LEONARDO REVIEWS

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AUDIO CDs

SPECIAL DELIVERY

GROUP THERAPY

Reviewed by Michael R. (Mike) Mosher, Saginaw Valley State University, University Center, MI 48710, U.S.A. E-mail: <mosher@svsu.edu>.

Novelty songwriter Jimm Juback, while listening to James Brown in 1972, predicted that black music would soon become entirely rhythm. The ensuing three-plus decades of hip-hop rap music have not proven him wrong as to the primacy of a good beat. In affirming that, two CDs from 2005 also provoke thoughts on rap as text.

Text is often used as a visual motif by Chinese contemporary artists, and Michigan photographer Shaun Bangert has covered portraits of members of her family with text. Tunsi delivers dance beat as text, as telegraphy of the body, gestural movements. One is reminded of those pages of the faux-nerd text—a sort of German blackletter and a linear electrocardiogram stutter—found in Rick Griffin’s Man from Utopia 1971 comic book for acidheads. Tunsi’s “Jump” (1991) by the Irish-American crew Ace of Bass. Tunsi provides Special Delivery in an instrumental form, like a Jamaican dub version, as well. Jubbuck’s collaborator Gary Malvin once demonstrated a simple riff, in “Gordon and Bobby,” whereas Jubbuck exclaimed that it was like the mnemonic a high-school nerd would use to memorize an electronics formula. Tunsi’s “Whoop De Do” fits that description, too, using a smart/stooidip motif as a bed for motor-mouthed braggadocio, while “Shock Pain” is powered by another, similarly engaging riff. “Politics at Work” is a promising slice of critical dance music, a genre briefly explored in Britain a quarter-century ago, as in M’s “Pop Music” or something by the Gang of Four. It is as if only bodies in movement on the dance floor can shake apart a glimpse of the inner workings of the Spectacle.

Whereas Oakland’s Tunsi appears to be a one-man production, a studio mastermind along the lines of Prince, the Elephant Tribe of Chicago is a crew. Four faces appear on the cover, which are likely b-knucklez, israel, jay and drunken monkee, for they receive the most numerous songwriting credits on the 27-track CD. Other collaborators—sharing the humility of lowercase names—include demo, rusty, shake, bacardi, brando, turon, billie and phoenix. Illiana obviously wants her name capitalized, thank you.

The Elephant Tribe’s Group Therapy CD is a mix tape,” purchased (possibly from one of the Elephant Tribe) at a table set up on Chicago’s Michigan Avenue one afternoon last August, appropriately a couple of blocks from both the Apple Computer store and Tower Records. It has a surprising variety of hip-hop approaches and plenty of good tracks. The disc is marred, though, by the rambling spoken bits attributed to Talman Greed. Perhaps he is a neighborhood character that the crew finds funny or wise, or perhaps it just is the kind of foolin’-around indulgence that maps homeboy productions like the movie Straight Out of Compton.

Beyond the good beats for dancing and grooving, the storytelling, the scene-setting and personal boasting, hip-hop is also interesting here as that textual artifact, its rap an easily visualized verbal typography, one that needs to be embodied to be appreciated. As a traveling child, I played a game of looking out the train window and pretending a motorcycle rider was rolling over land, treetops, jumping rivers and highways, beside the Chicago-bound train. Elephant Tribe’s wordplay serves as a contemporary soundtrack for that game, the train rolling through Chicago neighborhoods and their South Side home. Their boisterous effusiveness, a Hieronymus Bosch-like excess, is easy to criticize as intemperate until I recall my own college favorite writers like Hunter Thompson and Lester Bangs, none of them circumspect or terse.

The listener contrasts the Chicago posse of MCs at the mic with the Oakland guy who works as one man, one voice and one machine full of beat-making and recording software. M.K. Assante’s San Francisco Chronicle essay “We Are the Post Hip-Hop Generation” spoke of how today’s youth hear this
CONTROL AND FREEDOM: POWER AND PARANOIA IN THE AGE OF FIBER OPTICS


Reviewed by Martha Patricia Niño M., Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Facultad de Artes Visuales, Carrera 7 Number 40-62, Colombia. E-mail: <ninom@javeriana.edu.co>.

This enjoyable book examines the paradoxes of freedom in the age of fiber optics. The notion of light as knowledge, clarification, surveillance and discipline is interwoven by networks of light tubes, giving way to a literal materialization of enlightenment and at the same time serving as a metaphor of reality. There is some extent extreme but interesting discussion about concepts that we take for granted, such as freedom and liberty. The author’s position is akin to Žižek’s. There is no better way of enslavement, no better way to live a non-reflective existence than living in a free society, a free world, a free market with a free circulation of information and democracy. For him, enlightenment means “Think as much as you like, and as freely as you like, just obey!” Freedom is different from liberty. The act of liberation from an oppressive circumstance is linked to liberty, while freedom is related to mobility. If in the past people longed for “liberty, equality and fraternity,” we now speak of “freedom, democracy and free enterprise.” Freedom in our society is more a characteristic of capital than of individuals, regardless of how bourgeois they are or even exactly because of that very same condition, as Marx stated. This social shift toward a control and power society is not necessarily better or worse than a disciplinary society. These models will always have at some point internal contradictions, such as the tension between liberty and equality. Chun also implies the impossibility of full democracy in a technocratic society in which the so-called digital divide has not disappeared, and will not disappear since it is what companies use to sell themselves as “the solution.” It introduces new liberating and enslaving forces, such as the emerging digital sweatshops.

