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Honors 499

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Senior Project Reflection

Neither research nor creative projects ever end up as one expects, and this project fits both categories. It underwent several conceptual, and innumerable surface level, revisions. I thought it would be done several times before it was, and then I feared it would never be done.

When I wrote my proposal, I knew I wanted to blend fiction, non-fiction, and images into a genre-bending work. I expected the fictional narrative to be the cohesive element. I knew any nonfictional and visual elements would have to come as short and unobtrusive bursts. However, I had to experiment and revise extensively before this blended document took its final shape. The largest change was that, after multiple re-envisionings and several brainstorming sessions with my advisor, I decided to blend two layers of fiction instead of both fiction and nonfiction. By making my protagonist a journalist, I was able to use the guidebooks he was reading and the articles that he was supposedly writing as the “nonfiction” elements to interrupt my central narration.

One reason for these changes in structure was that my purpose for the document changed somewhat drastically. I had originally wanted my senior project to be a sophisticated literary piece based in theory, an offbeat intellectual map for the experience of Prague. However, I found that while much research is being done on hybridization and cultural mapping, I wanted the piece to be more accessible to a broad audience than the typical texts involved in that research. A turning point came when I applied for a government Gilman

Scholarship and decided to use my document as part of the required carry-on project for after I returned. I wanted my text to be a helpful tool to teach others about my host country and encourage them to study abroad. From then on, I thought more about that future audience and tried to make my piece more relevant to them. I could still utilize the theory I had read in subtle ways and as inspiration for experimenting with structure.

This focus on a general audience, of students with more interest in than experience with foreign travel, was how I came up with the guidebook structure of my project. I wanted to make a “novel guide” that would tell people what to expect from a foreign city without being as dry or list-based as typical travel guidebooks. It would draw on the genres of guidebooks and fictional novels in a new way. Besides being the established genre for foreigners to learn about travel destinations, the guidebook structure allowed me to integrate different kinds of text, photography, and design. I adopted the generic guidebook layout with headers and colorful blurbs, while making the content within more personal. My goal was to entertain readers and encourage cultural curiosity, rather than to help travelers navigate the physical city. Therefore, I was able to incorporate my own perceptions and experiences, as well as my research on various topics, through the conceit of my protagonist.

I molded the fiction thread to be the coherent narrative that would keep readers flowing through what might otherwise be a confusing, segmented text. I hoped to create a near-interactive experience where readers could discover the city alongside and through the protagonist. The characterization of the protagonist as an older male who had grown up in Prague and only went back as a forced assignment was done to add interest and distract from how much was my own experience. His occupation and mission were also important to the way the story developed. I assembled the document so that his fictional journey would give

readers background information while showing them through the city. As they progressed through the document, they would see those same bits of background information and those adventures influencing Jan's "nonfiction" articles.

Incorporating photography into the document without overly complicating the reader's experience was a difficult issue; but my instincts, mapping research, and adoption of the guidebook format all called for visual elements. Photography was the most appropriate visual element because it comes the closest to a direct transfer of experience. I chose to put a few, very typical photographs of Prague's most important sights and monuments inside colorful blurbs that could almost have come straight from a guidebook. Despite the fact that I wanted readers to feel more intimately acquainted with the city as a result of my project, I still wanted them to gain an understanding of the most typical Prague. Ideally, the more personal snapshots interspersed somewhat chaotically as part of the protagonist's creative process will be highlighted in contrast. The evolution of my original proposal for an annotated photo log was my blog and photo site, which is accessible in the August- December archives of www.boomsinthenight.wordpress.com.

A last creative decision I struggled with during this project was how to conclude the document. Since I was aiming for a reader-guided experience, I didn't want to force a lesson or theme on it. I am also still evaluating my thoughts, perceptions, and most valuable insights into Prague. At the risk of making it appear unfinished, I decided to end the text before all the threads within it were tied up. Instead of including the final "nonfiction" article written by my protagonist, I left the final words with my readers. I hope that will allow them more freedom to process their impression for themselves. First, I hope that someone who does not have to will make it that far. But at the very least, the process of crafting this blended project gave me

the opportunity to think harder and more creatively about the many elements involved.

It was challenging keeping track of so many ambitions, story threads, and design considerations, but by far the largest difficulty I experienced was an emotional block.

Unfortunately, I have some regret over my decision to study in Prague during fall 2009. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time for me. Although I enjoyed myself and learned important things, it feels like a huge missed opportunity. Over the course of several months, I succumbed to guilt and guilt-induced stress, and those feelings became associated with my senior project. I would shut down every time that I tried to start work. I worked on anyway, but I was stressed and unproductive. I am grateful for the encouragement and critique of my wonderful advisor, the deadline flexibility that was given to me, and the fact that Prague can now become a fond memory while I concentrate on the present.

