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Strange Loops as (Inter)Disciplinary *Ecriture* and Invention

M. Todd Harper

In *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture*, Mark C. Taylor describes the “strange loops” created in a photograph of Chuck Close. Close sits at his desk, painting a self-portrait from a photograph. Above his desk hangs an even larger self-portrait. These multiple self-portraits, these multiple layers of representation, form a hall of mirrors—subject and object, original and fake deconstructed. The photograph is not really about self-portrait as visual reflection, nor is it really about self-portrait as inner essence. It is neither mirror, nor lamp. Rather, it is a play of the two, wherein the seemingly closed system of re-presentation is opened through repetition. The multiple images of Close are lost in a play between subject and object until it becomes apparent that they are but signs within a network of signs. And, yet, it is not just Close, now subject, now object, who is looped around and folded over; it is also the art of self-portraiture. Self-portraiture, possibly the most representational of the arts, can never re-present reality without passing back into a sign. The collection of self-portraits comments on the im/possibility of self-portraiture. Each image, each self-portrait contained in the picture comments on the inability of signs, the inability of language to re-present reality. The title of the work, *Portrait of the Artist with a Work in Process*, offers product and process, railways and rail stations in an infinite process of looping back.

Taylor defines “strange loops,” a concept that he borrows from Douglas Hofstadter’s landmark *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, as “self-reflective circuits, which, appearing to be circular, remain paradoxically open” (75). A simple example of a strange loop is the liar’s paradox: “This sentence is a lie.” If we take the sentence’s assertion that it is a lie, then the sentence is expressing a truth. However, if it is true, then it cannot be

a lie. With the photograph of Close, each image, each self-reflective turn that the artist makes, reveals the impossibility of creating a work that represents an essence or true self. The result becomes a play of similitude and difference. Taylor opens up Hofstadter's original concept to argue that the self, an interconnected node of various systems, disrupts those systems and causes them to turn inward when it looks inward. This article attempts to explicate and elaborate on Taylor's definition of "strange loops" by considering the photograph of Close, a lithograph of M.C. Escher, and, finally, the disciplines as nodes and networks that constantly loop back into each other to create even more space for ideas and language.

Strange loops might be said to affect invention within network *écriture*. It is through repetition that the sign, the image, the reality become caught up in a network of signs and signification, gaining meaning only as it is seen in relation to itself and other signs. This repetition of the sign creates a fractal image of the sign's predecessor and successor. Consider, as Taylor does, the "recursive screens" of *This is Not a Pipe* in Magritte's *Two Mysteries*. The image of the pipe is repeated within the painting and within a painting within the painting (75–78). Similarly, in his later work, Close inscribes self-portraits within the pixels of his self-portraits. Important not only is the repeated signs, but the gaps and *aporias* that emerge within those repetitions, creating additional space for invention to take place. The constant re-turning where subjects and objects are re-inscribed is never perfect, and, yet, in its imperfection, lies its invention and re-invention.

What are the different layers within these strange loops, then?

We might begin with the node. A node is the intersection of various threads within a network. (Keep in mind that nodes become networks when magnified.) In the most common network theories, the node is the self. As Taylor observes,

The self—if, indeed, this term any longer makes sense—is a node in a complex network of relations. In emerging network culture, *subjectivity is nodular*. Nodes, we have discovered, are knots formed when different strands, fibers, or threads are woven together. [. . .] [T]he networks in which nodular subjectivity is emerging bear traces of natural, cultural, and social systems. (231)

We are the intersection of different practices, values, norms, ideas, and beliefs, the intersection of many gossamer threads that connect to form a

spider web of meaning. It is at this level, in particular, that we are most likely fooled by re-presentation. We think that in the mirror of the department store our elongated reflections, making us look thin, are realistic self-representations. In short, we are deceived twice: first, by the reflection in the surface of the mirror, which presents the deceptive appearance of a complete self; and, second, by the mirror's ability to make us forget that it and we are in a larger context/network of commerce and capitalism.

When we realize that the reflections in the network of department store mirrors are different or, better yet, that we are cultural and societal reflections that are, in part, created by the consumer culture of the department store, we are able to use the similarity and difference created by this hall of mirrors as *chora* or a space of invention. We become subject and object in a network of multiple signs. This realization that we are inscribed allows us the ability to begin inscribing. Taylor describes this moment in almost religiously ecstatic language:

The more I struggle to fathom this critical moment, the more complex it becomes. Eventually, I am driven to conclude that I am—the I is—a moment of complexity. The networks in which nodular subjects form create binds and double binds that cannot be undone. Turning back on myself to look at myself looking at myself, I realize thought is never my own, and thus thinking can never come full circle. (232)

And, yet, Taylor not only realizes that he is the host of networks, or parasites (to borrow Michel Serres' terminology), but that he too is a parasite who links to other nodes. "As I try to think about, speak about, write about what seems to be happening," Taylor continues,

I discover that words are not mine but are merely borrowed for a *brief* moment. My identity—literary as well as otherwise—is parasitic upon the ghosts haunting me. Their noise is what makes it possible for me to write. As I screen their words, their thoughts and words are reborn through me. What I know now that I did not know when I began is that I am not merely a parasite but am also the host of others both known and unknown. (232)

Suddenly, the distinction between nodes and the treads leading out of them becomes increasingly unclear.