Within the text one can encounter information about widely discussed topics that are still very relevant, such as, When do we sacrifice important rights such as privacy in order to have security and to reinforce control, as with militaristic approaches and the post–September 11th terrorist paranoia. The author also notices that paranoia is not pathological anymore but something that we perceive as logical. Justifying fear has become quotidian and acceptable.

Although there is a list of technologies and descriptions of software and hardware, the core of her analysis is not based on technology or military strategies, and she clearly states that control and paranoia form parts of bigger political problems that cannot, under any circumstance, be reduced to technological ones. For that reason the research is focused instead on the roles of race and sexuality in the rich and complex interactions between freedom and control. These discourses are symptomatic of larger changes in bio-power. The Internet is sometimes advertised as a utopian place in which there is no gender, age, infirmity or other ways to be excluded. This is problematical, in particular when it is portrayed as a race-free utopia, because it ends up solidifying the stereotypes that it claims to erase. New media constructs notions of race that, as Mongrel states, are more than simple indexes of biological and cultural sameness; sometimes ethnic conflicts are also carefully constructed. Race is a complex mental image that sometimes depicts the fear of otherness, since sometimes it is built upon harmful stereotypes. Some of the constructions about others also have colonial and conquest strategies. The chapter “Orienting the Future” is particularly insightful, in that it has interesting criticism of nerd-cool cyberpunk literature, such as Neuromancer, a narrative with high-tech Orientalism that projects exotic and erotic fantasies highlighting the anxieties about the “impotence” of Western culture. It is not surprising that the main character, Case, is a primitive, enmeshed and suicidal cyber-cowboy. In a similar way, cyberspace is a sensuous consensual hallucination, an addiction so powerful that one turns to drugs to get over it. For Burroughs, just as for Norbert Wiener, all language is about commands in order to control people but it also implies free will. Burroughs’s own addiction made him the perfect visionary of an age in which the body is the main battlefield. In a similar way, sexuality has been associated with relationships of power, viruses and pornography, all discourses that dominate descriptions of networked contact to the point of talking of pornocracy.

The study in Orientalism also includes Mamoru Oshii’s Ghost in the Shell, always taking into account the construction of both identity and otherness, through complex examples such as how Neuromancer and Ghost in the Shell create an “East” in order to create cyberspace. One difference is that U.S. cyberpunk depicts a Japanese future in order to register a forthcoming time that has become worse, inhospitable, dangerous and thrilling. Meanwhile, cyberpunk anime perpetuates “Japanese” (not actually Japanese but a created, stereotyped image) in order to place the blame for the future’s problems on U.S. multinationals.

Too numerous to list are the book’s many relevant comments about investigations and inquiries regarding the important contemporary issues of control, freedom and paranoia. The author’s fresh and intelligent perspective makes us also reflect upon subjectivity and identity. Useful information can be found at <www.controlandfreedom.net/>.
**The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression**


Reviewed by Jan Baetens, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Faculty of Arts, Blijde Inkomststraat 21, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. E-mail: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.be>.

The Aesthetics of Disengagement is an innovative and challenging, yet not totally unproblematic book that raises important questions on contemporary art and aesthetics as well as on the relationships between art and science. It claims, first, that contemporary art displays a specific regime of attention and perception and, thus, of the aesthetic interaction with the object and the world; and second, that it intervenes in a very active way in the ongoing scientific debate on the nature of depression. More specifically, the book argues that, in the field of aesthetics, contemporary art's fascination with depression introduces a dramatic modification of what happens between the audience and the world, bringing to the fore a characteristic lack or incapability of interacting with the other. In the scientific discussions on depression, Ross makes a plea against the currently prevailing dementalization of depression and perception and, thus, of the aesthetic interaction with the object and the world.

In a series of well-documented close readings, Ross demonstrates how contemporary artists, such as Ugo Rondinone, Vanessa Beecroft, Douglas Gordon and Liza May Post, *enact* what is going on in depression. This enactment, moreover, is not just descriptive but performative (in the sense used by Judith Butler) and forces the audience to experience what resides in the heart of the depressive state of mind. Yet this is only half the story, for Ross argues that the aesthetic of disengagement is also critical, both of traditional aesthetics and of society. Disengagement is critical of aesthetics, for it denounces the latter's incapacity to deal with the contemporary social problem of depression (according to the most recent statistics, half of the world's population will suffer some depressive disorder at some point in their lifetimes). However, it is even more critical of contemporary medical science, which refuses to take into account the mental and psychological dimension of depression. For Ross, the contemporary medical *dosa* on depression is characterized by two axioms: (a) physicians apply a "summary semiology" (a term coined by French psychoanalyst Pierre Fédida), that is, a mere description of symptoms without any interpretation; (b) they defend a strictly biological and pharmaceutical treatment of the illness that refuses to make room for mental, psychological and psychoanalytical aspects of the patient's symptoms. In these debates, contemporary art's enactment of depression plays a key role, for it intervenes in each of the two questions (the aesthetic one and the medical one) put forward by Ross. The art of disengagement proposes "thick" images that cannot be reduced to mere symptoms but have to be experienced in a subjective and mental way, even if this experience emphasizes the very difficulties of establishing a satisfying relationship with a work of art. On the one hand, the artistic symptom resists any "summary semiology." On the other hand, it also reintroduces the mental and psychological dimension of the depressive experience.

