

baroque at the level of its style, is definitely something else than, for example, the very “wild” and definitely baroque writing of Severo Sarduy or Lezama Lima. As a corollary (but this is a problem with many Anglo-Saxon interpretations of the modernism/post-modernism debate), the coupling of Borges and Derrida, which can be defended at a strictly theoretical level if one considers that both writers take poststructuralist stances, is seriously challenged by the stylistic and rhetorical differences between them. But these are minor flaws, compared with the major qualities of a book that sheds much new light on very old problems.

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### AGAINST FASHION: CLOTHING AS ART, 1850–1930

by Radu Stern. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2004. 205 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN 0-262-19493-7.

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Near the close of the 19th century, the French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec exhibited his stained-glass window designs (produced by Tiffany and Company) in Paris at the famous L'Art Nouveau gallery, the interior of which had been designed by Belgian architect and designer Henry van de Velde. At some point, Toulouse-Lautrec was invited to visit Bloemenwerf (near Brussels), the home that van de Velde designed, both inside and out in, 1895. However, when the diminutive but proper French artist arrived, he was apparently greatly offended because Mrs. van de Velde greeted him dressed in what appeared to be her housecoat

(or dressing gown), a sign, he thought, of disrespect. As it turns out, she was wearing not a housecoat but a simple, loose-fitting garment designed by her husband, who insisted that his wife (while at home) should dress in a way that reflected the building's architectural style, a belief that was widely referred to in Europe and the U.S.A. as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (or total work of art). As this book reminds us, the person who launched this link between clothing and architecture was probably William Morris, founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, as he was most likely the one who designed the loose-fitting corsetless gowns that were worn by his own wife, Jane Morris (consistent with the spirit of Red House, their innovative home). Following that example, van de Velde designed outfits for the wife of one of his patrons; Frank Lloyd Wright created dresses for his own wife and the wives of two architectural clients; Wassily Kandinsky made outfits for a woman companion; Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser designed clothing ensembles; and of course there is the well-known example of Gustav Klimt, who designed one-of-a-kind “art dresses” (called *Kunsterkleid*) in collaboration with his companion, Viennese clothing designer Emilie Floge. By the turn of the century, a German essayist could claim that the time was fast approaching when “shows of women's clothing will take their place among art exhibitions,” with the result that it may be exhibited “next to paintings and sculptures.”

Illustrated by more than 100 photographs and drawings (many in full-color), *Against Fashion* is an interesting history of the development of an attitude that flourished during the eight decades between 1850 and 1930. The first third is devoted to an essay on clothing as “anti-fashion,” detailing contributions by the Wiener Werkstatte, Futurism, Russian Constructivism, the Omega Workshops and others. The remaining portion is an insightful anthology of 30 historical writings about clothing and art by Oscar Wilde, Hoffmann, van de Velde, Giacomo Balla, Varvara Stepanova, Sonia Delaunay and various others. Of particular interest is a pioneering essay (dated 1868) by British architect E.W. Godwin on the importance of clothing design and its relationship to architecture and archaeology. “As Architecture is the art and science of building,” wrote Godwin (a friend of Wilde and

James A.M. Whistler), “so Dress is the art and science of clothing.”

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### THE CINEMA EFFECT

by Sean Cubitt. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2004. 464 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-262-03312-7.

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Another Cubitt. After the publication of two volumes on video that discuss aspects of medium and culture (*Timeshift* [1991] and *Videography* [1993]), Cubitt's critical preoccupation with the phenomena of flow, change and instability also drives the discussion of digital media and networked communication with regard to the organization of knowledge, power and spatial relations on a global scale in the monograph *Digital Aesthetics* (1998). There, he identifies cartography as the paradigm of realism in contrast to perspective as the paradigm of special effect (perspectival vision is synthetic) that is essentially spatial because it organizes in space. (Cubitt coins the term “spatial effect.”) And finally—after publishing the comprehensive survey of simulation theories (*Simulation and Social Theory* [2001])—the masterpiece (so far) is out: A book about *The Cinema Effect* that takes in previous reflections on the instability and flow in the emergence of media, instead of identifying interruption and defining normative patterns.

