Davis Schneiderman, *Blank*. Davis Schneiderman, *[Sic]*. Davis Schneiderman, *Ink*.

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The DEAD/BOOKS trilogy from Davis Schneiderman consists of three full-length novels, together making up just under 600 pages. Between the three of them, and excluding introductions, author biographies and other paratextual matter, the books contain maybe 100 original words in total. Blank (2011), the first in the set, is made up of almost entirely blank pages. Its successor, [Sic] (2013), is made up entirely of texts copied from other copyright-free sources and inaccurately ascribed in every case to Davis Schneiderman. Every page of the final book in the trilogy, Ink (2014), is covered entirely in black ink. Taken as a collective entity, the three books present readers with a challenge to the entire idea of the text as a medium for original communication.

It should also be said straight away that despite the seriousness with which they have been put together, and despite some ideological problems that I will discuss later in this review, they are also both beautiful objects and extremely funny. I'm generally of the opinion that the best philosophical jokes are those that appeal outside the narrow confines of the academy, and these books have not failed to provoke a reaction in anyone I have shown them to in the past few weeks. My children, aged 6 and 4, are used to seeing their parents reading “boring” “grown-up” titles, but they could not get enough of Schneiderman's creations. More, as should be the case with such titles, these books have provoked additional creative works—after seeing it, an administrator in my department asked me to “review” a ream of paper stapled together with only the addition of her name and the copyright symbol, possibly unaware that in doing so she was replicating Aram Saroyan's 1968 untitled “publication” through Kulchur Press of a ream of 500 sheets of blank typing paper.
Indeed, as Craig Dworkin traces in No Medium (2013), a monograph on blank or erased works, the 20th and 21st centuries have seen the publication and exhibition of many such books and other art works (the taxonomic distinction between book, art, recording, film and other forms of cultural production seems particularly moot in these cases). They range from the twin pieces self-explanatorily titled “The Space Between Pages 29 and 30” and “The Space Between Pages 74 and 75” that Robert Barry published in the journal 0 to 9 in 1969, all the way to The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan (1981), an entirely silent 17-track double-sided LP. Blankness, as Dworkin persuasively shows in a tour de force of critical reflection, is never pure or unmediated, but always framed by both pre-existing discourses (summoned via title, artist history or marketing material), and also the physical reality of the object. Both of these are brought to the fore by the very blankness of the original object.

In the case of Blank, the blankness of affect embodied in the title is clearly the main point. Rather than having his book be entirely blank in the manner of Saroyan, Schneiderman includes chapter headings every ten pages, written in the manner of the popular parlour game “Consequences.” Thus the first three chapters are titled “A character,” “Another character” and “They meet.” I won’t quote more for fear of ruining the experience, but it is obvious from even this short excerpt that the author is parodying the conventions of traditional realist novels, suggesting that these can be boiled down to a simple formula or set of instructions. Audaciously positioning his work as the telos of all narrative, again via chapter titles, Schneiderman implicitly asks whether in the 21st century, with all tricks of conventional narrative explored, explicated, parodied and reinstated, a blank book is the only truly honest form of text. The narrative is complemented with Susan White’s pyrographs, appearing roughly once per chapter, and consisting of holes burnt into photographs of skyscapes by Debra di Blasi. These might be interpreted as further illustrations of semantic blanks, or as providing a transcendent element similar to Philip Larkin’s “deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless” (from “High Windows,” 1974).

However, there is one unexpected element, significantly placed on the book’s final page, which makes me wonder if another more specifically American strain of thought is being invoked. As well as the singed pyrographic hole, a single aeroplane appears, heading towards the left hand side, photographed in a manner that recalls pre-impact images from 9/11. Is Schneiderman here explicitly placing 9/11 as the moment that conventional narrative died, or, is he using 9/11 as a metonym for 21st century creative destruction? Either of these possibilities seems troubling to me. William S. Burroughs, a clear influence on Schneiderman’s work with the audio art collective The Muttering Sickness, was given to linking prophecies determined in his cut-ups to real world events in this way. But 9/11, for all the national tragedy and anomie it engendered in the US, has had most effect outside that country in the illegal invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan: can an art book primarily situated within a Western tradition of blank books really speak from or even for the perspective of the victims of this war? Here I would place Schneiderman’s Blank in conversation with Palestinian artist Emily Jacir’s installation Material for a Film (2006). This featured 1,000 blank books which she subsequently shot with a .22 pistol (deliberately echoing the 1972 assassination of Wael...
Zuaiter in the Israeli Operation Wrath of God), then photographed each page until she reached the point where the bullet hole faded into silence. The blanks and holes of Schneiderman’s text seem in this context to serve a somewhat comfortably bourgeois universalism, albeit a negative version.

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I confess I may here be reading too much into a single picture of a plane. However, the second book in the trilogy, [Sic], continues my worries about the ideological implications of Schneiderman’s project. Here Schneiderman follows the lead of David Shields’ Reality Hunger, a 2010 manifesto calling for creative plagiarism which itself drew on (or plagiarised) a strain of thought dating back through the Festival of Plagiarism, Kathy Acker’s appropriations of an outraged Harold Robbins, Burroughsian cutup and Dadaist poetry, and particularly founded on the set of questions raised in Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote.” [Sic] consists mainly of excerpts from copyright-free works cut and pasted from this internet, beginning with “Caedmon’s Hymn” and continuing down the centuries with excerpts from Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, Hamlet, and so forth. In almost all cases the text is presented in its original form, but re-ascribed to Davis Schneiderman.

