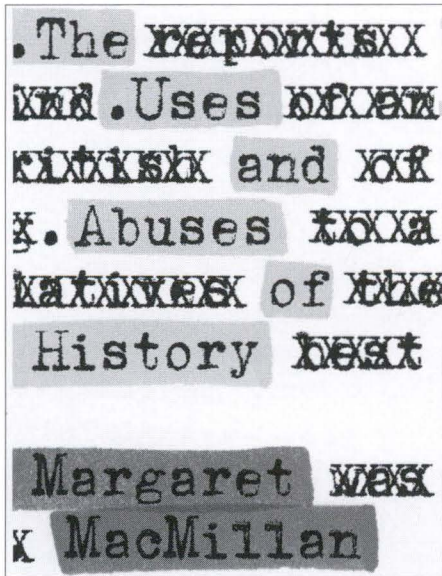
Well, so what, you might well ask. The point of the cover is to signal graphically to potential readers and consumers what the book discusses, and how better to do it than with such unambiguous signs? But I think that the cover design unwittingly points to a weak link in the logic of *Kiddie Porn*'s argument. That is, censorship, or erasure, or the deleting of texts, images (here the text is an image), and so on, is a much more prevalent practice than that imagined in Persky and Dixon's discourse: it is not only heavy-handed police and government agencies that censor, but, indeed, artists and designers and writers and readers. This may not be convincing; but hold onto this thought, this widening of the net of who erases or censors or deletes: I'll come back to it.¹ (It may even be that the authors are not concerned with censorship at all: the book, which alternates between breathless accounts of policy formation and more philosophical notions of scapegoating, the variable nature of childhood, and the relation of privacy to democracy, concludes by acknowledging that "it cannot be sensibly said that the child porn possession law, as finally edited and augmented by the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, poses a spectacular threat of widening state censorship" [214].)

A more recent book cover, that of Margaret MacMillan's *The Uses and Abuses of History*, works a similar trope. Here the book's title is presented as if typed (both covers rely on representations of pre-contemporary technology), amid lines that have been x'ed out; the title and the author's name are also highlighted—the title in yellow, the author in pink. The suggestion here, then, is to connect the abuse of history to its excision, to its erasure. Again, there is a certain metaphoric slippage at work: x-ing

out typescript was a process usually done (this is a history lesson for those of us who did not work on typewriters, those born after 1975 or 1980, perhaps) by *the author*: you realized you'd typed the wrong word or spelled it incorrectly, and you backspaced to x it out. If MacMillan's book argues that history is abused when distorted by malign leaders, the cover art (by Toronto shop KerrinHands.com) suggests that even as history is being written it is being changed, erased, distorted, deleted. In this case, the book cover may reflect a more Benjaminian or Freudian notion of history (always

in the process of being re-written) as opposed to MacMillan's more stable concept.

MacMillan argues in her book that, along with national leaders who seek to rewrite history (from Stalin and Mao to George Bush) and minority groups who seek undue recompense (from those interned during the world wars to First Nations peoples), another group guilty of the "uses and abuses" of history are historians themselves, particularly those too inclined to theory, jargon, and asking "questions about how we, the professional historians, create the past" (35). There is a good reason for MacMillan's skepticism toward theorizing history, since for her "there is an irreducible core to the story of the past and that



is: What happened and in what order?" (38). But even here, of course, MacMillan has shaped that "core": as literary critic J. Hillis Miller argues, "We tend to assume that historical events occurred as a concatenated sequence that can be retold now as a story of some kind Narrative will tell the truth about history" (12-13). The *order* of events in history is important to MacMillan because this suggests causality: but this very belief would be, for Miller, the weakness in MacMillan's book.

Asking questions about narrative, about history as a narrative, for MacMillan may constitute an abuse of history. But perhaps, as some philosophers have argued, *abusing* history, or erasing history, may be an unavoidable necessity. Referring to Nietzsche, Miller writes that "the past must be forgotten as objective narratable knowledge in order not so much to be remembered as to be repeated in vigorous

inaugural present action that gives birth to the future” (27). It is this myth or metaphysics of “objective narratable knowledge”—or MacMillan’s “irreducible core”—that Nietzsche targets in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” Thus “Forgetting is essential to action of any kind,” and “*there is a degree of sleeplessness, or fulmination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture*” (62, emphasis Nietzsche’s). Unlike MacMillan’s easy dichotomy of “uses” and “abuses,” Nietzsche argues that “*the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture*” (63), and in favour of “the art and power of forgetting and of enclosing oneself within a bounded horizon” (120).

