

Silvio GAGGI. *From text to hypertext. Decentering the subject in fiction, film, the visual arts, and electronic media*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997, vx + 169 pages.

If interactions between the written and the visual can be taken in the broadest sense, not just as separate word-and-image configurations or creative transpositions from one artistic medium to another, but also as critical negotiations and theoretical «reflections» between different disciplines sharing a crucial common concern, this study provides a welcome addition to the present issue of *Links and Letters*. Gaggi tackles the growing problematization of the male logocentric subject from the pre- to the postmodern eras—whether consisting of a literal or metaphorical decentering, a flattening, gendering, cloning or fragmenting. Interdisciplinarity and multimediality form an integral part of his argument, being evidence of the logic of supplementarity which he grants free play out of respect for the Other and in contrast to a binarism excluding any traffic between artificially polarised positions (e.g., the Freudian binary construction of gender). This, as much as Gaggi's informed and fair judgement, turns *From text to hypertext* into an overall balanced and valuable critique.

The first chapter on painting and photography provides several examples

of how the intermediality established in-between sections of the book also operates within some of the works discussed. This may seem obvious for Barbara Kruger's far from simplistic blown-up images incorporating conventional, advertisement-like slogans challenging «originality» and individuality; Cindy Sherman's intriguing «stills» presenting themselves as brief records of absent(ed) performances; or Mike and Doug Starn's collage-like creations whose material hybridity already conveys and effects the unified subject's dissolution, apart from the brothers being identical twins displaying an obvious fascination with doubles.

Even in van Eyck's «The Wedding of Arnolfini» (1434) the visual disruptions of a singular, coherent perspective (the two vanishing points; the painter's reflection in the mirror next to that of an unidentified witness) are shown to be supplemented by verbal ones (the painter's written signature placed conspicuously above the mirror). Together they betray the ideological conscription of the multiple subject (painter, viewer, and represented couple) in the transition from the medieval (and oral) wedding vow be-

tween two lovers (sufficient unto itself) to the (written) Renaissance contract (certified by a third party), in the context of the growing entrepreneurial world. Ever so «arresting» is Picasso's «*Demoiselles d'Avignon*» (1907), in which the visual representation of the naked female prostitutes, like the omission of their two male clients from the painting's final version, is said to result in a narrative or temporal flattening, though it could be argued that the spatial simultaneity of the incorporated viewpoints (frontal, profile, and aerial) re-expands time and story line.

With regard to Picasso, Gaggi's interpretative sources include Laura Mulvey and Freud, with regard to van Eyck, Althusser and Foucault. These are joined elsewhere by the likes of Barthes, Irigaray, Lacan, Derrida, and Baudrillard, leaving no doubt about Gaggi's pluralistic but poststructuralist assumption of the discursive and ideological constitution of the subject. At the same time, he holds on to a humanist belief in a pre-symbolic self not yet subjected by ideology and discourse, a belief that love, death, and ideas always somehow «exceed» commodification and representation. Gaggi means to salvage the possibility of political action and personal resistance rather than prolong the submission to social manipulation, something Lyotard and Baudrillard have been accused of, the first because of his early ludic conception of postmodernism, the second because hyperreality seems to leave only room for the residual politics of parodically miming the media's commodification.

Favouring a less ambiguous commitment, Gaggi in his third chapter differentiates between movies on the basis of their relative critical consciousness of the gap between the real and the represented. He believes that Richard Rush's *Stunt Man* (1980) is reactionary and capitulates to the hyperreal by presenting it as the product of a single (ultimately benign) author-

ity in control (the film director) and by raising substantial issues like Vietnam, power, evil, and violence, only to pass them off as jokes or evidence of ill-will and paranoia. Coppola's deadpan *One from the Heart* (1982) goes straight for the banal, no less exposing itself to the criticism of complicity raised against ionising strategies. Altman's satirical *Player* (1992) may have been the most successful politically speaking, but its box-office popularity made for a specious social impact. Small wonder Gaggi's ethical project of marrying poststructuralism to politics at times resembles that of squaring the circle. Cases in point are the easily missed «Fourth World» (the poor, native Americans, war veterans,...) in Baudrillard's *America* (1986), but also Lyotard's call not to speak (for fear of distorting), yet still to remember the unspeakability of the holocaust (Heidegger and «the Jews», 1990). Internet and hypertext art, foregrounded in the fourth and last chapter, by potentially dismantling the notions of a single, fixed authorship and private property, may come across as a grass-roots democratic movement, a new counter-culture, yet they may equally result in the noncommittal play of the hippies. The sophisticated and expensive technology, as Stuart Moulthrop and others have reminded us, is tied to the military and corporate business establishments. Discriminatory attempts to restrain the free circulation of on-line information come not only from the political right (regarding pornographic and subversive material) but also from academia and publishers (because of political correctness or economic necessity).

The difficulties Gaggi encounters, though, are not only due to the postmodern condition and the tricks of representation but also to his way of coping with them. Already in *Modern/Postmodern: A study in twentieth-century arts and ideas* (Pennsylvania UP, 1989) he identified formalism in reaction to contemporary

scepticism as the threat to an engagement with reality. There, however, he distinguished between two (not mutually exclusive) paradigms, the Pirandellian and Brechtian modes of self-referentiality. The one promotes representational systems into a work's contents (e.g., parody, the play-within-the-play, the frame-tale,...), thereby confusing art with life and increasing the illusion. The other foregrounds style and medium, causing a «semiotic dissonance» which dissolves illusion and turns into an «ethical semiosis» by reminding the reader that «truth» is always constructed (16).

