
Introduction

NOT ALL WORK REQUIRES EXPLANATION, but this one does.

From 6 August 2019 to 6 February 2020, I cut up over 400 books: on purpose, though half-consciously. The conscious part was the method: that of the cut-up narrative. The unconscious part was the manner: a form of automatic writing long associated with the unimpeded flow of language and a channel through which one tries to express, whether verbally, in writing, or otherwise, the true operations of the mind.

My material consisted of canonical texts from across the disciplines—academic and non-academic literature, fiction and poetry spanning centuries. The aim was to reflect on essential tensions within knowledge production, and in particular, the methods of critical practice, creativity and personal experience that seem to have existed in conflict. This conflict had troubled me for a long time, but I viewed it as my own. Now, I see it as part of a broader, universal concern about creative and critical thinking—an issue currently facing a significant crisis in our cultural history due to generative AI. To resolve it for myself, I created 111 poem-like epigrams, extracted from a random selection and mixing of the material at my disposal. It helped me reframe some existing paradigms of life and science, transforming my work through a radical departure from many traditional academic approaches. Overcoming them restored within me a fresher, clearer, and indispensably absurd outlook on ‘things’.

This book describes my critical cut-up/assemble writing method, which I loosely term *textrapolation*. With this method, I echo a bigger tradition of cut-up and alternative forms of writing, building on earlier experimental writing styles. I also address several dilemmas, including the function of the book, the role of education and science, the modes of theorization, and the future of writing (so intriguingly challenged by large language models). Above all, I leave the method for the reader to try themselves, perhaps to help them reinvigorate some dormant or discouraged potential for framing life as they see it, which is particularly problematic in an academic setting.

The practice this book documents may appear offensive, blasphemous or disturbing—especially when advocated by a professional whose livelihood depends on ‘written volumes’. This is partly because it entails *cutting up books*, which means re-experiencing them through destruction,

thus viewing destruction as a revelatory and productive technique. Such an approach to writing moves beyond the conventional understanding of genres and methodologies, including the traditional material semiotics of a book: what we have learned to believe a book is as an object. At the same time—as evidenced in Chapter 3—it breaks the book object away from its customary form and function. It does so for the method's sake and for the users who, rather than being called 'readers', are consistently referred to as 'practitioners'. This supports the rationale of cutting up books and explains why this practice can be a tool for intellectual work and self-navigation.

Throughout this book, self-navigation will be a nexus of epistemic activity explored in the context of writing. Other contexts will arise, but only in the service of textual forms or composition. Writing is what we predominantly think with, and yet it tends to be templated, i.e. made impersonal by default. Therefore, in Chapter 1, 'Experimentation Turns', I tap into experiments, considered not merely a means of conveying knowledge, but a practice of interrupting and rearranging knowledge production with relevance to personal experience. The chapter's radically reflective tone—determined by *discognition* (a term I borrow from Steven Shaviro 2016)—models the cut-up approach and individuates the norm. Here, the act of writing is never settled but always becoming.

A drift from the settled is this book's starting point. It is also my way of addressing the obsolescence of what we once considered given. If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that such givens no longer hold. Similarly, semantic technologies have starkly exposed the corroded structures of our modern life, from relationship patterns to work organization to education systems, replicating the 'human condition'—every aspect of it—almost like a virus. This moment unravels the futility of 'the goal-obsessed world' (Le Cunff 2025), to which most life activities, including thinking and writing, have been tethered. At the same time, it initiates pushback.

Recent cultural vocabulary is full of attempts to 'break free of established categories' and their fixed functions (cf. Nightingale et al. 2020). Concepts such as *disnovation*, *post-growth*, or *unruliness* have emerged as operative terms aimed at reimagining life: its modalities and consequences. Much of this new lexicon originates in climate or economics discourse, which increasingly grapples with a disjunction between scientific knowledge, policy frameworks, and tangible outcomes. Yet these ideas resonate

loudly across the spectrum of human activity and everyday practice. The language we use to describe life, including methods of that description (often stagnant and habitual), can obscure more effective, imaginative, and insightful ways of knowing.

