

# Resistance is Utile

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**I**N THIS, MY FIRST YEAR OF A FULL-TIME JOB, I rarely find myself concerned about the extent to which I might or might not be procrastinating. Instead, I think a whole lot more about how much I might be able to increase my potential productivity to make better use of the limited time available. On the one hand, this might sound annoying, and perhaps it can even be taken as a symptom of my subsumption into the current conservative political climate of this country. On the other hand, I bet many of you often think like this out of a genuine sense of love and duty toward the job. You find yourself staring at the computer, wondering: Can I, in the next three hours, get a substantial, pedagogically innovative, and “fun” lecture prepared, finish that overdue review, and co-ordinate a research trip? Can I think about the first while writing the second and searching the web for the third? I think like this and I don’t even have *kids*, which is probably a good thing, since I’m saving up to buy my dog a treadmill.

My sense is that we *know* what procrastination is ... we hardly need to consult the *OED* to recite its meaning and usage—that since its first known recorded appearance in 1548, the term refers to the act of cleaning grout between the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush instead of writing wondrous works of literary and cultural criticism. And we know, we know

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all too shamefully well, what it means to wish with all our hearts that we had not procrastinated. But at the same time, we do not have any clear sense of what this activity of “not procrastinating” entails. We may sit upright, bright-eyed, caffeinated, and vitamined at our computers typing vigorously away. But sometimes even this is procrastinating in the sense that what we really should be doing is thinking more about what we are writing, prompting our consciousness to resist those paths-of-thought too commonly traveled, and allowing the ideas to coalesce and morph and ultimately soar to the upper echelons of analysis. Or, we should be marking Intro to Canlit exams.

What I wonder about is this: When are we distracting ourselves from our work, and when do these distractions in fact lead to the best work we’ve done in a while? What *is* the poise, the intellectual commitment, the state of mind/body fusion that leads to scholarly utility? What, after all, constitutes the academic procrastinator’s number one, always desired, and often begrudged, fantasy figure—the “utile” scholar-in-action?

I once took a research trip to the New York Historical Society where I read the diary of the nineteenth-century American architect A.J. Bloor.<sup>1</sup> Bloor never procrastinated. Every day in his diary begins with the entry “7:15 am: went to buildings.” Sometimes it was “7:10 am,” and sometimes “7:45.” But it was always before eight, and always the activity and the words he used to describe it remain the same, he “went to buildings.” He even spelled buildings “b-l-d-g-s.” Far be it for a man of stature such as Bloor to put off the next consonant by including vowels in his words. He went to bldgs. It seems that anything more would have been procrastination.

So, can Bloor then be taken as a good example of the “utile” professional? “Utile,” says the *OED*, means “useful, profitable, advantageous.” Now, in our profession, resisting procrastination probably isn’t going to end up making us a tidy profit. Perhaps then we need to adapt the definition to our particular case: the utile academic would seem to be someone whose faculties—the sensory-motor system, grey matter, desires, blood-flow, body heat, snacks, and memory—are all co-ordinated to participate wholly and to the highest standards of efficiency in the effort of doing academic work ... of academicking. Hence the cocktail of caffeine, vitamins, yoga, and poutine to which we diligently subject ourselves. But no matter how well we keep to our academic-fitness regime in the name of scholarly utility, in the end we experience all sorts of clashes and misfires and anomalous

<sup>1</sup> This research was for a project that I eventually abandoned. Does this count as retroactive procrastination?

productivities as part of these earnest efforts. Is this our shortcoming, and, if so, should we take a look back to a time when utility was apparently better appreciated, embodied, and ultimately mastered?

Bloor's descriptions of his professional life express a principle already building in 1860s American architectural and cultural life, one that his younger colleague Louis Sullivan would coin in 1896 with the phrase "form ever follows function" (408). By the turn of the twentieth century, buildings were considered functional objects, which apparently meant that their shape, materials, look, and overall state of embodiment were to aspire to the utmost utility. Meanwhile, ornament and decoration were treated as unnecessary, as excessive to the point of being a "crime" according to Adolf Loos ... as something even a little dirty. Yes, Loos associated ornament with the erotic. He argued that "man had progressed enough for ornament to no longer produce erotic sensations in him" (30) but that the "revival of ornament ... represents a crime against the national economy" (31). This last bit comes from Loos's conviction that too many labour hours were being wasted on unnecessary decoration. He looked forward to the advent of a shorter work week once ornamentation had been completely obliterated from society.