Departing from still commonly held theoretical positions according to which cinema is roughly divided—that is, realism (starting with the brothers Lumière) and magic (starting with the stop-trick by Georges Méliès)—Cubitt is interested in the magic flow of effects that constitute cinema on the whole: as a visual effect of motion on the temporal raster of the “pixel;” as an effect that through the differentiation of the “cut” constructs objects in spatial and temporal relations; and as a special effect that is grounded in animation and connotes meaning, transformation and metamorphosis through the “vector,” which marks the transition from the “being” of the object (cut) to becoming “synthetic.” The book's argument lucidly develops from the beginning of the medium, where Cubitt describes three positions, namely Lumière, Méliès and

Cohl, that together contribute to the formation of the cinema effect.

The first, the “pixel,” describes the moment of movement as the first “magic” effect of cinema. This moment in the history of cinema, as the author stresses, “documents” not “life” (*la vie*) but “liveliness” (*le vif*) and is shared by the social activity of the modern *flâneur* (around 1895) and is also paralleled in the new concept of life that is divided up into work and leisure time. Thus, in understanding cinema as magic, special effect is, first of all, exemplified in the work of the brothers Lumière, who serve as the main authority behind Cubitt’s statement that cinema does not represent time but originates it. As the thorough (and for the non-expert easy to follow) discussion of theories on early cinema convincingly concludes, the Lumières’ cinema is mistakenly categorized as “documentary,” as it shows the magical transformation from life to liveliness: therein lies the magic, the speciality of cinema.

The second category that Cubitt introduces in order to liberate cinema from the dogma of realism and narrative is the “cut,” which develops with the interruption of movement through Méliès’s invention of stop-trick. In line with the previous argument that a cinematic event relates to the real but (with regard to its material condition) consists of discrete and fragmented elements, Cubitt’s secondary discussion of the cinema as the universe of the “synthetic” discloses how Méliès’s technique of stop-motion distinguishes objects from their movement. Méliès thereby constitutes the possibility of a cinematic third dimension: cinema as a spatial effect. Logically, what follows in the third section, the “vector,” is another argument for the synthetic characteristics of cinema that Cubitt identifies in the early animation films of Emile Cohl (around 1908). Clearly, here film is not narrative, not the illusion of continuous flow, but fragmentation.

All of this, pixel, cut and vector, points to the cinematic way to spatialize looking. Here, Cubitt relates to Jacques Aumont’s theories of painting, photography and film where Aumont anchors the invention of cinema in the “mobilization of gaze.” As Cubitt concludes,

At some point in the near future when historians recognize that the photochemical cinema is a brief interlude in the history of the animated image, representation will become, like narra-

tive, a subcode of interpretation rather than an essence of motion pictures (p. 97).

This view of cinema maintains the importance of a material theory of film “against narrativity.” The point, however, is that animation film is not a subcategory of cinema. Rather its essence is what determines the grounding principles for the development of any cinematic magic: a magic that involves the construction of movement from discrete entities and the perception of moving images; a magic that encompasses the extension of temporal and spatial features, and through its potential of the spatial map beats off any scholarly notion of cinema representing reality; and, finally, a magic that is open to the production of meaning. Cubitt stresses, in particular, the positive aspect of the vector principle of “becoming” (which means open-ended and mobile relationships between “subject, object, and world”), because in a world where everything turns into spectacle and data, where everything is ruled by laws of commodity, the work of art “must be positive.”