In this context, experiments are re-skilling events that lead to fresh practices, relations, and meanings. They rely on improvisation, mistakes, and personal involvement, rejecting both detached musing and fixed roles. In *Experimental Phenomenology*, Don Ihde observes that ‘many disciplines are better learned by entering into the doing than by mere abstract study’ (1986, 13). It is because we understand better by doing, and without doing, a new understanding is hardly possible.

Cutting up books is doing through writing, and writing through doing. Textpolation, then, becomes a way of thinking with one’s hands: a form of *savoir-vivre* through *savoir-faire*. The ‘cut’ I discuss here is both structural and conceptual: it fractures expectations, creating space for writing as a mode of living and as a divergence from what thinking (researching, theorizing, studying, etc.) is conventionally supposed to be. This cut gains a particular charge in the broader breakdown of authorship brought about by algorithmic reproduction. I explore it in Chapter 2, ‘Templates of Creativity’, where I reflect on machine writing and how it is often wrongly blamed for the decline of creative skills—a misconception that reveals much about our technological anxieties.

We tend to hold technology responsible for eroding thinking and originality, without fully examining the deeper causes. In my view, it is not technology that threatens creativity, but rather the rigid forms of formalized self-expression that have long governed our writing practices. Algorithms simply make visible the formulaic structures that were already in place. As the chapter suggests, large language models (LLMs), which replicate human writing with uncanny accuracy, do not invent these norms. They reflect them, revealing the extent to which templatized conventions have shaped authorship well before the rise of AI. From here come critical tensions around authorship. This book engages these tensions not only in theory but also through the method: before the emergence of ChatGPT, the assemblage epigrams in Chapter 3 were processed through earlier AI summary engines. These primitive models, which were less fluent but rich in interpretive errors, became speculative co-readers of the cut-up collages. Their misreadings, reframings, and associative leaps opened up a space for experimentation, offering an alternative route to uncovering

the unconscious logics embedded in the text-image structures. In this way, the machine was not an endangerment to authorship, but a disruptive collaborator that mirrored the 'cut' in both model and insight.

The book's longest chapter, 'Textrapolations', presents a foundational set of 111 epigrams, through which I developed and carried out my 'cut-up/out' method for critical thinking. As I explained earlier, this approach merges conventional scholarly analysis with personal experience, intentionally making academic writing subservient to the expression of lived, subjective knowledge. The choice of the number 111 was proposed by my mathematically gifted sons as a structural gesture to help me render the textures of science and knowledge production that could not be fully expressed through the cut-up technique alone.

111 holds several interesting mathematical meanings and properties. Notably, it is a repunit in base 10, meaning it consists entirely of the digit 1. While repunits are not inherently rare, they take on added resonance in relation to the structural method explored in this book. As a palindromic number, 111 reads the same forwards and backwards, a feature that makes it popular in recreational mathematics. It is also the sum of three consecutive prime numbers ($31+37+43$) and qualifies as a Harshad number, since it is divisible by the sum of its digits ($1+1+1=3$). In binary, 111 is represented as 1101111_2 . The number 111 functions as a unifying total in various types of magic squares, highlighting its mathematical balance. One 3×3 magic square uses only the digit 1 and selects prime numbers to construct a grid where every row, column, and diagonal adds up to 111. Another example, a 6×6 square using the full set of integers from 1 to 36, achieves the same total across all directions. These patterns show how 111 can serve as a stable and symmetrical constant across very different numerical sets—whether drawn from primes or consecutive numbers. Its recurrence as a total reveals its role as a point of harmony within ordered systems. A curious arithmetic pattern further illustrates 111's embeddedness in numerical elegance: multiplying a number composed of sequential digits by 9, and then adding the next digit in the sequence, yields a number made entirely of 1s. For instance, $1\times 9+2=11$; $12\times 9+3=111$; $123\times 9+4=1111$; and so on, up to $12345678\times 9+9=11111111$. Each step builds a longer string of 1s, demonstrating how a number like 111 can arise from simple but beautiful mathematical logic.

