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Author

Loselle, Andrea

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SELECTED PAPERS

Andrea Loselle is an Associate Professor in the Department of French and Francophone Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

The principal challenge and merit of this collection of papers gathered under the title “*Caméra ou Stylo: A Problematic Dialogue?*” is reading across centuries, cultures, disciplines, and media in the seeming absence of the camera and in some cases of the modern pen. How can these serve as critical tools that we may work into such “quilled” subjects as the problematic status of the “je” in Renaissance poet Maurice Scève’s *Délie, objet de plus haute vertu*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theatrical descriptions of gardens and landscapes in *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, Denis Diderot’s dialogic and apostrophic representations of paintings in his *Salons*, as well as into those topics sharing the same cultural, historical space of the camera and pen: Stéphane Mallarmé’s symbolist poetics, the abstract simultaneism of Robert Delaunay’s paintings and Guillaume Apollinaire’s free verse, the dialectical images of Walter Benjamin and Osip Mandel’stam, and visual artist Sol LeWitt’s predetermined serial systems? This collection of papers is the distilled result of a call for papers that opens out onto the question of language’s relation to visual, material phenomena and that eschews the already well known history of mechanical reproduction and modern visual culture.

Less well-known but no less productive are the juxtapositions that place, for example, Loli Tsan’s reading of Scève at the end of this collection and Anthony Abiragi’s reading of Mallarmé’s sonnet, “A la nue accablante tu,” at the beginning. The Renaissance poet’s voice is “délié” in a mirror structure involving the relation of a suppressed “je” with a “tu” it dares not look upon: “Mon regard par toy me tue.” Do we not hear a paradoxical echo—this doubling of an implied “tu” (you) in “tue” (kills)—in Mallarmé’s meditation on the trace of sea foam (of an event: a shipwreck or a passing siren) materially obliterated in the past participle, “tu” of the verb “taire”? Scève’s arrow with which he is pierced by desire becomes, Tsan writes, the visual “image du basilic et de son regard poignard.” But the arrow with its feathers is also related to the agile quill, an *écriture déliée* and fulfilled by this instrument. We are reminded of how much the symbolists admired the work of this Renaissance poet when Abiragi writes on Mallarmé’s sonnet that “[t]he silenced ‘tu’ strains proleptically towards other elements in the poem in order to achieve some form of semantic fulfillment....” The source of this fulfillment for Scève is visual, but the lady is herself, like the mythical basilisk, lethal in her gaze; the image of her looking at the poet, a gaze turned on him, threatens to silence him. Like the basilisk, Mallarmé’s poetic ideality, evidence of whose dangerous voice is left in only the visual trace of sea foam, contains the possibility of its own semantic shipwreck in the colliding material trace of a posited, real shipwreck and its mythical cause, the figure of the siren.

One might think in this connection of Anastasia Graf’s reflection on Mandel’stam’s metamorphic images and Benjamin’s constellatory pregnant moments or dialectical images. This essay occupies a pivotal place in this collection as a rethinking of “mystical and mystified symbolist aesthetics” that in Benjamin and Mandel’stam reengages with penned material images during a time when painters were first experimenting with abstraction and cameras were increasingly both recording daily life

and creating narrative illusions. Mandel'stam's work on old Egyptian stamps—whose inked images tended to fade when subjected to steam—seeks to “preserve the fading image in writing and cover over it at the same time.” Allegory, as Benjamin suggested in his essays on children's books, can be seen in the way children learn to write using visual images. Here he refers specifically to black-and-white woodcuts in old primers as opposed to modern colored illustrations; for the former invite children “to scribble on them,” fill and color them in much the same way as the poem ekphrastically glosses and yet meticulously covers the image of the fading stamp. This essay and the symbolism essays offer windows through which one can look in on earlier innovations in ekphrasis, a figure dependant upon recognizable visual representations, and compare these to the 20th century art historical commitments to abstraction, seriality, chance, and predetermined systems.

The essays on Rousseau's picturesque landscapes and gardens in *Julie* and Diderot's lively descriptions of paintings by Chardin, Greuze, Fragonard, and so on in *Salons* offer two approaches to representing compositions theatrically or as theatrical scenes. Drama, writes William Hendel, “centers around articulate discourse” whereas theater “implies the spatial features of performance.” Both essays address the latter definition in different ways. Human artifice in Rousseau fashions a natural décor whose very “concision of scenes” draws on the language of theater, a representational genre “where the illusion is so well executed that the spectators can walk on stage and become themselves actors.” Diderot's descriptions of paintings, as Zeina Hakim argues, employ apostrophe and imagined dialogue, making it “possible de *se promener* dans les compositions d'un peintre.” Diderot's *effets du réel* lead both the writer and reader into the similarly spatial illusion of being in the painting; one forgets “que l'on se trouve devant un tableau.” The reading of painterly figurative illusion or of gardens so artfully tended that one would say nature herself had created them come up against the modernist rejection of figurative art and illusion in the essays by Madalina Akli and Mette Gieskes. Vision appears to trump perception in the early 20th century experiments with abstract color contrasts in Delaunay's paintings. These are related to Apollinaire's unpunctuated free verse, a liberation from fixed poetic forms that allows for greater abstract visual play on the page. Gieskes reading of the work of Sol LeWitt examines how the nonhierarchical play with systems and chance uses, as the artist himself wrote, “‘absurdity as a way out of intellectuality’.”