The Aesthetics of Disengagement raises fundamental questions that are a welcome contribution to basic discussions on aesthetics (attention, absorption, the role of the self, the relationships between art and science, the place of melancholia today, etc.), and Ross's demonstration is, globally speaking, quite convincing. In some other respects, however, the book falls prey to a certain instrumentalization of art. Throughout the different chapters, one has the impression that what is at stake for Ross is in the very first place a critique of contemporary medicalization of depression, and the role of art is merely to produce arguments for those who, like Ross and many others in the field, attempt to save psychoanalysis from the attacks of the biomedical lobby of Prozac & Co. This stance—which is, of course, legitimate in itself—may explain why the author is not always very critical of the artists and works she is discussing here. One may wonder if it suffices to be critical of modernist ideals of absorption, melancholia, distance, self-construction, etc., to produce interesting art. To say that contemporary depressive art aims at criticizing this type of aesthetics may not be enough to take away all skepticism. Or to put it in other words: Is it not too easy to discuss depressive boredom in works that are very boring themselves, for instance? Is it really impossible to articulate the art of depression, hence, means the impossibility to establish any traditional aesthetic relationship whatsoever, since such a relationship is characterized by exactly what is missing in depression: the orientation toward the outside and the building of oneself through perception of the other, dialogue with the other, critique of the other. Disengagement, it should be clear, is the opposite of absorption, i.e. the aesthetic state of mind imposed by modern art, to follow the famous analysis by Michael Fried.

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depression with traditional aesthetics? Or is art relational to such an extent that it cannot, by definition, really enact the loss of relationships meant by depression?

In her book Ross discusses with much empathy the ideas of Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Richard Shusterman on art as relationship. Yet she also seems to suggest that the positions of these two “relationists,” although a necessary critique of modernist abstraction and idealist hermeneutics, do not provide a viable road for the art of depression. One may close this book with the idea that the major challenge of tomorrow’s art of depression (for depression is here to stay) lies not in the enactment of the new “negative” aesthetics of disengagement but in a new “constructive” confrontation with the traditional aesthetics of perception, self, object-hood and distance.

**THE COMMERCIAL AND POLITICAL ATLAS AND STATISTICAL BREVIARY**


Reviewed by Stefaan Van Ryssen, Hogeschool Gent, Belgium. E-mail: <stefaan.vanryssen@hogent.be>.

The name of William Playfair probably will not ring a bell with any reader not versed in the history of statistics. And let’s be honest: Statistics is not a popular sport anyway, so who would want to delve into its arcane beginnings? Some people do. For those who do not, no apology is needed if one knows only the names of Petty, Pearson, Kendall and perhaps Quetelet. Why, then, would one add Playfair to the list?

There are two reasons for doing so, a serious one and a frivolous one. Let’s start with the latter. William Playfair was the son of the enlightened Reverend Playfair and had an interest in math, engineering, the sciences and practically anything an 18th-century Scottish minister with an education would want his sons to know. When William was a child, his elder brother, who gave him tasks such as charting daily temperatures and rainfall, stimulated young William’s intelligence and skills. He soon became an apprentice with the famous engineer James Watt and his partner William Boulton and started on a career as engineer and publisher. Always short of money, he set up one grand scheme after another, failing as often as not to wring some money from the world’s grandees on both sides of the Channel. He had to run from pre-Revolutionary France, escaped conviction in several lawsuits, and made himself impossible with practically everybody. Engineer by trade, he imagined himself a writer and published numerous books, most of them not really well received because of his too-outspoken opinions and his personal attacks. His life’s story reads like a Dumas novel without the love affairs.

There is also a serious reason why one should remember Playfair: He was the first author to use graphical representations to illustrate economic variables. Up until the end of the 18th and even during the first half of the 19th century, economic figures were invariably presented in tabular form. Precision and accuracy were more important than ease of reading. Pictures or illustrations were deemed imprecise and unreliable. Playfair brushed aside all arguments (including James Watt’s!) against visualization of abstract quantities and developed several techniques for representing populations, revenues, imports and exports, and balances of payments. Using engraving, etching and—depending on his fiscal situation—coloring by hand, he managed to include as many as 43 charts in his first edition of *The Commercial and Political Atlas* (1786). Single-handedly, Playfair set the standards for the layout of pie charts, bar charts and timelines, even if he sometimes had to use just a trifile too much of his imagination to fill in the blanks where he lacked the necessary data.

Cambridge University Press chose to publish a facsimile of the third edition of the *Atlas* and of *The Statistical Breviary, shewing, on a principle entirely new, The Resources of every State and Kingdom in Europe; illustrated with Stained Copper-plate Charts, representing the physical power of each distinct nation with ease and perspicuity*. The content of these books is clearly outdated, and Playfair’s commentary to the charts is funny rather than economically sound, but the illustrations are breathtaking—given the fact that this was the first time they had been used for this kind of data.

The book is bound in cloth and printed on a beige-ish paper, which makes the charts look very ancient indeed. It has an insightful and very readable introduction by editors Howard Wainer and Ian Spence. Let’s hope William Playfair gets credited for his invention each time we use our favorite spreadsheet to construct a chart. The unfortunate man surely deserves some posthumous fame.

**FEINTES_DOUTES + FICTIONS: REFLEXIONS SUR LA PHOTOGRAPHIE NUMERIQUE**


Reviewed by Jan Baetens, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Faculty of Arts, Blijde Inkomistraat 21, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. E-mail: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.be>.