Blurring the distinction between node and thread, as it were, we arrive at our second level of looking at the "strange loops" among a few nodes. Consider M.C. Escher's 1956 lithograph, *Bonds of Love*. In *Bonds*

of Love, Escher profiles a couple reflectively looking down and into each other. Bonds (or strips) of what look like papier-mâché in the process of (un)raveling loop and then loop and then loop again to provide shape to the couple's head and shoulders. Through the open bonds, a blue-black air gives a cosmic feel with small ball-shaped satellites that float in and out, in front of and in back of the bonds. The surface of the bonds reveals the distinctive features of hair, eyes, ears, and mouth of the couple—the woman, her hair pulled in a bun; the man, sporting a thin goatee. The bonds connect at the couple's shoulders and in the back of their heads. A strip that forms the head of the woman, whose gaze is lower than the man's, loops around one of the bonds that shapes the man's head. Their connected profiles almost provide the sense of a human *Moebius Strip*. *Bonds of Love* takes a glance at a similar woodcarving, *Rinds*, of a woman's bust gazing up pensively toward the sky. It is also possible to see the goateed, middle-aged man and the woman with the tight bun of *Bonds of Love* as Escher and his wife, Jetta Umiker, making the lithograph not only a comment on all relationships, but their relationship.

We might say several things about Escher's *Bonds of Love* in the context of Taylor's work. There exists a relationship between system and self, network and node. Unlike many of Escher's other lithographs, the human subject takes greater form and prominence. In Escher's *Relativity*, for instance, small cartoon-like figures ascend and descend multiple stairways. In many ways these figures function only to trick the eye. (As the eye follows one figure up a staircase or through a portico, it suddenly finds itself going sideways.) *Bonds of Love*, however, suggests that without the bonds, the faces would not be given form, and without the faces, the bonds would simply float away. Without love and the constraints therein, there would be no lovers; without lovers, there would be no love. What is especially noteworthy is that there are two actions taking place at the same time. On the one hand, the two figures reflect upon each other, seeming to look down and into the other. On the other hand, the "bonds" are in a process of raveling and unraveling. Are the reflective looks caused by the bonds unraveling, or are the bonds unraveling the cause of the reflective looks? Escher seems to suggest that they could be one or the other, or, more likely, both. In short, "strange loops" can be read into the system, not only the bonds which encircle to give shape to the heads, but the process of reflection in the midst of unraveling.

The third level advances an even more complex relationship between networks and nodes than outlined in the first two. Consider the disciplines and their scholars as examples of this third level. As formulated by Kant

and first realized in Berlin, the modern university sought to divide and purify the disciplines in discrete units. Placed together, they would form individual stops along the student's assembly-line education. Students, faculty, staff—nodes along a network of disciplines (Taylor 240). The role of reflection within the disciplines, as Clement Greenburg tells us, was to strengthen the disciplines by removing contradiction and impurities as well as to establish limits and parameters.

The essence of Modernism, Greenburg states, lies in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its areas of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained of it. (qtd. in Taylor 74)

Taylor's "strange loops," however, reestablish the role of reflection, particularly between node and network. As a result, reflection becomes heuristic and inquiry within the disciplinary environment.

When we loop back through the photograph of Close, we realize the difference that Taylor brings to disciplinary networks. The photograph of Close, as noted above, can in part be viewed as a self-reflection on the art of self-portraiture, a genre, if not an art, within Visual Arts. Neither photograph nor self-portraits act as beginning or end or points between a teleology that culminates in an ideal form. Rather Close plays with different mediums, different times, different places to open up rather than limit possibility. Scholars in numerous disciplines have similarly thought to use the reflection as a means of opening up rather than shutting down their disciplines. The work of Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and George Marcus, for example, comes to mind. The path that Clifford and Marcus, along with the contributors to their *Writing Cultures*, take, in particular, attempts to reflect upon anthropology as colonial. Not only do they seek a discourse to address the colonizing impulse in anthropology, but they also open up the possibilities of doing anthropological research. Like Close, they and their discipline become caught in the play of subject and object, a hall of mirrors that opens up seemingly closed systems through repetition and returning.