From text to hypertext does not reintroduce the Brechtian paradigm, even if self-referentiality is prominent in the works dealt with and the designation Pirandellian is applied to *The Stunt Man* (67). Rush's movie is indeed about making a movie, just as *One from the Heart* is thoroughly «metacinematic» (79), and Griffin Mill's final movie-deal in *The Player*, a work rife with allusions to other films, sounds exactly like what we have been watching. Inevitably one gets the impression of a vicious circle from which there is no escape. Similarly, in the second chapter on written fiction Gaggi may set apart the modernism of Conrad's multiple framings and telescoped viewpoints in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) from the post-modernism of Calvino's more radically deconstructive *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979). The mise-en-abime in both novels nonetheless precludes closure and decisive action, either by inviting the endless retelling and distancing of Kurtz's tale or by preventing that a tale ever be told in its entirety. In both cases the «subject» is found to retreat into the reader (within and of the novel), who in the last resort constructs the implied authorial subject.

With regard to *One from the Heart* Gaggi's frustrating search for the subject has him raise from the dead the romantic concept of genius, throwing a familiar es-

sentialist (and often racially abused) cliché, about jazz into the bargain. Muzak's onslaughts, with the musicians' assistance, have long since undone the magic formula of «Jazz, existentialism, and authenticity» (79), and honouring Coppola for it also means reinstating a high-modernist elitism and shifting the onus of the movie's flop to the general public for missing the «subtle» but «rigorous» parody (82). Far from wishing to exaggerate Gaggi's slip concerning Coppola —after all *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (65) and collaborative on-line creation are interpreted as challenges to the traditional notion of artistic genius (139)— I take it as illustrative of the snares besetting mimicking forms of resistance, no matter how disciplined, and these include Gaggi's own brand of criticism.

Granted that the subject is constituted discursively and the Real eludes representation, it hardly helps to position oneself willingly within the Symbolic. In a move which duplicates the substance and method of the book, van Eyck's «Wedding of Arnolfini» comes to function as Gaggi's programmatic and constitutive moment of entrance into the Symbolic, much as the mirror phase, which he repeatedly returns to (1, 73, 93), instigates Lacan's Imaginary. Here, however, it makes for the already mentioned self-referentiality, an artistic intertextuality (29) ultimately subsuming the world, definitely so in the case of Internet (103), and overriding the book's multimodality. As his general title announces and his preface states up front (xiii-xiv), Gaggi approaches his samples without exception as «texts». From the outset, this warrants a semiotic method to cope with visual images and verbal texts. In the process, the materiality of both is lost (despite Gaggi's appreciation of Barthes's sensuous, writerly bliss [53]). Even if a hypertext like Michael Joyce's «Afternoon, a story» (1987), with its potential for the readers' (Barthes would say their «writerly») empowerment, self-conscious-

ly foregrounds the medium's materiality, it also «dematerializes the story as an object, makes much more elusive its existence as a thing.» (125-6) Internet fiction even dissolves the material supports of RAM-memory and CD-ROM, in contrast to interactive computer-aided theatre, which allows for the participants' bodily immersion.

What *From text to hypertext* requires, then, is a renewed phenomenology of the subject, as Gaggi realises only too well (112), a method to counter the predominantly symbolic economic and cultural exchange, binding critics and consumers alike in their engagement with the world. In his conclusion he quite appropriately mentions Elizabeth Wheeler's invocation of subjective experience (painful or pleasurable) in response to Baudrillard's apparent amorality, daring to apply that category not just to people, animals, or nature but «(possibly even) hypertextual networks» (143). How that should be conceived remains as difficult a question (which people like Donna

Haraway have barely begun to answer) as that of locating whatever ethical and political agency can be imagined. Karen-edí Barzman is quoted for looking in the «semiotic slippage», «the instability of signs» (144), Kristeva for reverting to the pre-symbolic, bodily energies of the female, which she also labels the «semiotic» (150), in recognition of the subject's inevitable but ever-fluid, provisional participation in the Symbolic. The economy and lucidity with which Gaggi synthesises the problem of the subject and suggests a potential, in no way absolute solution, follows from his expert coupling of theory with practical analyses. My only quarrel is that he did not admit right away (in the preface, say) the general need for a phenomenology, tracing and traversing his otherwise admirable trajectory.

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Gene D. PHILLIPS. *Conrad and cinema. The art of adaptation*. New York: Peter Lang, 1995, xvii + 219 pages.

The first undeniable merit of Phillips' work is that it is the first book ever published entirely devoted to the topic. Its publication coincides with the recent boom in Conrad adaptations in the last few years that has turned the Polish writer, as Daniel Rosenthal points out, into «the literary darling of Nineties film and television» (1995: 35). The long fruitful history of Conrad on screen would certainly deserve *per se* a book which exhaustively explores the peaks and valleys of such a relation, but there is also a second reason which justifies a close look at the subject: Conrad has always been considered a very «cinematic» writer whose technique has been compared to that of

the cinema. In fact, Conrad himself even acknowledged «I must have been unconsciously penetrated by a prophetic sense of the technique and the very spirit of film-plays» (quoted in Ingersoll, 1995: 24). Unfortunately the bad news is that in spite of this splendid raw material, Phillips' book does not come up to expectations.

In the first chapter Phillips deals with the relationship between film and novel as well as the difficulties a filmmaker may find when adapting a literary work to the screen. Special emphasis is made on the idea of «faithfulness» but his conclusions do not add anything new to the subject and seem to be simplistic: in order to