This collection of essays and pictures has a twofold structure and a double aim. On the one hand, it contains a series of images by Canadian-based artists (Holly Marie Armishaw, Nicolas Baier, Ivan Binet, Marcel Blouin, Robin Collyer, Isabelle Hayer, Bettina Hoffmann and Yoko Takashima). All these artists, who have displayed in the past a certain concern for technology, take on the new conceptual possibilities that digital photography offers. On the other hand, it includes, in addition to an article by Sylvie Parent, who delivers a comment on each artist, five rather short essays on the various challenges—aesthetic, philosophical, ethical, etc.—raised by the digital revolution. All these texts are also by Canadian scholars. The publication is partly bilingual. The essays are either in French (Olivier Clain, Thomas De Koninck, Alain Paiement) or in English (Robert Bean, George Legrady), with an abstract in the other language. This double structure is also reflected in the book’s program, which aims to display contemporary creative work as well as to offer new insights on digital photography. As the title of the book suggests, its basic claim is that digital photography introduces a fundamental suspicion toward the photographic medium, which has been deprived of its fundamental indexical properties. Yet if photography’s fictionalization is strongly underlined in most of the accompanying texts, this revolution is not really what appears in the images of the book.

This is not only because the selection is limited to contemporary photog-
Art and Technoculture traces the shifts, developments, dead ends and breakthroughs in this dynamic area of studio, laboratory and street-culture activity. It develops from previous energies of the 1970s—from the publication Radical Software’s use of the term media ecology; through exploring the early formal photographic work of the artist John Hilliard; to the more recent work of Heath Bunting, whose web sites test our civil and social loyalties by enabling interaction with surveillance cameras hijacked off the Internet. Fuller’s tone is agitational rather than methodological. The pitch builds upon selected cultural, political and philosophical treatises—from Nietzsche through Alfred North Whitehead’s Science and the Modern World (1938) to Foucault, Negri and Deleuze and Guattari.

The image of the itinerant metallurgist, moving to where the materials, the conditions and the needs are situated, the machinic phylum of A Thousand Plateaus, “allows thought to enter a thicker relationship with practice, with materials of expression, their constitution of effect.” Materials such as the low-power FM transmitter, used (illegally) in districts of London as a part of hip-hop culture, are tempered with the more mundane official documents that trace the management of a key material of modernity, radio waves (again the subject of 1970s activism for community-based radio and television). The machinic tools of turntable and microphone, of voice and drugs, the issues of redundancy and entropy bent out of shape to produce heard stuff, are crafted through parts of the text into a prose refracting the central issues of cultural traction. Reflection by the reader is a requirement here, as this is no quickly absorbed account. Discussion of mobile (phone) cultures moves back into more familiar range, with J.J. Gibson’s views about technology driving cultural change being echoed where frameworks and affordances provide for consumers and hackers opportunity to patch their gadgets, from which emerge meaningful “dimensions of relationality.” Braced between the representation of materiality in Hilliard’s choreographed A Camera Recording Its Own Condition (7 apertures, 10 speeds, 2 mirrors) and the materiality of what is heard

prophets who forecast a participatory rather than a passive audience in the near future. How wrong they were.


Reviewed by Mike Leggett, University of Technology Sydney, Australia. E-mail: <legart@ozemail.com.au>.

“Art, as much as science, often attempts to put an enclosure around a sequence, a process, in order to isolate it as material to be inspected in a certain way, as distinct. Name a system, exhaust its permutations.”

Aphorisms of this kind pepper Matthew Fuller’s account of the interplay of expressive electronic media forms through the period of millennial change for creative people, both producers and audiences. Characteristically, the statement can be taken to be both a pungent critique and benign observation. As critique, it suggests practitioners and researchers cynically delineate territory through which they career for their individual professional and economic benefit. As an observation, it is a reasonable description of the approach so many, the altruistic together with the avaricious, take to dealing with complexity—far better, perhaps, to deal with a part of the world in depth than drown in unrelated details.

Ecological systems of biological interdependency are less than 50 years old in the public mind, during which time we have experienced the impact of systems of information and communications technology (ICT). Indeed radio and television have been largely responsible for disseminating information about the biological domains, presenting us with the shape of an image we now refer to as ecology—it enables us “to think through the patterns of mutuality, dependency, fuelling, parasitism, etc. in a system, and between overlapping systems,” as the Australian publisher Keith Gallash wrote recently.

Audiences eager for arts information and criticism increasingly seek alternatives to a challenged mass media, whether in street papers, magazines, web sites or blogs, and above all, in combinations of these. A decade ago the commercial media mocked
when a microphone and loudspeaker are in close proximity is the full range of vectored expression between affirmation and interference, autopoiesis and intervention. In The Switch, a community-based installation by Jakob Jakobson, the street lighting in a cul-de-sac in Denmark involved 40 households in determining each night at what point the lighting would be switched on or off. What flowed was unpredictable.

Less so the rhetoric of BITRadio data interventions over WNYC at the WEF. This is straightforward reading, but not so the penultimate chapter, “Seams, Memes, and Flecks of Identity.” Covering boundaries, variable and events, it is also the longest chapter, zipping between ideas and artifacts at a breathless rate: Dawkins to packet-switching; Chaosmosis to New Slovenian Kunst collective; TCP/IP to A Media Art (Manifesto) from the 1960s; Jennicam to Albert Speer. Unlike Sergeant Pepper, however, Fuller keeps our gaze directed at the threatening oppressive backdrop, always changing but always present—then the camps of totalitarianism, now the interned refugees and terror suspects. For the rest of us, “In the meantime, there are plenty of forms to fill in, some buttons to press,” some faxes to send. The short final chapter deepens the auto-reflective stance taken by the writer, seemingly conscious that the ride has been a demanding one but determined to resist the temptation to prescribe or predict progression—apart from a few cases—and fascinating case studies they are. I discovered the somewhat strange reception of heavy metal additions in Nepali pop music by the urban middle and upper classes of Kathmandu—they appear to take them as eminently suitable for a good love song (see the article by Paul Greene). I enjoyed the analysis of the complex technological issues involved in samba ride, the samba contest at Rio Carnival, and its effects on the production of CDs and cassettes with samba music (in the essay by Frederick J. Moehn). The technical and spectroscopic analysis of heavy-metal music—some of my youth and some more recent—brought me new insights into the meaning of “timbre” and its shifting reception by listeners (Cornelia Fales and Harris Berger). Jeremy Wallach made me listen (again) to Indonesian pop and made me think again about the meaning of “authentic” in indigenous or aboriginal music. So did Beverley Diamond with her description of some practices in the studios where Native Americans record their songs.

