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Methods of translating: Written Response

This week's written response aims to restyle Michael Rock's "Fuck Content" in the manner of Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*. Rock argues that "content" is not sovereign. Form, weight, contrast etc. shape what messages mean and how they circulate (Rock, 2009). Queneau's book retells a trivial bus encounter in ninety-nine constrained styles, showing that stylistic procedure manufactures new knowledge and sense from the same event (Queneau 1947). In this written response, Rock's thesis is restated through Queneau-like constraints; metaphorical, double entry, and with an element of surprise, so the proposition remains constant while the rhetoric changes. The aim is to make method act as argument; to show by controlled variation that design choices do the heavy lifting of meaning, and to test the portability of Rock's claim across forms.

Exercise one: Metaphorical

The message is a passenger on the London Tube, the grid, pacing, and contrast are the train that actually moves. The timetable is the system which decides arrivals, and the platform serves as context and decides who boards. The carriage formats how closely passengers sit.

Swap passengers and the train still rattles and screeches the same; stops, gradients, announcements, form conducting meaning along fixed rails. Sometimes the carriage is packed at rush hour meaning clings to poles of hierarchy and doors of access, not to the chatter of commuters. When the train enters the tunnel, content goes quiet but design keeps speaking in rhythm, light, pressure and (potential) delay. At the point of arrival, what is remembered is the route map, not the faces of neighbouring commuters. A demonstration that vehicles and systems author our journeys.

Exercise two: Surprise

Headline first! Meaning follows the typography like a siren.

The paragraph breaks, suddenly! And the argument feels sharper without adding a single fact.

Change the type size by two points and attention sprints to a different clause.

Swap order! Frame before thesis. And voilà. Priority flips without new evidence!
Add a caption and the image stops being “nice” and starts being “true”.
A footnote appears! Authority inflates! The same sentence now sounds peer-reviewed!
Reverse contrast. Light on dark! Urgency doubles while content stands still.
Delete italics, keep pace, and the “voice” vanishes although the words remain!
Final twist! Nothing in the claim changed, yet every choice around it did. That is what changed the claim!

Exercise three: Double Entry

At the outset and at the beginning, content is crowned and declared king. However, in practice and in operation, form governs and sets the terms:

A page and a screen filter and select before words arrive. Typography and hierarchy choose emphasis and entry. Grid and context constrain and permit; platform and channel open and close. A caption and a footnote turn picture into evidence and proof. Sequence and placement invert cause and consequence. After reception and after revisit, what persists is scaffold and form, system and procedure.

Thus and therefore, “content” follows and trails; “form” precedes and rules.

References:

Queneau, R. (1947). Exercises in Style, London, John Calder, pp. 9–16, 19–26

Rock, M. (2009) Fuck Content, Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users, New York: Rizzoli, pp. 45–56, 91–95

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488 words