Looping back through Escher's lithograph, we discover similar parallels to the relationship between node and network. Taylor's strange loops allow a greater play between nodes, nodal subjectivity, and disciplinary networks. Like Escher's couple whose nodal subjectivity is

shaped by the bonds of an outside network, disciplinary subjects are indeed shaped by the disciplines. But, also like Escher, there is a greater exchange between node and network. With an inward glance, the disciplinary subject tugs at the networks threads; conversely, with a change in the network, the nodal subject feels a pull. The inward glance of Clifford Geertz affects anthropology, establishing a new field of meta-theory; the students of Geertz writing in this new field, conversely, give shape to the work and subjectivity of Geertz. This dialectical push and pull between node and network cannot be understated. In "Discourse on Language," Foucault argues that the disciplines constrain and limit discourse and subjectivity. The individual—to the extent that there can be such an animal in Foucault's discourse—arbitrarily fills a subject position that could be taken by anyone. The force of discourse and disciplinarity would ensure that there had been anthropological theorists that reflect upon the profession had there not been a Geertz. And, yet, Taylor provides a greater play between node and network, allowing both an equal role within disciplinary invention.

This constant play between node and network within disciplines becomes an alternative to Modernist notions of inquiry. As Greg Ulmer notes in *Heuretics*, the dominant metaphor of Modernist invention has been the "frontiers of knowledge." Renaissance explorers encouraged scholars to go beyond the limits of the known world. Likewise, the rise of science at the same time ensured that inductive logic, a reasoning from particulars to a general conclusion, would become, to paraphrase Ulmer, the compass of knowledge. This view of inquiry, as Ulmer astutely notes, moved from exploration to territorialization and colonization. Similarly, Michel Serres argues that it led to dead end roads of specialization. Noting what he hopes as the end of specialization and the birth of interdisciplinary exchange, Serres notes,

Exchange is the rule, even if it is not total: importation and exportation which mark, in my sense, the end of the era of specialists. The learned community is polyglot. The more one goes towards pedagogy, transmission, the more one goes to speciality: socio-political frame, ecological space; the more one goes toward invention, the more one encounters exchange and translation. (qtd in Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, 163)

Later Serres argues, "To invent is not to produce, but to translate" (qtd in Ulmer, *Applied* 163).

Ulmer's and Serres' resolutions are instructive and reveal subtle differences between their own and Taylor's. Both see a pulling and recycling of existing material as a point of invention. Ulmer theorizes "choreography" as a substitute for methodology. He borrows and reworks Derrida (as Breton reworked Freud) in the context of hypermedia: "That is how I am going to invent choreography—by creating the field within which the insight I seek already exists. Compose a 'diegesis'—an imaginary space and time, as in the setting for a film—that functions as the 'places of invention,' using this phrase in a sense associated with it in the history of rhetoric" (48). Choreography creates and maps out a space for an intricate and, yet, playful dance of knowledge to occur. Adopting the metaphor of translation, Serres works within the field of interdisciplinarity. In *Le Passage du Nord-Ouest*, Serres compares the interdisciplinary scholar to the nineteenth-century explorers of the Northwest Passage. The scholar, a parasite to this treacherous landscape, must be willing to navigate between the frozen and often closed path between human and exact sciences: "From the human to the exact sciences, or inversely, the path does not traverse a wide and open space. [. . .] More often, the passage is closed, either because of the rough terrain or the ice or because one is likely to become lost. And, if the passage is open, it is difficult to anticipate" (18). And, yet, it is by mapping this landscape that Serres, himself, is able to begin translating knowledge from one discipline to the next.

Were we to paint Serres' image on a canvas, we might have the philosopher himself bundled in protective clothing forcing his way across the frozen landscape. Were we to adopt Taylor's perspective, the philosopher would become the surrealist's opening wherein the canvas would begin to turn inside out. Although Taylor borrows Serres' metaphor of the parasite, he sees the nodal subject as a focal point for the network to loop around and pass through itself. Less imagistic than the imaginary canvas is the difference between where and how the different threads of knowledge are connected. Although his work itself is interdisciplinary as well as critical, Taylor suggests more minimalist views of self-reflection. He picks up on an instructive quotation of Kirk Varnedoe: "Like other artists of his generation—Sol Le Witt, Richard Serra, Phillip Glass—Chuck Close does the same damned thing over and over. The constructive boxes he puts around his options, and his nonstop recycling of motifs and methods, might seem to guarantee monotony" (qtd. in Taylor 127). Taylor goes on to note, "[. . .] the differences among the works are more important than their similarities. By framing an intricate interplay be-

tween sameness and difference, Close [and here we insert all practioners who work in this self-reflective way] creates paintings that are anything but monotonous" (127). The exchange that Serres spoke of is both called forth and played with in this minimalistic sense of returning to the same theme.

For our conclusion, we might loop back once more. Throughout this essay, I presented three levels that seem to progress logically. Yet, Taylor's description of them is more along the lines of fractal images. On the one hand, nodes are networks themselves. Human subjects are a complex network of tissues, organs, blood, cells, ideas, practices, beliefs, norms, and so on. Conversely, networks are nodes. Disciplines are nodes within the university are nodes within societal institutions are nodes within. . . . The series is infinite and when one node/network changes, it sets a chain reaction along the entire field. What this fractal alignment provides us within the academy is a new way to envision invention and inquiry. These movements release and establish a constant play for new knowledge to be generated.

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