It does not happen often that I find myself breathlessly reading a series of ethnomusicological essays, and I assume the editors had a hand in restraining the authors from too much speculation and (postmodern) phraseology. So: three amps for the editors: May their voices be heard more often and more loudly— with the appropriate accompaniment and reverb, of course. Also be sure to stay close to your favorite search engine so you can find and download, legally or otherwise, some of the music discussed in the essays. You will be listening with new ears.

**Cuts: Texts 1959–2004**


Reviewed by Alise Pielbala.

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**Wired for Sound:**

**Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures**


Reviewed by Stefaan Van Ryssen, Hogeschool Gent, Belgium.

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Over the past decade, a number of studies by sociomusicologists, ethnographers and anthropologists have shown that the most important single instrument in popular music has become the mixing console and its technical extensions: synthesizer, drumbox, amps, recording platforms, etc. Producers and engineers have gradually taken more control over the final result that actually reaches the audiences of bands and singers through airplay, audio CD, cassette and the Internet. Even at concerts, the “sound” is seldom heard unmediated or entirely “acoustically.” The obvious question when we think about this evolution is: How and in what measure are (even sometimes unnamed) technicians and engineers influencing the creative process itself? Or, to what degree have they supplanted the musicians in the artistic creation? Has the producer become composer also?

In this collection of essays, these questions are taken even a step further. The editors and authors simply take the important and sometimes dominant role of the masters of the mixing console as a given and are looking at the societal effects of this shift in relations in the recording studios. How do the choices of engineers and technicians create new musical and social meanings for the various audiences? There is no single, simple answer to this question, and it is only one of the many merits of this collection that none of the authors tries to jump to general conclusions from the analysis of one or a few cases—and fascinating case studies they are. I discovered the somewhat strange reception of heavy metal additions in Nepali pop music by the urban middle and upper classes of Kathmandu—they appear to take them as eminently suitable for a good love song (see the article by Paul Greene). I enjoyed the analysis of the complex technological issues involved in samba ride, the samba contest at Rio Carnival, and its effects on the production of CDs and cassettes with samba music (in the essay by Frederick J. Moehn). The technical and spectroscopic analysis of heavy-metal music—some of my youth and some more recent—brought me new insights into the meaning of “timbre” and its shifting reception by listeners (Cornelia Fales and Harris Berger). Jeremy Wallach made me listen (again) to Indonesian pop and made me think again about the meaning of “authentic” in indigenous or aboriginal music. So did Beverley Diamond with her description of some practices in the studios where Native Americans record their songs.

It does not happen often that I find myself breathlessly reading a series of ethnomusicological essays, and I assume the editors had a hand in restraining the authors from too much speculation and (postmodern) phraseology. So: three amps for the editors: May their voices be heard more often and more loudly—with the appropriate accompaniment and reverb, of course. Also be sure to stay close to your favorite search engine so you can find and download, legally or otherwise, some of the music discussed in the essays. You will be listening with new ears.
Carl Andre is arguably one of the most discussed and re-interpreted artists of modern times. His *Equivalent VIII*, acquired by the Tate for £4,000, is still a vital building block in discussions on the role of art and public spending. *Cuts*, a compilation of interviews, texts, letters and poems authored by Carl Andre and edited by James Meyer, offers a unique opportunity to gain a much more accurate, firsthand impression of the artist, his sculptural installations and his poetry.

The book is divided alphabetically into subject headings, ranging from Art, Capitalism, Painting and Poetry to Marcel Duchamp, Frank Stella and the artist’s hometown of Quincy. Each subject heading contains various types of texts: interviews, letters, poetry and short epigrams and maxims. The nature of these texts, however, being private correspondences, published and unpublished letters and statements, means that the tone of the book is never assuming or ostentatious; instead it evokes reflection and meditation, forming an unofficial conversation with the reader. The lighthearted tone is reaffirmed with the inclusion of short epigrams along with some witty letters to individuals and publishers.

The texts have been laid out with consideration: the more intellectually challenging ones, such as the correspondences between Carl Andre and his close friend filmmaker Hollis Frampton, include “On Sculpture and Consecutive Matters” and “On A Journey to Philadelphia and Other Consecutive Matters.” The particular focus of the latter were Marcel Duchamp and his *Large Glass* and Auguste Rodin’s *Gate of Hell*, interconnected with short and concise statements on the nature of art, particularly sculpture and literature. Notably evocative are the sections on Quincy, the artist’s hometown, where Andre describes his first inspirations drawn from the dockyard and the quarry, his reflections on life as an artist in New York and friendships with Hollis Frampton and the famous painter Frank Stella. Despite Andre’s own distrust of photographs, all of the sections of this book are supported with images of his work, himself and the surroundings discussed.

