Scott Esposito on finding your method



November 17, 2017 - Scott Esposito is the author of four books, most recently *The Doubles* from Civil Coping Mechanisms. He is a frequent contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and his work has appeared in *BOMB Magazine*, *Tin House*, *The White Review*, *The Lifted Brow*, *The Believer*, *The Washington Post*, and others. He was a finalist for the 2014 Graywolf Nonfiction Prize. He is a senior editor for Two Lines Press and runs *The Quarterly Conversation*. Here he discusses how writing functions like translation, why it's important to have a jumping off point for your work, and the ways in which readers create purpose for what you make.

As told to Mark Sussman, 2136 words.

Tags: Writing, Film, Process.

Translation seems to have an important place in your writing life, so I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the relationship between translation and the act of writing.

A lot of times a commonplace you'll hear in the field is that translation is the closest form of reading. Every single word is a decision they're making, or every other word is a decision, and there's a lot of second guessing. I just did a panel about *A Hundred Years of Solitude* last week, because it was the 50th anniversary. And right there, in the title, there's like three translation choices. Is it *A Hundred Years*? Is it *One Hundred Years*? Is it *The Hundred Years*? Is it gonna be "solitude"? Is it gonna be "loneliness"? There's just a lot of thinking that goes into the simplest stock phrase. I don't do that much translating myself, but I do use this to inform my writing and ideas about close reading and looking at the text not only as the text it is but as a kind of array of choices you're making. One person's gonna read it this way, one person's gonna read it that way. So that's in my mind when I'm writing.

As it relates to [my 2017 "memoir-through-film"] *The Doubles*, I have thought of essays as translations a lot of times, and I was using that as a lens to think of the essays through. So you're going from film to page, and there's a translation going on there. And definitely I was making choices as I was writing the book. This isn't the film word-for-word or scene-for-scene. I'm taking some things out, embellishing other things. I'm putting myself into the process.

***The Doubles* prods at the relationship between criticism and your life. There's a back and forth between your life and the cinematic texts you're working with.**

In that sense, it is replicating the translation process to an extent, where you are getting very close to this movie, and you're looking at the scenes or certain images from all sides, and I'm thinking, "What's the best way to represent this text?" I'm trying to put my own spin on it, which a good translator is doing even if they don't want to think of themselves as putting their own spin on it. Although there are some translators who go very much the other way and go into an idiosyncratic or subjective translation, which can be interesting in its own way.

The middle essay [in my book *The Surrender*, is all about my experience with the Kiarostami movie *Close-Up*. That originally was going to be an essay for *The Doubles*. Later on, I was having a conversation with the person who eventually became the publisher of *The Surrender*. The idea of the book emerged from that conversation. I feel a little bit like I was coached into the idea. I do have that resistance, and once that door was opened, I became very invested in [writing] in more of a memoiristic fashion. I hadn't found my method, I discovered how I wanted to go about writing it. I guess I just wanted to see that through to the end.

There were a number of stages of persuading myself to write that stuff. Again, if you're a writer, you have your own methods for getting yourself to whatever you're going to produce. But I think right there, I would have felt strange, to just kind of nakedly say, "I'm going to write a memoir about gender" without that lead up to it. It's a bit like a stage. If you're an actor, and you have your stage to perform on, you're very comfortable. You're going to play your role and you fit in there. Then maybe the same person in another circumstance is going to be shy. I guess that's how I look at it. I also do that myself.

So it's like creating a context for yourself or your writing.

I think context is big, yeah. Because I myself, I'm a bit of a shy person. Throw me into a party and I'll talk to the same person all night long. But then, when I do the launch events for *The Doubles* or I do a panel or whatever, I can become very talkative. And it's because I understand that situation. I understand where I fit into it. To me, yeah, context is a very important thing.

There's the process of sitting down and writing. Then there's also creating the context or creating the concept. Are those two things part of the same effort, or are they two different processes?

I would say there is first a level of context, where you need to be persuaded that this project is worth writing. Like in *The Surrender*, I thought that these parts of my life, the story, would be something someone else would find interesting. I felt like I had something to say to people, and so I felt like, "Hey, this is worthwhile thing to do." I was willing to portray many, many, many moments where I did something for the very first time. And each of those were kind of a step on my journey. The first time I wore a dress or the first time I had a wig or the first time I appeared as femme to somebody else, things like that.

With *The Doubles*, it was very simple. I was going to retell movies. The very first time I wrote one of the essays in this book, it just kind of came out of me. I was watching *The Seventh Continent* by Michael Haneke. It really just got into me and I didn't know what to do with it. I just kind of wrote it out. It was an hour or two, this very quick, intense hour or two of writing. That was when it came to me. I can do this for a number of films, and I can even make a book that way.