Works Consulted

Creative Nonfiction Theory

Dybek, Stuart. Interview with James Plath. *The Cream City Review*. Chicago: Illinois Wesleyan U, 2009. Web. 10 March 2009. A discussion of setting and obsessions within fiction, useful for writing my fiction thread.

Fletcher, Allan. *The Art of Looking Sideways*. New York: Phaidon P, 2001. Print.

This book is an unique assimilation of design, architecture, and writing: an inspiration piece.

Heyne, Eric. "Where Fiction Meets Nonfiction: Mapping a Rough Terrain." *Narrative* 9.3 (Oct. 2001): 322-333. Print. A survey of theories behind fiction and creative nonfiction.

Hilbert, Betsy. "The Truth of the Thing: Nonfiction in *Moby Dick*." *College English* 48.8 (Dec. 1986): 824-831. Print. An analysis of the part-fiction, part-nonfiction structure of *Moby Dick* and its effects upon the novel's meaning and readability. Important in initial shaping of project.

Holmes, Leigh Howard. "Linkages of Nonfiction and Selfhood: The Places of Personal Essays." *The English Journal* 91.4 (2002): 64-68. Web. 9 March 2009. This article discusses the role of setting in creative nonfiction pieces where the location of the events is central to the meaning. It was interesting but became less relevant as the personal essay sections became news articles.

In Fact: the Best of Creative Nonfiction. Ed. Lee Gutkind. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005. Print. More reading in recent, good creative nonfiction to study the conventions of the genre.

Cultural Mapping Theory

Thompson, Nato. *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2009. Print. Thompson offers a survey of historical and new mapping techniques, beyond the traditional navigational maps. This was the inspiration for my altered metro map.

Turchi, Peter. *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity U P, 2007. Print. Turchi explores relationships between writers of place and their writing, as well as unconventional methods of mapping geographical regions. This helped me think of weaving in the news articles and guide book format as sorts of maps throughout.

You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Maps of the Imagination. Ed. Katharine Harmon. Princeton, PA: Princeton Architectural P, 2003. Print. A psychological exploration of how writers and artists capture the essences of cities as they see them, more perception than geography.

Guidebooks

I referenced multiple travel guidebooks, including series such as Eyewitness Travel Guides, Fodors, Frommer's, Lonely Planet, Rick Steves', and Rough Guides.

Historical and Literary Context

Burton, Richard D.E. *Prague: A Cultural and Literary History*. Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2003. Print. A scholarly, non-revisionist history of Prague for background and fact check.

Horrocks, Caitlin. "This is Not Your City." *The Pen / O. Henry Prize Stories*. Ed. Laura Furman. New York: Anchor, 2009. Print. This story centered on a woman struggling with past, present, future, and family in two different countries. It was an excellent example of how to balance my comparable themes with believable, compelling foreign characters.

Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. Print. Reading Kafka, especially "The Metamorphosis," was a strong influence on how I perceived the city and on my development of the disillusioned characters.

---. *The Trial*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. This novel was a valuable example of writing about Prague, and Prague's geography, in creative ways.

Kundera, Milan. *The Joke*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1963. Print. Kundera's novels provided me with valuable setting and character sketches of Prague in the last 50 years. *The Joke* specifically helped me develop my protagonist, physical descriptions of Prague, and borderline-ironic tone.

---. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009. Print. As a bestselling fictional representation of Prague, this book informed me about popular perceptions of Czechs and encouraged me to experiment with structure.

Neruda, Jan. *Prague Tales*. Budapest: Central European U P, 2002. Print. Realist, semi-autobiographical vignettes about the famous Czech author's street. Neruda's examples of Czech ideas of home and strong sense of place helped shape my protagonist.

Jirásek, Alois. *Old Czech Legends*. Chester Springs, PA: Dufour Editions, 1992. Print. Many of these interesting legends are referenced in my final text.

Phillips, Arthur. *Prague: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 2003. Print. This is the story of 5 American expatriates in Budapest during the early 1990s but dreaming of the fabled art scene in Prague. This gave me a stronger sense of the idealized Czech era.

Prague: A Traveler's Literary Companion. Ed. Paul Wilson. Whereabouts Press, 1994. Print. This collection of 23 non-fiction pieces, legends, and short stories about Prague focus on cultural and political history. Includes both famous Czech authors like Kafka and new work. It was useful to have multiple insider and outsider views of Prague while I described the city.

Tylinek, Erich. *Prague: A Book of Photographs*. London: Spring Books, 1963. Print.

This and other photography books gave me a sense of the iconic images of Prague.

Wechsberg, Joseph. *Prague, the Mystical City*. New York: Macmillan, 1971. Print.

This overview of the city's cultural charm and reputation as a "fairy tale city" shaped many of my "nonfiction" article inserts.

Image Credits

"Prague Maps." *CheckInPrague*. Suricata S.R.O., n.d. Web. 4 Nov. 2009.

Map images from site used for front cover background and in "Planning Your Trip" section. I also used the metro map this site as reference for the orientation map I created. All other photos and design were original work.