

A Prolegomenism to Erasure

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One group I relate to is BAMC, the Bay Area Music Circle, which has monthly concerts in which members play for each other. The last concert was via Zoom and was, perhaps surprisingly, very good. For the next concert someone is going to perform John Cage's 4'33", in which the musician(s) play only silence for 4 minutes 33 seconds. The score consists entirely of rests. I posted the following response on the Meetup page:

In this postmodern world it is understood that the only way to examine in its fullness an idea, an event, a person is *under erasure*, a practice in which the thing to be examined is crossed out as such but left partly visible under the mark of erasure. An example is this drawing of Carlos Castaneda in which he has erased half of his face:



Carlos told artist Richard Oden that he wished to erase only half of his drawing because "I am not at the point at which I can eradicate myself entirely."

Another example is civilization today, under Coronavirus.

Erasure in this sense is, as you probably know, an idea from Heidegger; it was taken up and amplified by Derrida, where I discovered it. This has stimulated a new project—I am going to try to write something serious about erasure as the fundamental esoteric gesture. Among other things

it will deal in a way that will be provocative to many both within and without the Gurdjieff tradition, with what Gurdjieff said on the very first page of his first book *Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson*, a kind of prospectus:

Ten Books, in Three Series

Three books under the title of “*An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*,” or, “*Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*”

....strictly directed towards the solution of the following three cardinal problems:

FIRST SERIES: To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world.

Now, did he accomplish this merciless destruction? No, it takes more than a book, or ten books, to do that. But now we can read that even the promise given above is already an *erasure*, an erasure of the naive confidence we have in our beliefs and views.

At the end of the book, Gurdjieff recommends a practice of *memento mori*, contemplation of one's death, as the only thing that can save man from the tyrant of his own petty absorption in life. While death itself may be final erasure, he can make use of the shadow that it casts on every moment of life by such intentional erasure of the common deadening sense that there is always plenty of time.

Erasure is an underlying trope in many traditions. For example, witness the deconstructive, esoteric heart of the Heart Sutra:

There is no ignorance,
and no end to ignorance.
There is no old age and death,
and no end to old age and death.
There is no suffering, no cause of suffering,
no end to suffering, no path to follow.
There is no attainment of enlightenment,
and no enlightenment to attain.