Andre’s planar poetry—arrangements and rearrangements of letters and words in various patterns—weaves throughout the book. It is remarkable on how many levels these poems can be enjoyed; they have the aesthetics of a complex mathematical problem and the gravitational pull of a word game, as each letter gains its own autonomy and participates as an essential but independent particle within the pattern. The inclusion of these literary works and discussions on poetry not only illustrates the multidimensionality, commitment and thoroughness of Carl Andre’s creative output but also helps to complete and round off the perception of the artist and his sculptural contributions to the world of art.

*Cuts* is more than just an account of one artist’s artistic practice; it is an insight into an act of creation, from the first inspirations to late-night discussions and tough interviews. It lays bare the fallacy of the artist-as-inspired-genius myth and exposes the intellectual and physical work and the need for persistence and in-depth knowledge about the works of others. This compilation of interviews, correspondences, reflections and poems is an intimate introduction to the artist, his works and the art world in general.

**PERCEPTION AND ILLUSION: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**


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Recently, with the introduction of visual culture studies into the academic curricula of many universities, the art, science and technology agenda has received greater exposure. Seeing the proliferation of images within contemporary culture, scholars within this broad academic field have taken on as their mission an investigation of the production, form and reception of images past and present. As a result, visual culture studies have re-defined some of the basic tenets of art history, reconfiguring the text-driven approach put in place through the efforts of men like Alberti and Vasari. Most noticeably, visual culture scholars have probed the long and contested history of word/image relations. Some have developed a keen awareness of visual phenomena in all of their gradations. Others have shown that practitioners were apt to integrate, borrow and push to the limit the technologies that aided research, as is evident in examination of 19th-century entertainment (e.g. the fascination with pinhole cameras and stereoscopes) and in the many digitally based presentations of today. Visual culture theorists have also worked with sight in all of its permutations, examining hypotheses related to vision and a number of historical figures whose influence stretches far beyond the parameters of any single field. Visual culture literature demonstrates this sweep well. In it, we find abundant reference to Plato, the *Ut Pictura Poesis* tradition, perspective theory, Lessing, Kant, stereoscopic experimentation and so forth. It is also clear that the field has raised several questions. These include: What is visual history? How did the philosophical legacies of earlier thinkers influence our thoughts about images? To what extent are the contributions of historical eras relevant to our work today? How do art, science and the humanities integrate their evolving schemata within the cultural framework?
What has been missing, however, is a comprehensive, scientifically grounded study to aid the field in developing an understanding of the history of the scientific investigations of the eye, the brain, how we see, what we see and why our ability to see raises so many fascinating questions about sight, vision, and illusion generally. Nicholas J. Wade’s *Perception and Illusion: Historical Perspectives* fulfills this need. His overview, which is focused on empirical advancements rather than the more elusive humanistic concerns of visual culture theorists, is the first volume in the Library of the History of Psychological Theories Series (edited by Robert W. Reiber). Wade treats perception, and principally vision, as an observational discipline. He clarifies the vagaries of visual experience and why they compel our studies. As he explains, the emphasis on errors of perception might appear to be a narrow approach but, in fact, it encompasses virtually all perceptual research from the ancients to the present. Moreover, as this volume illuminates, the constancies of perception have been taken for granted, whereas departures from constancies have fostered fascination. Wade also demonstrates that perceptual research includes threshold measurement and experiment.

This far-reaching, authoritative and insightful survey examines the variable nature of our perceptual experiences from a number of angles. The author introduces particular aspects of seeing (e.g. the way colors can be modified by their surroundings and that motion aftereffects can make us believe that objects are moving despite our knowledge that they are motionless), and outlines historical tensions between theoretical and experimental methods. Surveying over two millennia of research, Wade, a professor of psychology at the University of Dundee, brings a firm footing to earlier research into the human fascination with perception and presents a broad picture of how the urge to know more has influenced the cultural milieu. Moreover, he has a knack for capturing the importance of incremental discoveries in the overall scheme of investigations and for threading the large and small questions into a unified framework. Thus he conveys that science involves recording and interpreting natural phenomena.

One exceptional aspect of the survey is the author’s remarkable sensitivity to the interface of science and philosophy. This comes through as he traces the history of sight and how visual phenomena raised questions that address the close relationship between vision, light and sight. The volume captures these threads, which wind through the historical story, and brings to the fore issues that are reframed from era to era. We also see that at times new questions emerge. For example, as Wade explains, the distinction between light and sight was not seriously entertained until Kepler described the optical properties of the eye early in the 17th century. Indeed, Kepler’s work is one touchstone throughout the volume (because he formulated the problem that generations of students of vision have attempted to resolve: How do we perceive the world as three-dimensional on the basis of a two-dimensional retinal image?).

Reading through the text, I was particularly taken with the historical sweep of the volume. Theories of light, sight and illusion are described, from early naturalistic observations to sophisticated contemporary experiments so frequently intertwined with art commentary today. The careful clarification of the experimental compared to the philosophical arguments that we can identify within various time frames—and across them—brings to mind that natural philosophy was an approach that included science and philosophy under one umbrella prior to the 19th century. Moreover, Wade’s ability to balance the parameters of historical and contemporary perspectives allows the reader to see that optics, physiology and ophthalmology emerged from tradition and dogma. It also becomes clear that laboratory research continues to expand our knowledge of vision, how the eye works, views of the brain, perceptual anomalies, etc. One plus is Wade’s extensive integration of quotations from the primary documents of all periods. This captures the mindset of historical episodes that were quite unlike our own. Wade also makes it clear that certain visual problems were under examination throughout several centuries, whereas others were addressed for the first time during a particular time-period. The sum total brings together a comprehensive cast of characters that includes (among others) Plato, Euclid, Alhazen, Descartes, Kant, Young, Bell, Wheatstone, Brewster, Müller, Helmholtz, Gibson, Julesz and Marr. Finally, and ironically, the omission of images in this study brings to mind that the tension between words and images, so evident historically, is often sustained in contemporary publications. Indeed, one of the themes within visual culture studies today is that the elevation of text was largely the result of the word-based communication of earlier eras. While I did not feel that *Perception and Illusion* suffered from the lack of visual documentation, I was aware of the omission, particularly in light of the many reproductions found in other Wade publications. Still, as it stands, this work adds a great deal to recent literature in the history of science related to vision (e.g. David Lindberg’s *Theories of Vision: From Al-Kindi to Kepler* [1] and Catherine Wilson’s *The Invisible World* [2]).

