

Imagination Factory

by stephen hastings-king

I sit in a small office amongst a huge pile of letters picking out individuals and arranging them on a big square made of something like paraffin. It is one of a series of small offices in which other selves sit amongst huge piles of letters picking out individuals to arrange on a big square made of something like paraffin.

We have to be careful where the letters are positioned and even more not to include too much: these are not stories but parameters of stories, the parameters people use to shape them. They have to come from somewhere.

When we are finished with a square, we make another in which each type of letter used becomes an element in a circle. Then we draw lines connecting them. We call them gates. There cannot be more than 261. Usually, the target number is much lower than that. The number of gates determines the range of permutations. The permutations are stories.

On the wall over my desk, like there is over every other such desk in this department, an advertising poster.

It says:

Twenty Six foundation letters.
He engraved them, He carved them
He permuted them, He weighed them
He transformed them,
And with them He depicted all that was formed
and all that would be formed.

Sometimes I think about him, the fictional craftsman we created as a public image that we later had to put out of business.

When someone finishes a square, they carefully carry it out of their office to another room in which there is a metal conveyor belt that carries them through a complex of ovens and laminating machines. The squares are melted and remolded around the letters, holding them together. They emerge at the far end of the conveyor system as transparent structures which are stacked on pallets. Forklifts move them to another area that I rarely visit. That area fashions and affixes to the back of these structures the fine, intricate gearing which enables them to fit into the appropriate area of cultural machinery.

I haven't traveled much further than my office since I started writing a text about Zeno that will not end. From the moment it arrived, I suspected it was a trap, a way for management to sideline me. I wracked my memory going through all the interactions with management I could recall, trying to find the moment I made a wrong move and gave offense. I couldn't think of one.

Orders arrive by tube from upstairs. They come in metal cylinders that make a hollow sound when they arrive. There was a time when I got many work orders:

Short story template: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets tractor.

Constitution of small country. Rationale for the Office of President for Life.

Advertisement: how eating red sausages made of processed meat by-products makes life more worth living.

My tube has not sounded for a long time now. My work is always half-way finished. No matter what I do, it is always half-way finished.

We make templates. Forms they're called. What we do is important: without forms, no-one can dream anything, write anything, make

anything.

We occupy a fundamental position in the way capitalism operates.
We design imaginations.

Despite that, we are a shy company. Marketing prefers that products be thought of as platonic forms or as the products of some distant craftsman. The forms are for advertisements which emphasize something grand; the craftsman for ads that personalize. We are shy because we are not interested in brand identity: quite the opposite. We mass produce templates that allow people inside capitalism to dream. You know, to dream appropriate things. We are technicians of desire because we are technicians of expression. Inserting a brand between people and what they dream and desire would disrupt the circuits of dreaming and desire. Ours is the anti-brand.

Our business is recession-proof. No matter how bad things get, people want to dream. In order to dream, they have to have patterns. So day after day, we stamp them out.

The firm is very big: lots of departments. I work in the Northeast Sector, Writing Division.

But I digress.

Letters are produced by putting old letters into huge vats which are heated. This is a dangerous operation and happens in the basement. People wearing white uniforms and safety glasses monitor round glass gauges, sometimes turning valves to release ammonia god knows where it goes. Once in a great while something happens down there and a bell rings and we all go stand in the parking lot. In total silence we watch the fire department and emergency crews arrive. Everyone is nervous. Much is at stake in the continued production of imagination.