Other anchoring elements include coordinates, modality, provenance, and an AI-generated summary that accompany every textrapolated

epigram. There are also sources listed twice: first, individually, alongside each piece, and second, collectively, in the Bibliography at the end of this book. Coordinates refer to a geographical or navigational form of expression, often subjectively linked to each epigram's content. They also serve as a playful puzzle for the reader-practitioner, who may choose to decode or guess the location behind each reference. Modality reflects the mood of perception, sensory climate, or experiential tone evoked by an individual piece, anything from emotional resonance to embodied atmosphere. Provenance signals the imagined disciplinary origin of each epigram: the field of study it intuitively belongs to. These disciplinary labels are fluid variations on existing academic areas, suggesting that we need not remain confined within traditional disciplinary boundaries. The AI-generated summary offers a basic machine interpretation of each epigram. It is included as both an additional layer of meaning-making and an acknowledgement of the alien states or intelligences that AI inevitably represents. Finally, the sources, displayed alongside each cut-out verse, inform the reader-practitioner of the origin of each line.

Textrapolation found me in a daydream. I mused on the possibilities that may come from the vastness of content in all existing books and imagined how amazing it would be to create a narrative—a novel or a story—by assembling various passages from different authors and genres into a coherent text. The task was a bit overwhelming, especially the challenge of maintaining control over coherence. I then envisioned a smaller-scale solution, which I promptly tried by cutting up books in my Brooklyn apartment, where I was living at the time in New York. This is how 'epigram zero' (which is not included in this book) came into being.

The name *textrapolation* came naturally. It combines the words *text* and *extrapolation* to suggest both working from a text and thinking about the text itself: what it is, how it works, and what it might become. In this sense, *textrapolation* is both the name of the method and the result it produces. The verb *to textrapolate* describes the process: a way of engaging with a text by selecting, cutting, arraying, fastening, and reworking it across its apparent boundaries.

The process is dreamy and intuitive, based more on feeling than on logical thinking. It follows a 'repetitive pattern of randomness', unfolding in gentle, exploratory steps. It begins by selecting a few books from the immediate surroundings and shuffling them. Their pages are flipped through, often led by a quiet hunch, allowing attention to settle on lines that stand

out. Those moments of attraction matter most. The selected lines are then cut out and assembled, which is a step guided more by instinct than by plan. The outcome is never judged but approached with trust in the sense that begins to emerge.

This method makes academic practice feel more personal. It also creates space to reflect on its own tools, especially those shaped by deeper problems. These problems are mainly methodological, involving how knowledge is produced through rigid systems: strict procedures, isolated disciplines, narrow themes, and ineffective cross-disciplinary work. Another concern is the dominance of text, especially the pressure to publish in English, which continues to shape global research unevenly. My frustration with this went beyond language and touched anything that limited or standardized how scientific or critical ideas could be expressed. In response, I began to question existing research protocols and formats, trying to move away from structures that fix or filter how ideas take shape. I wasn't rejecting the method itself, but looking for new ways to structure thought, what I imagined as a 'theory-making machine' that could both break beyond and hold together our efforts to describe reality.

I was also searching for something that felt uniquely mine, wherein 'mine' meant a distinct imprint rather than control. This desire reflects early psychiatric theories of experimental writing, which stressed the importance of disconnecting from the conscious mind. According to these theories, such a disconnection should be artificially induced by suspending the activity of the brain's higher regions, thus allowing for 'a variety of quasi accidental circumstances precisely similar to those which determine the character of dreams' (Mercier 1894, 198). The goal was a kind of semi-hypnotic exchange between the writer and their instrument: the writer sets the process in motion, but the motion is contingent on the instrument. The choice of instrument varies depending on the individual. In my case, it was scissors and books, tools that brought with them a dual sense of immersion and focus, one that allowed me, in Soupault's words, to 'disengage my mind from all critical pressure and scholarly habits' (1967, 664–5). That focus was particularly bound to the books themselves, which I view as modern fossils fixed in form, yet waiting to be reanimated, even if through destruction.