Nietzsche’s critique of the fetish of objective knowledge finds validation—or exemplification—in my third design example, which is from a genre even more culturally-humble than the book cover: a t-shirt. Purchased at an L.A. gallery, a black t-shirt of mine (designed by Dutch studio Experimental Jetset) lists three bands with the word “black” in their names: Big Black (a punk band from Chicago), Black Sabbath (the British heavy metal band), and Black Flag (a punk band from L.A.). But in each case, the word “black” is represented by a *white* strip: again, suggesting erasure or deletion. Here the design works on viewers being able to guess the missing words, working from the best-known “Sabbath,” to the less-well-known but still fairly familiar “Flag,” then sometimes (and, in my experience, sometimes not) “Big.” But the play of chromatic and racial codes here (is the t-shirt *white* washing these band names?) discour-



aged me from wearing the shirt right after I bought it, when I was staying in South Los Angeles and Oakland, that is, in fairly black neighbourhoods. Too, the erasure or absence here denotes a *stable* signifier, indeed the same one: different work is going on here than in the MacMillan and Persky/Dixon covers. That is, as Nietzsche argues, here it is the *forgetting* of the band’s names, of their blackness if you will, that makes

the t-shirt design possible; too, the very erasure, at least in my case, made me uncomfortably aware of my whiteness. Indeed, arguably what the t-shirt's erasure did was to make me aware of the sudden *non*-transparency of my whiteness.²

But what this foray into design critique is mostly meant to suggest, however, is how pervasive are notions of erasure: so pervasive, that book and t-shirt designers can count on people to understand both its denotative and connotative values. And so, in all three cases, the designs “work” if the viewer or audience or reader understand that the codes represent erasure (deletion, etc.) *and* (in at least the two book covers' instances) that it is regrettable. This is Nietzsche's point: it is the forgetting that produces knowledge, to which we can add that the forgetting must be legible.

I said above that “artists and designers and writers and readers” are always erasing and deleting and censoring. By this assertion I certainly did not mean that there is no difference who does the erasing or deleting, that we censor ourselves, so how different is it if the government or a corporation does it? This way lies postmodern relativism, which takes no account of the different power valences at work. For example, in the summer of 2008, a CBC freedom of information inquiry unearthed RCMP emails in which senior officers discussed the media implications of the death of Robert Dziekanski. (Dziekanski, a Polish visitor to Canada, was killed with a Taser by Mounties at the Vancouver International Airport on Oct. 14, 2007.) Throughout the six pages of emails, various lines or paragraphs (and perhaps an image) are deleted: all but one are simply left blank or white on the page.

But state censorship does not mean that the practice is necessarily tainted. That is, we can think of erasure as a matter of form, of, as I will show in a minute, poetic practice. And then we can ask: how much is erasure a part of creation? How much is deleting part of writing? How much is censorship part of creativity?

Consider Allen Ginsberg's poem “Howl,” and the variation in the text and its drafts and performances. One well-known line reads, in the final (1986) state, “with mother finally *****”, and the last fantastic book flung out of the tenement window...” (Ginsberg 2006, p. 6, l. 71). The line first makes its appearance in the second draft of the poem (Ginsberg 2006, p. 27) as “with ~~his~~ mother finally fucked”; in the third draft (Ginsberg 2006, p. 31) as “with mother finally fucked”; in the fourth and fifth drafts (Ginsberg 2006, pp. 42, 53) as “with mother finally ***”; in the final, printed version the three asterisks are expanded to six. And at least two variations (documented variations) exist of how Ginsberg performs the line: in a 1995 Knitting

Factory performance in New York, captured on a 2004 CD, Ginsberg impishly reads the line as “with mother finally asterisked”! Another recording, archived as a Youtube video, has Ginsberg reading “with mother finally fucked.” The mind reels at the variables here: readers of the final text will not unreasonably assume that the word has been censored by the publisher: but of course the asterisks are merely the simulacra of an erasure, of a censorship (indeed, the drafts of the poem show the revision process that was heavily at work in Ginsberg’s writing of the poem—the first section has five drafts, the second part has an incredible 18 versions!). Or, to be less Baudrillardian and more Freudian, at some point Ginsberg wanted both to excise the heavy “fucked” *and* to mark that erasure: to which we might add that this then becomes a Derridean mark, the “under erasure” that indicates the word is still there (as it survives in Ginsberg’s performance) *and* deleted.