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Part one takes in 25 works written pre-1923 (the year in which copyright protection kicked in when [Sic] was written), and is thus able to include some of the pinnacles of literary achievement, leading to Prufrock and Ulysses as a summit. Part two is the only “original” work, reproducing the entirety of Pierre Menard but after the text has been automatically translated “from Spanish to French to Italian to English to French to Norwegian to English to Italian to Spanish to Estonian to Greek to English to Estonian to Portuguese to Japanese to English” (92). The result, Borgesian enough in itself, is Babel, beginning “It is easy to verify that remains is that the author is described briefly” (92) and continuing on the same lines. After this encoding and rewriting of the founding legend-text of modern plagiarism, Schneiderman continues to public property texts from the 20th and early 21st centuries, with a notable emphasis on technology’s effect on textual output, with excerpts including the classic “Send-A-Dime” letter, the entire commentary on the first ever YouTube video (“Alright, here we are in front of the….uh… elephants” (128)), Wikipedia’s crowdsourced articles, and finishing with an advertisement for Superiorpapers.com, a bespoke essay writing service that removes the necessity of “writing your own essays” from the requirements needed to get a degree for the monied student.

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What is the implied narrative here? One possibility is that we are seeing here a story of decline–writing as high art reached its apogee in the high modernism of the early 1920s, but the textual experiments of that time blew up any concept of a unitary book and unleashed postmodern understandings of texts as always multivocal and reusable. Another is that this is a novel about copyright–the imposition of copyright laws has meant that the sources freely available stop in 1928 and everything thereafter is subject to structures of capitalist control. The inclusion of the lyrics to “This Land is Your Land,” famously the subject of an attempted assertion of copyright by Ludlow Music, would seem to affirm this, as would the promise of a fine art version of the book (costing $24,998.98) containing “a biological pathogen [to] make the reader sick–sick about copyright” (146). Yet another is that the story is one of radical changes in the conditions of textual
production–mass literacy, mass reproduction, computer technologies and the internet have all freed up all planetary inhabitants to do the sort of textual experiments in an Eliotic wasteland of fragmented cultures that was once the privilege of elites. This last leads us back to creative plagiarism in a culture of sampling, YouTube clips, and self-publishing on e-platforms referenced above.

However, the story told is incomplete in a specific and telling way. Throughout the text are interspersed photographs by Andi Olsen in which a genderless human figure, entirely encased in what could be latex, is seen moving around various Parisian locations, emitting an eerie glow. The human being, who might well be Schneiderman himself, visits the Louvre, crawls by the Seine, sits at an outdoor bistro table, stands outside Shakespeare & Co, and scares children on a bridge. I don't pretend to entirely understand the purpose of these provocations (and I’m unsure whether the figure is produced entirely by digital manipulation, or if Schneiderman actually wore a sci-fi suit around the city), but the choice of Paris, traditionally the city of high culture in the Modernist tradition, and also the home of the Oulipo movement, is not unmotivated: the choice of tourist and cultural activities, too, is telling. Because a sampled novel like this one tells its stories through choices and exclusions as much as inclusions, it is very noticeable that the story being told is one that excludes all text produced by people not of European descent, with the single exception of the text of Zero Wing, itself prized as the source of the popular Engrish meme “All your base are belong to us.” No pre-1922 text belongs to anything other than the tradition of high modernism, and all are chosen to favour a narrative of high culture.

Why not, for instance, include misspelled and obscene graffiti from Pompeii to disrupt the narrative of a gracious European civilisation? Why not include something from a commonplaces book of the 16th century to acknowledge the long history of this sort of sampling work and significantly complicate the narrative of early 20th century breakdown? And, above all, why not include pre-20th century texts by women (omitted here apart from the single and rather insulting exception of A Vindication of the Rights of Women by Davis Schneiderman), by non-whites, or by any other group outside of the dominant European white male paradigm? To do so might question the ethics of appropriation, uncritically on display here, in a way more in keeping with the publisher’s stated commitment to “publishing socially engaged literature with an emphasis on the voices of people of color.” A similar challenge to the logic of the remix recently happened with Kenneth Goldsmith’s performance of “The Body of Michael Brown,” where the autopsy report of the teenager killed in police action was remixed as a poem, and in the aftermath of which it became clear that creative appropriation outside of a fairly narrow community becomes highly problematic and redolent of colonial privilege. By avoiding such questions Schneiderman seems to me to be replicating the logic of the photographs, in which the genderless body is also presumably rendered free of other attributes (age, sexuality, race) by being reduced to shining featureless whiteness.

After such troubling questions—and I should repeat that I find these novels far more stimulating and just plain fun than these criticisms might suggest—it is a pleasure to turn to the last volume, Ink. Here black ink is splattered, in a way reminiscent of William S Burroughs’s shotgun paintings, on a grey background, or grey on black on darker black,
with occasional interspersed photographs rendered in a similar black-on-black colour scheme. I didn’t get hold of the fine art edition (£24,999.99) rendered in the artist’s book, nor as a reviewer did I get the option open to purchasers of destroying a volume from Schneiderman’s personal library, but of the three this is probably the most accomplished and purely enjoyable read, now that almost all pretence of ability to signify has been put aside in favour of pure flows of ink on the material surface of the paper.

12 Schneiderman’s culture remix project extends much further than these three books, with several books, multiple CD’s as part of The Muttering Sickness (worth checking out on YouTube) and many collaborations with other artists under his belt. However, the purity of intent in this conceptual trilogy make the three books, for all the questions I have outlined above, an excellent introduction to conceptual literature.

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