In light of this idea, the critical and political stance against narrative and realism implies an avant-garde position towards the corporate cinema that has taken over since the implementation of copyright laws. This produces the apparatus of a narrative according to the laws of commodity that are highlighted in normative Hollywood cinema. Consequently, in the two chapters “Normative Cinema” and “Post Cinema,” Cubitt discusses the stabilization of cinema that subordinates magic to narrative. Strikingly, Eisenstein’s montage of effects marks the transition from total cinema to the aesthetics and norms of totality in so-called classical film that forms the paradigm of “spectacle” in the 1930s and 1940s. Naturally the chapter that follows searches for points of resistance to the “total” cinema. But in contrast to the early days of the medium, the period of “post cinema,” as Cubitt puts it, departs from normative aesthetics and the elitism of the “sublime”; it bears the potential of becoming democratic when it follows the understanding of beauty, which is inside the world and “confronts ugliness: sickness, squalor, brutality: things that can be changed” (p. 10).

However, in “post cinema,” the explorative naivety and pioneer spirits of early cinema are gone and cinema has to struggle harder to connect to its magic. Even in mainstream films such

as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Matrix*, Cubitt finds roots and traces of the “instability of the vector,” effects that “hover between reality and unreality” (p. 350) and that are open to ethnic issues as well, such as the influence of Asian cinema effects. This constitutes another era of “cosmopolitan film.”

As its leading metaphor the new book starts with Christian Metz’s statement that “in some sense all cinema is a special effect.” What Cubitt means by the phrase expresses a counter-argument against a narrow understanding of film’s relationship to (physical) reality. “To the extent that all cinema is a special effect,” as Cubitt previously explained in *Digital Aesthetics*, “The effects film is the cinema of cinema, the cinema of a disavowal become affirmation in an astounded moment.” The concern in *The Cinema Effect*, then, is to underline the construction of a cinematic reality with its own language that functions as the mediator between the viewing subject and—what interests Cubitt—the “object of cinema.” The medium of film has always played a major role in Cubitt’s reflections on electronic and digital media when he focuses on the interplay of technological, economic, social and political factors (in short, relationships of power, knowledge and aesthetics) that drives the emergence, constitution and institutionalization of a new medium and thereby sets the frame for the unfolding of the “object” (and the specificity) of the medium in temporal and spatial terms.

In *The Cinema Effect*, Cubitt pursues the effects that cinema produces in relation to reality from the perspective of digital media and traces back the roots and conceptual history of terms that commonly are used in contemporary media language, such as pixel, cut and vector. For example, the openness of the vector includes the “subjective role” of the individual who engages in an authorship type of interrelation with the computer. Plus, the notion of transformation and metamorphosis makes the connection to the human-machine relations that we deal with in the computer age. Where Cubitt states, “The vector is the art of curiosity” (p. 85), the focus easily extends into the discussion of European “oneiric film” that in the manner of science fiction deals with the results of the atomic and post-nuclear catastrophes that the Hollywood cinema passes forward. The reader, then, is not surprised that

points of resistance that highlight instability, fragmentation and spatial effects for the most part are located in the realm of science fiction, where magic is near.

### **JAROSLAV RÖSSLER: CZECH AVANT-GARDE PHOTOGRAPHER**

edited by Vladimir Birgus and Jan Mlcoch. Derek Paton, trans. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2004. 176 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-262-02557-4.

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The formation of the modern spirit in Europe prior to World War II would have been much impoverished without the presence of the Czech avant-garde. Seminal movements from constructivism to surrealism mark the debates begun and contributions made in the evolving complex of artistic values, whether revolutionary by design or by effect.

Central to this evolution are figures in Czech photography, who we in the West are finally encountering, Jaroslav Rössler among them. A creator of first importance to the mid-1930s, Rössler's oeuvre bypasses the usual conventions of type or style without, at the same time, obscuring his interpretation of them. Commonly associated with constructivist, abstract, poetist and informal tendencies throughout his career, Rössler emerges intact, a sensibility to be reckoned with, perhaps because of his verve in sustaining an anxious tone; a critical, if disarming, poignancy in questioning why and how. His touch remains his own, as does his means of envisioning, something that was not lost on Karl Teige (the principal theoretician of Devetsil, the leading avant-garde group prior to Czech surrealism), who in 1926 placed Rössler's work above that of Man Ray—when Man Ray held a commanding influence on Czech photography.