This doubling then, this palimpsest of presence and absence, is also at work in contemporary personal computers and the various GUIs (graphical user-interfaces) that have replaced DOS-based text interfaces since the 1990s. When a person using a PC or Mac wishes to delete or erase a file, a complex process takes place. If we think of the file as taking up certain parts of the computer’s memory, the computer finds that file through a metaphorical table of contents—in this case, for active files. When a file is deleted (when its icon, in a Mac system, is dragged to the recycle bin), its entry in the table of contents shifts from the active files table of contents to the recycle bin table of contents. The actual space on the hard drive where the file’s contents are located—the images, texts, music, data—is not touched.

Which is to say, then, that what results in the computer processes is not so much an erasure—or not only an erasure—but the production of a gap, a discontinuity in the hard drive’s metaphorical table of contents. For the classical post-structuralist argument of Foucault, this gap in the archive (in this case, the archive of a computer’s hard drive memory) is constitutive of our subjectivity. As Foucault argues in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, “the gap between our own discursive practices ... deprives us of our continuities ... dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history” (131).³ Erasure, then, or the production of gaps, is where we are actually located. This makes sense of Ginsberg’s variable texts: what is most productive in that textual history is the gap between the erasures and the “original” word: the variable asterisks (which are analogous to the xes in the MacMillan cover) produce a subjectivity.

These different ideas of erasure can also be further expanded if we think about the simulacral nature of the examples so far: in all cases (with the exception of the RCMP emails), the erasures or deletions were only the pretence of same. The text erased on the cover of *Kiddie Porn* was legible in its introduction. The x'd out words on the cover of *The Uses and Abuses of History* were not germane to the book's title and served to frame the (highlighted) title itself. Too, the work of the t-shirt erasures was to suggest to the viewer the missing word in all three bands' names. Finally, Ginsberg's mischievous variation of the asterisks and the word in the publications and performances of *Howl* means that the asterisks were not so much a trace of an erasure as their own sign.⁴

So these first two ways of thinking about erasure: readable, not necessarily censorship, can be then supplemented with some new, yet untheorized, examples from contemporary art and poetry. In the summer of 2008, in a group show on minimalism at Vancouver's Western Front gallery, Ron Tran exhibited his apartment door.⁵ That is, the artwork consisted of removing the front door from his apartment and relocating it to the exhibition space. The *presence* of the door in the gallery signified its *absence* from Tran's apartment: the artwork also consisted, in a Relational Aesthetics fashion, of the social relations that Tran had to construct, anew, in his apartment (sleeping knowing that anyone could come in, etc.). But in terms of the loss/lack dialectic, surely what Tran's work meant in some ways had to do with how much we fetishize our "doors," both conceptual and material (i.e. body language, like crossed arms, that signifies to others "keep away"; listening to an iPod to maintain privacy on public transit). What erasure does is to illustrate how contingent, and indeed fragile, are these objects in which we invest so much meaning.

Think, in this regard, of a recent work by another Vancouver artist, Kevin Schmidt's "Wild Signals." Recently exhibited at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, the work is a film of a concert in the Yukon, a concert complete with dry ice generators, coloured lights, and large, stadium-sized speakers belting out Schmidt's doom-metal version of the theme track to *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*.⁶ The concert film shows everything but a performer: Schmidt himself is the void at the centre of the process, reminding us of how manufactured, and, perhaps, human-less, is much contemporary music, if not culture in general. In both Tran's and Schmidt's art, then, and like the Foucauldean reading of computer interfaces above, the void or gap or erasure at the centre of the work is

tremendously productive.

These concrete, or material, examples of erasure or absence or the void then allow us to turn to another way of theorizing erasure. That is—and here I draw on both Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek—that is, erasure means both the absence of the object and its presence. All erasure is productive, all removal or censorship is *constitutive* of texts, all erasure, that is, is its own simulation: the book covers and other detritus of pop culture discussed at the start of this essay are not merely contingent or local examples: in their very spectrality, in the way that they flirt with and put on and perform erasure, they are absolutely typical. Both Žižek and Agamben conceptualize these issues in their writings on Freud's dyad of mourning and melancholy. In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Žižek argues that the melancholic is "the subject who possesses the object, but has lost his desire for it" (148), and that objects in reality are "structured around ... a void" that must be covered up by some lost object of desire—Lacan's *objet petit a* (149). This *objet petit a* then is the fantasy of the unerased text, the uncensored dream, the complete artwork. Agamben covers the same territory in his book *Stanzas*:

[I]n melancholia the object is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time. And as the fetish is at once the sign of something and its absence, and owes to this contradiction its own phantomatic status, so the object of the melancholic project is at once real and unreal, incorporated and lost, affirmed and denied. (21)

Ron Tran's door, the musician that we never see in Kevin Schmidt's video: these stand in for the *objet petit a*, the object that structures our desire. If only I could see that musician, if only the door was back in the apartment, then there would be a whole: if only the erasure had never taken place.