A short review can hardly begin to touch the breadth of research within this volume. Suffice it to say that I will revisit this book in the future. During my initial reading, I concentrated on areas of particular interest to my own research. I was impressed with Wade’s attention to the instrumental devices and philosophical toys of the 19th century, his overview of the foundation of psychophysics and the references to visual illusions. Indeed, given Wade’s ability to convey visual research, I am certain to refer to the book on many occasions when pursuing future projects. I also recommend this volume to scientists, humanists and those in the arts who work with vision. Moreover, I would especially urge those in the humanities to read it closely. Too many visual-culture theorists have settled into a boilerplate story that would benefit immensely from the details included in Wade’s in-depth approach.

References

**Peter Tscherkassky**


Reviewed by Eugene Thacker, School of Literature, Communication & Culture, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332-0165, U.S.A.

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Once, when I was at a media festival in Germany, someone told me that the “avant-garde” response to digital media consisted of two kinds: that which derived from Michael Snow and that which derived from Stan Brakhage (or was it Peter Kubelka? ...). I thought the statement was rather weird, though generous, given that Snow was actually in attendance at the festival and that a great deal of the new film work being shown was heavily formalist. Nevertheless, I assume the person meant that these two trajectories in avant-garde cinema—one formal and “structural,” the other material and, well, “destructural”—have had a resurgence in the era of digital film, digital video, Flash, Director and so on. Not being a film scholar, I let the statement pass on.

I was reminded of these thoughts, however, when I first saw a suggestively titled short film called *Outer Space*. It was on a DVD that I rented, along with other contemporary avant-garde shorts, all of which reinvented or re-purposed the horror genre in some way. I remember being completely taken by this film, the director of which had a long name that, for the longest time after returning the DVD, I was always forgetting or getting wrong. The director, of course, was (and is) Peter Tscherkassky. The film— *Outer Space*—made such an impression on me primarily because I was totally engaged in the film while, at the same time, totally aware of the film—as film. Now, this is arguably a characteristic of all avant-garde film, at once bringing the viewer in while at the same time disrupting this same immersion through the use of techniques both standard and nonstandard. But *Outer Space*, like Tscherkassky’s other films, is very “digital”—and yet made by cutting and splicing 35mm film.

Let me stick with *Outer Space*, since it is the film with which I am most familiar. It constitutes part of a “Cinematic” trilogy in black and white. The film itself is mostly appropriated from a 1983 horror film *The Entity* (starring Barbara Hershey), in which a woman is attacked by an invisible ghost. Tscherkassky radically re-works the original, and what results is a 15-minute hallucinatory piece that can only be described as filmic demonology. “Invasions” of all sorts occupy the film, and the frames from the original begin to reference other genres, including science fiction, the psychological thriller, even, in a strange way, melodrama. The way in which *Outer Space* does this, however, is through the intrusion of film itself into the film. There are many struggles: between narrative and abstraction, between the woman and the film material itself, and, as editor Horwath notes, a struggle for space—the space of photography, the space of film. But Man Ray and Vertov haunt this piece.

*Outer Space* is nearly film. I say this in a double sense: it presents us with fragments of a narrative, from which we can glean only the most general affects (violence, possession, the demonic), but we do not know what the story is (or the plot, for that matter). It is also “nearly” a film because, as a medium, the film itself seems to be constantly on the verge of “breaking down” (can the material of film have a nervous breakdown?), always unstable, skittish, frenetic. Nearly a narrative, nearly a medium. *Outer Space* is, however, only *part* of Tscherkassky’s overall output. This monograph devotes considerable space to Tscherkassky’s early Super-8 shorts and his interest in body and performance, as well as to his interest in psychoanalysis, music, avant-garde film and appropriation.

I have been wishing that a DVD collection of Tscherkassky’s work might be made available (with the appropriate region code ...), but in the meantime I have been paged through the monograph of his work, recently published by Synema/Filmuseum. The book contains extensive documentation of Tscherkassky’s films, including several sections of high-quality, glossy color stills. The essays—in German and English—include an introduction to Tscherkassky’s work by editor Horwath (contextualizing his work in relation to avant-garde film), and a fascinating essay by Drehli Robnik (a reading of Tscherkassky’s *Instructions for a Light and Sound Machine* as a “messianic materialism”), and an extensive, personal meditation on photography and film by Tscherkassky himself. So, until the DVD is released, this will be more than enough to occupy my interests.

To return to my opening: Tscherkassky’s “response” to digital media is not simply one of digital formalism, nor is it one of a nostalgic “return” to the purity of film itself. There is always a struggle with the medium, as if the materiality of the medium always divulges a “resistance” to the process of film-making. If anything, I would say that Tscherkassky’s recent work evokes a sense of film and photography as always going outside itself, as extrinsic.
The centrality of play lends games to more utilitarian ends. The most obvious of these ends is educational, although Jos de Mul offers a compelling investigation (drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur) of “the way computer games construct our identity” (p. 251).