Rousseau and Diderot's penned theatrical illusions may appear displaced by cinema, our theater of illusion, but these also help us understand the challenges abstraction poses today and the literary and art historical tension over recognizably figurative versus abstract representation implicit in the work of, for example, Mallarmé and Benjamin. It is fitting that one of LeWitt's inspirations for serial composition was a forerunner of cinematography: Eadweard Muybridge's late 19th century timed stills of animals and humans in motion. There is, after all, a kind of critical camera (a camera and a pen) tantalizingly situated in various ways between still photography and motion pictures, between the ekphrastic figure of the real and serial abstraction, between the pregnant moment of the convulsed dialectical image and the metamorphic image in motion. The pen and the camera are latent images here informing the dialogue that this collection of essays launches.

IMAGE RÉELLE, IMAGE TEXTUELLE, IMAGE VIRTUELLE

Alain Robbe-Grillet
De l'Académie française

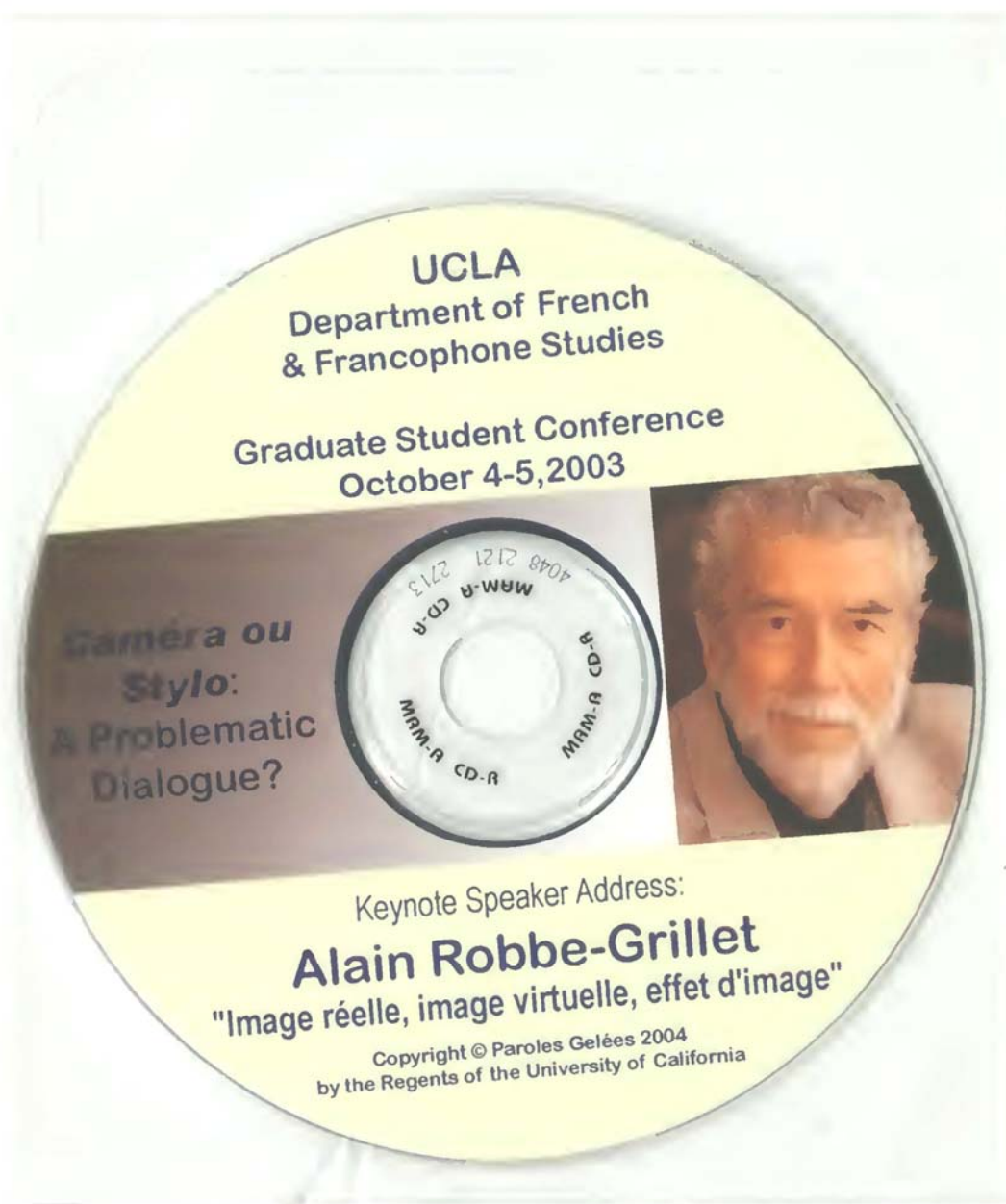


Image réelle, image textuelle, image virtuelle

This CD-ROM contains an audio track (60 min) and a video track (10 min) of Alain Robbe-Grillet's keynote address. For PC or Macintosh, these are best viewed with QuickTime for the video track and Media Player, iTunes or QuickTime for the audio track.

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher
si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles
paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*.

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Paroles Gelées
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