Chapter 4, 'Invitation to Cannibalize', explores this further by extending textrapolation to the material form of the book. Here, I consider what it means to treat the book as a living, edible body that invites cutting

and ingestion. Because cut-up is not just about dissection, in Chapter 5, 'Writing in Combinations', I explore the flip side of cut-up—the assembly process—where fragments of text and meaning come together in varied configurations. With this, I also reflect on the traditions central to textrapolation, tracing the influences that have informed and shaped its method. Those chapters make it clear that at no point do I claim to have invented the cut-up technique. Instead, I have adapted it for academic use, drawing on the practices and ideas that continue to inspire me: the procedural rigour of Oulipo, the spontaneity of automatic and intuitive writing, and the visual boldness of concrete poetry. Textrapolation stands at the intersection of these approaches. It merges play, pattern, and intuition, open to anyone who wishes to reinterpret it for their own purposes.

Speaking of approaches, it is important to clarify a small detail: the terms 'cut-up' and 'cut-out' are often used as if they mean the same thing, but they actually refer to different methods within the collage tradition, each with its own focus and background. The cut-up technique is rooted in literary experimentation and involves slicing texts into fragments and reassembling them to create new meanings. It was popularized by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin to invite more chance, disruption and subconscious associations into the writing process. The cut-out approach originates in visual art and centres on physically removing images, shapes, or sections—often from magazines or printed media—and rearranging them to form new visual compositions. This method, famously used by artists like Henri Matisse, is more concerned with spatial relationships, aesthetics, and symbolic layering. While both techniques share the principle of reconfiguration and are sometimes blended in interdisciplinary practice, the cut-up is primarily textual and literary, whereas the cut-out is visual and compositional. Textrapolation subscribes to both approaches and treats them synonymously, being equally invested in the visual materiality of the page and the semantic volatility of text.

Each textrapolated piece can stand on its own, but together they form a larger narrative—with exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution—similar to classical storytelling. Seen individually, they make clear statements about the shared human experience, but when read as a whole, they begin to tell a more personal story. I continue to use textrapolation as a form of inquiry in many contexts, from conference abstracts and talk fragments to both academic and personal writing. The practice now goes beyond this book and has become part of my life on the move. As I travel for research and live

in different parts of the world—Paris, London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Venice, Tokyo, Kyoto, Rabat, New York, San Francisco, Phoenix, Benson—the method is shaped by each place. It draws from many intellectual landscapes without trying to separate science from pseudoscience or logic from superstition. This openness applies not just to the spirit of the method but also to the materials I incorporate.

If this method encourages anything, it is this: ‘Cut up your books!’ To make that impulse more approachable, Chapter 6 offers a short manual for those eager to try the method but haven’t yet found a way in. I understand that openly encouraging systematic experimentation might seem a little suspicious. After all, experiments are supposed to be spontaneous and improvised acts, *n’est-ce pas*? As it happens, though, they can also be a mindful decision to question how things are done, and how they might be done differently when guided by a hunch.

The same hunch can be trusted when reading this book. How else does one engage with a work that is simultaneously a palindrome, an experiment, and a personal statement? How does one read something that is neither a monograph, nor a textbook, nor an artbook, nor a research study, nor a set of instructions, nor a collection of poetry, nor a diary, but still embraces aspects of each?

This book is a Matryoshka doll filled with nested forms and hidden curiosities, inviting both tactile and reflective engagement that blends simple joy with deeper introspection.

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