That was just over a hundred years ago, but I think that while we academics, utile and procrastinating, would do just about anything for a little more time, one thing we wouldn't sacrifice for it is ornament (and all that Loos associated with it). The world of design, and also of queer theory, have helped us come to realize that pleasure and utility refuse to be co-ordinated—or rendered mutually exclusive—such that we can't very often separate out the ornamental, the sensational, the pleasurable, and the sexy from that which is "useful, profitable, and advantageous." And we know that we do a really bad job of cordoning off the former to particular activities, people, objects, and times of day.

Theodor Adorno critiqued Loos's "Ornament and Crime," insisting that "there is no chemically pure purposefulness set up as the opposite of the purpose-free aesthetic" (8). In other words, if there is no opposite to procrastination, maybe procrastination isn't quite what we think it is either. Adorno went on to say that while utility may be the dream of modern industrial capitalism, "no form can be said to be determined exhaustively by its purpose" (8). And it seems that we too cannot be determined exhaustively by the purpose of academic work either. How can we presume that it is possible to engage ourselves 100 percent in *any* activity?

Those who have taken the "affective turn" will say that our attempts at utility are always in vain, because the fact of the matter is that we are made

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up of many internal and external interacting forces and that this primary condition of affect makes our actions and their effects indeterminable. Indeterminable, however, in a good way, to the extent that affect integrates us in the realm of potential rather than in the much more limited and benign realm of the already occurring and known. Affect theorists draw largely from the work of Henri Bergson, who argued in his book *Matter and Memory* (also published in 1896) that the best thinking must necessarily begin with a suspension of bodily action in order to relieve our thought processes from their concerns with the determined realm of our bodies in an immediate moment and, therefore, enable us to become more in tune with the affective, temporally conditioned processes of interactive potential and change in the world in general.<sup>2</sup> We already know this in a way: we sit in chairs all day thinking thoughts while our dogs run the treadmill. But what is important about Bergson's model in the context of procrastination is that it forces us to re-examine what constitutes the individual who applies herself, to reconsider this very notion of self-application, and also to reassess the possibility of identifying and measuring the results. If we follow Bergson, we have to admit that we can't will our brains to think more or harder—we can only will our bodies (brain matter included) to ease up, to resist as ever possible the trappings and forward thrust of the rational, to render ourselves ever more available to new ideas and new concepts of what it means to think.

Perhaps the problem with procrastination arises when it looks too much like work—when it's the kind that gives us satisfaction (like cleaning) because at least we get something accomplished. In other words, what keeps us from our work can be work itself, work conceived as a set of tasks, work that produces what Ken Babstock in his poem "On Utility" calls "an oblitative cloud of Doings" (103). When it comes to our research, and also to creative teaching, it's those activities that we start with the assumption that we know what to do, how long it should take, and what will come of it that often end up forestalling the entry of new ideas, that inhibit the influence of thought that is not simply a rehearsal of the familiar, not a recombination and regurgitation of what we already know. Thank goodness we can't engage in any one pursuit wholly, with

2 In a frequently cited passage from *Matter and Memory*, Bergson writes: "To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream" (83). For an interesting discussion of the "kinship" between Adorno and Bergson in terms of their mutual concern "with a certain narrowing of the possibilities of cognitive experience," see Foster (120).

100 percent of ourselves. We would present the same argument paper after paper, the same lectures year after year. And we never do that do we? Because something new pops into our consciousness, from where we can't say, but we are grateful, delighted, inspired. That's why we do what we do after all.

The best way we can be as academics—the way that we, in the end, are the most productive—is to make ourselves as open as possible to the invasion of these new ideas. In other words, the best way we can do our jobs without succumbing to the “obliterative cloud of Doings” is a bit *like* procrastinating. The “utile” scholar is not the clean-freak-with-the-tooth-brush procrastinator, maybe, but the one who is willing to *not* type for a while—as Bergson would say, the one who *wills herself* to not type, to not treat our jobs as though we must put in so many billable hours, to lend ourselves a little to internal upheavals, and to distraction ... just in case that distraction happens to be a good idea about to introduce itself to us.

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