It is really this oscillation between "real and unreal, incorporated and lost, affirmed and denied" that makes me think of Žižek's and Agamben's theories of melancholy in connection with the concept of erasure, for the play of presence and absence that erasure itself necessitates. A text must be present before it can be erased. Or must it? To think about this, and to conclude I want to return to the examples of the RCMP emails and Ginsberg's *Howl*. In part, those dramatically different uses of erasure demonstrate the unpredictability of poetic form: erasure is not guaranteed to

be either subversive or reactionary. That is to say that erasure as gesture or form can only derive a political resonance when it is in practice, be it textually, materially, or in terms of the image. But the gaps in both cases can lead to interesting readings. In the first RCMP email, we read:

When I arrived home tonight, there was a Langley Det car and two young members next door.

It sure made me very proud.
Not likely to see that one in the G and M in the morning, or anywhere else for that matter.

Now, this has all the truncated pathos of a Kevin Davies poem:⁷ the macho cop-speak which approaches unreadability (“Langley Det car”), the mixture of the domestic and work, and, of course, the self-fulfilling prophecy that whatever it was that made the Mountie proud, one is not likely to see it in the *Globe and Mail*, “or anywhere else for that matter,” not least because it was blanked out from the email! Which is to say that the gap or void here is productive. Arguably, that is, this text is no less “poetic,” in an avant-garde sense, than the various iterations of Ginsberg’s line from *Howl*. Consider, too, a recent appropriation/erasure of *Howl*: Colin Smith’s “Hoot”, in which Ginsberg’s lines become “with mother ah and” (31). Smith joins the first two words of Ginsberg’s line to the beginning of the next (“ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and...”), an appropriation that nonetheless contains echoes not only of Ginsberg’s line but its vacillation.

So, where are we? Erasure is not only a readable sign—one that book and t-shirt designers can count on being legible—but also a productive one. Erasure produces meaning—or, if that is not user-friendly enough a formulation in our post-reader-response age, erasure in its very void, in its very commodification of absence, produces the conditions for the production of meaning. Too, erasure is not simply a matter of censorship, of the heavy felt marker of the Law: it is also a poetic or artistic technique, a creative practice. Which then means that the politics of erasure cannot be determined ahead of time. What does erasure do? It removes something. What does it leave behind? Something else.

Endnotes

- ¹ A similar representation of censorship, although in this case actual, is to be found in Frank Davey's 1994 "true crime" book *Karla's Web*. Looking at the Mahaffy-French murders committed by Karla Homolka and Paul Bernardo, the book was published during the trial and, due to press bans (which Davey supported), featured lines and entire paragraphs that were blacked-out in the printed text.
- ² The t-shirt is also available in white fabric with black lettering: in this case, the signifier "Black" is represented by its erasure, by the block of blackness—a void.
- ³ I am grateful to Kim Minkus for the Foucault reference.
- ⁴ There are more examples of such simulated erasures in popular culture. A July 24, 2008 *Doonesbury* cartoon sought to reproduce George Carlin's famous "Seven Dirty Words" (Carlin had just passed away on June 22, 2008) with the obscenities blacked out. Comedians Jack Paar (in the 1960s) and Jimmy Kimmell (in the 90s and present decade) have routines in which inoffensive words are bleeped out. Thanks to Greg Burnham for these examples and for the explanation of computer file deletion above. Readers who were sentient in the early 1970s may remember, apropos of the Watergate tapes, the brief popularity of exclaiming "expletive deleted!" as a mock profanity.
- ⁵ Please see my brief review; an interview with Tran is forthcoming in the Vancouver art magazine *Pyramid Power*.
- ⁶ See, again, my review of the exhibition in which Schmidt's work appeared, *Exponential Future*, in *Camera Austria*.
- ⁷ I am thinking in particular of Davies' 1992 book *Pause Button* and its use of square brackets to indicate absences in the text (or, at the very least, to *simulate* absence).

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