Unlike Man Ray, however, Rössler rarely achieved success or popular notice by name, despite his charming cosmetics and other ads during the late 1920s and early 1930s. No, Rössler's path was more erratic. Beginning in 1935 and for more than 20 years, in fact, he endured an eclipse brought on by a failed suicide attempt and an

extensive depressive aftermath. His public re-emergence in 1961 in the Prague quarterly *Revue Fotografie*, then in 1966, in Brno, where he appeared in the "Surrealism and Photography" exhibit with younger colleagues, is a tribute to his uniqueness during a time when cultural liberties in the former Czechoslovakia assumed mounting social importance.

Rössler made his first photos in 1917 as a teenaged apprentice in the studio of Frantisek Dritkol, an eminent Czech photographer. Having learned his trade there, along with a fascination for new mass technologies such as radio, Rössler cultivated several techniques to provide an image concurrent with the tensions of the era, when photography would soon claim its own space exclusive of other arts. His early use of bromoil (painting by brush on glass negatives) expanded to the complete negative and gelatin silver print, then collage, photo collage, photograms (he was perhaps the first Czech to make them) and photomontage, all done with great effect in black and white. In his last decades he created superbly evocative color images.

For viewers today, circa 2004, Rössler's independence remains perhaps his greatest distinction. We would do well to make of our encounter with Rössler—a poet of the constructed image rather than a constructivist, as Mathew Witkovsky notes in his essay on Rössler; designer of abstractions infected with ambiguity and psychological charge; integral to poetism during its ascendance; celebrated by surrealists; affected by informalism—a study of the deeper struggles of the imagination and the strategies required of artists in the world we face. In this regard, I do not take Rössler's refusal to sell his major work—for which he gained the most recognition, save for what he produced as a "professional photographer" in advertising (which even then brought him irregular compensation)—as a symptom of personal conflicts alone.

With Rössler, the photographic image becomes something more than a reflection of, or window into, the reality we face. It becomes a reality that reflects what we bring to it, opening up an interaction that rarely leaves us dispassionate. The recent release of the current monograph, with 178 illustrations (134 full-size) and six important essays and chronology, returns to us a world of light, shadow, people and

objects both quotidian and hybrid whose resonance remains.

Here, then, is Jaroslav Rössler, born 1902, died 1990.

### **WENDA GU: ART FROM MIDDLE KINGDOM TO BIOLOGICAL MILLENNIUM**

edited by Mark H.C. Bessire. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2003. 230 pp., illus. ISBN: 0-262-02552-3.

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The problem with book reviews is that we are constrained by the meaning of words! There are many things in this world that words fail to describe adequately, and Gu's art is one of them. Interestingly, much of Gu's work consists of Chinese-like ideograms that are pseudo-ideograms deliberately created to transcend the traditional content of Chinese "words." As Gu says, "I felt such freedom, leaving behind the content of words" (p. 145). Having only words at my disposal, I will do my best to give the reader a feel for this magnificent book.

The book is wonderful to just glance through, but it is much more than a coffee-table presentation. It documents much of Gu's work, both through serious academic discussion and lavish color photographs. It also includes an insightful interview with this complex, unique artist by David Cateforis, professor of art history at the University of Kansas.

Gu was born in Shanghai and now lives and works in Brooklyn, with studios in Shanghai and X'ian. In the East he is Gu Wenda; in the West, Wenda Gu. This naming convention in a sense sums up Gu's work. He is constantly striving to juxtapose Eastern and Western symbols, not in a unifying sense but in transcendent third position.

Globalism has intensified ethnic difference on a local level while increasing ethnic unity on a global level. This environment . . . is referred to as "transculturalism" by Wenda Gu whose work tends to parody the role of cultural colonialist from a suspended cultural position as a citizen of a diasporan world (p. 12).

Gu, like David Suzuki and Isamu Noguchi, constantly deals with this "transculturalism," both on a personal and professional level. Gu has to consider not only minor changes in conventions such as names but also