The method gives you something to hold onto.

I very often think of what Jørgen Leth said in [the film] *The Five Obstructions*, where I believe it's the third obstruction, and Lars von Trier says. "Well, the third obstruction is no obstructions at all." [Leth] looks very aghast. He says, "I would have liked to have something to hold onto." You can go anywhere, which is a very, very disarming thing.

That's the nightmare for writers, the blank page and the blinking cursor. For some writers, it doesn't feel like a moment of possibility. It feels intimidating.

I guess that's one reason why I think of memoir or criticism as slightly easier genres. If you're a critic, you're always writing about something. You're writing about a book, you're writing about a movie, whatever. Same thing with memoir. You have your life and you're trying to portray your life. You always have that thing to bounce off of.

But if you're writing a work of pure fiction, and you have that blank page, then that's a very hard moment. You don't have those things. There must be something to bounce off of. It doesn't just come *ex nihilo*. But it's a lot less than if you say, "Oh, I'm writing about this book," and immediately you have that surface right there.

I've written a book about gender. I've written a book about film. I'm currently working on something that's probably going to be about translation. Three distinct books. I feel like I'm dropping this subject matter into the same obsessive pits and watching it emerge into these different manifestations. To me, that's kind of the good side of being obsessive. That's where your creativity comes from.

Since I've finished with *The Doubles*, I've just kind of gone back to writing some essays. I've really been challenging myself not to start with anything known, just to let the thoughts emerge one by one. It's a very slow process, and I can spend hours before the blank page, before you accumulate enough material that you have a little bump to push off of. I guess it's a little like being in space, where you're weightless and how do you move where there's nothing to push off of.

In your books, you're playing with a specific genre of writing, memoir, and at the same time evading it. Do you think about your relationship to genre while you're writing?

Not so much. What I think I'm most fascinated by are the thoughts or the questions at stake. I mean, I'm really intrigued by seeing how far I can push an idea. I think that's a very underrated thing. And that's what great philosophers do. They can just find so many sides to a question. They can find so many thoughts inherent in things that look very simple.

I wrote about *Meek's Cutoff*, which is a movie that's set in the 19th century and is about these people going West. To me, it partakes in a lot of the tropes of a Western, even though I'm not sure that it necessarily is a Western. To me, a lot of what Kelly Reichardt was doing there was trying to use these genre conventions in creative ways to talk about something that she wanted to talk about. It wasn't necessarily the traditional Western or even necessarily going West itself, but that was how she figured out how to talk about the ideas that she wanted to talk about.

How much does your background in science infiltrate the way you think about yourself and your relation to the work?

[Science is] my foundation. That's the way I was raised. I come from a family that is not a very religious family. My father was a scientist. Throughout my entire childhood, I imagined that I would be a scientist, too. I was surrounded by that sort of stuff at home. I read tons and tons of science fiction. I eventually got into reading books of popular science, like [Stephen Hawking's] *A Brief History of Time*, and those sorts of things. I remember as a teenager, I really saw very little value in art at all. I just didn't get it. I didn't know what people saw in it. I didn't think it was that important.

That's just kind of the beginning of me. I think I've gravitated towards the arts and maybe when someone is the prodigal son, or is a convert to a religion, they can often be much more of a fervent believer because they have that conversion experience. They know what it's like to see the other side and to really believe the other side of things.

It's almost like you're saying that art has a purpose, which is a very trite way to rephrase that. But if it were true, it would be one of the most complicated statements you could make.

Well, I think it would have a purpose for the viewer, but not necessarily the creator. That's kind of like what Cormac McCarthy said: "The ugly fact is books are made out of books." Someone creates a book and they don't necessarily know why they created it. But then you read it and you find some purpose in it and that becomes your review and your essay, your own book. It's a chain of events in that way.

Scott Esposito recommends:

Wayne Booth — anyone interested in "how fiction works" (or really, how narratives of any medium work) should absolutely read Wayne Booth. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *A Rhetoric of Irony* are essentials for me.

Manuel Puig — an Argentine novelist, and one of the most insightful people on film I've ever read. *The Doubles* owes such debts to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

Abbas Kiarostami — Kiarostami was such a massive filmmaker, everyone should watch his movies. *Close-Up* sets a standard and a genre of its own.

Another Gaze — a smart Web-based film journal that specializes in feminist criticism

Music & Literature — one of the best print journals out there, each issue picks three artists in various categories and goes super in-depth in each. Plus, it has a great web presence.

The Scofield — another great journal, covering various writers to incredible depth. Each issue is free and downloadable as a beautifully produced PDF.

Filmstruck — a solid, affordable streaming service with high-quality film. You can see a lot of the Criterion Collection here.

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Vocation
Writer, Editor

Fact

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