Mark Griffiths’s chapter breaks the stereotype of games as “shoot-em-ups.” His chapter (“The Therapeutic Value of Video Games”) includes examples of gaming in pain relief, rehabilitation, development of social and communication skills, tackling attention deficit syndrome and care for the elderly.

Play can also be harmful, and much of the research is based on empirical studies of audience reception. Given the demographics, this focuses on developmental issues such as the effect of violent games. The concluding chapters introduce a sociological dimension to the analysis. These see games in terms of gender (e.g. Birgit Richard and Jutta Zaremba) and political intervention (e.g. the “Ethnic Cleansing” game, p. 319), including race (e.g. Anna Everett).

Authors tackle these issues with authority and balance. Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter conclude that “it is important to see . . . beyond the game text, and that an overly deterministic approach to the construction and influence of gender is restrictive” (p. 307). “Games as Social Phenomenon” ends this solid work. Like other sections, it offers a prescient and multidisciplinary perspective on computer games. Well-written and authoritative, it is one to recommend for your library.

**CONFERENCES**

**ASSOCIATION FOR THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF CONSCIOUSNESS, 10TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

St. Anne’s College, Oxford, U.K.,
23–26 June 2006.

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In its recent 125th-anniversary edition, *Science* magazine listed the top 25 questions still to be resolved by science. The understanding of the biological basis of consciousness was placed second in importance only to the question of what the universe is made of. This explosion of interest in the study of consciousness over recent years is all the more remarkable given that it was seen as a topic barely suitable for scientific investigation just a couple of decades ago. Even now there are some who consign such research to the fringes of scientific acceptability. Nevertheless, it is clear from the 10th Annual Conference of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness (ASSC) that the problem is attracting some of the most advanced investigators and thinkers working today, many of whom presented their latest research to the 300 or so attendees.

Although the conference is primarily scientific in purpose, there were a good number of philosophical contributions. Indeed the proceedings were initiated with a talk from Daniel Dennett, author of *Consciousness Explained* and recently elected president of the ASSC. In the fitting surroundings of the Natural History Museum in Oxford, he drew an analogy between the gradual evolution of biological species and the emergence of conscious thoughts, arguing that at no specific time or in no specific place can one say that a particular species or thought occurs. Each event, he claimed, is embedded in a wider temporal process that relies on the dynamic organization of sub-events, none of which in itself constitutes the larger property in question. For Dennett, the personal mind is organized from numerous “sub-personal” or “robotic” neurological events, which are distributed in time and space and act collectively to produce conscious experience. This collective activity supports a kind of “fame-in-the-brain” or “cerebral celebrity” for those mental events we are aware of—these being Dennett’s metaphors for the general propagation of conscious thoughts throughout our cognitive architecture.

It was a philosophical argument, made with reference to certain empirical data but nevertheless pointing to the deep conceptual problems we face in understanding the very thing with which we understand things, namely the mind.

Such introspection, however, was entirely absent from many of the scientific talks, which largely consisted of the presentation of experimental data that tended to measure degrees of “awareness” rather than states of “consciousness.” The neuroscientist John Driver, for instance, presented research on cross-modal sensation and its effect on spatial awareness in which he showed that the ability to determine the position of particular tactile stimuli on the body is affected by visual and auditory cues. To give a simple example, it is harder to report which hand is being...
stimulated when both are placed close together compared to when they are far apart. As Driver demonstrated, much evidence has accrued in recent years to support this cross-modal view of perception, in which each sensory pathway is significantly modulated by other pathways, with the consequence that the conventional notion that we experience the world through distinct senses is no longer tenable. The long-term aim of much research in the field is to discover some neurological basis for conscious experience, the so-called neural correlates of consciousness. Recent interest has focused on the “recurrent processing” that occurs when neural impulses from higher processing areas in the brain are relayed to earlier processing centers from which they originated. The presence of this kind of internal feedback in the visual system can be shown to closely correlate with the subject’s awareness of a particular event, and both Victor Lamme and Vincent Walsh presented experiments and arguments that supported this view in the first symposium. As was made clear, however, although recurrent processing seems necessary for visual awareness, the question remains open whether it is also sufficient.

Christof Koch, one of the leading figures in consciousness research, picked up the neural-correlate theme in his contribution to the second symposium. Koch is currently conducting research that uses ultra-fine electrodes to record specific neural signals in human subjects. Intriguingly, he and his team have found that very particular cells responded to very specific stimuli. For example, in one subject a certain cell would respond consistently to images of the actress Halle Berry, even wearing different clothes and even to the text spelling out her name. Another cell would respond in a similar way to images of Jennifer Aniston, but would not fire when she was shown paired with Brad Pitt. Again it is somewhat of an open question what exactly this can tell us about the way our minds work, although some have seen in this research the sinister beginnings of a mind-reading technology that calculates our thoughts from particular “fingerprints” of neural activity. Koch was also very excited about the potential for genetically engineered neurons, which are currently being developed for controlling and studying neural behavior.

Witnessing the quantity and quality of experimental data being generated in neuroscience labs around the world, one gets the impression that science, not philosophy, is making all the headway in consciousness research. In fact, on more than one occasion the question was raised of what role philosophy might have to play in the future of the field. For those of us committed to an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge generation, it is alarming to think we might all be left babbling about in science’s wake, struggling to absorb the masses of increasingly intricate data, much of which is yet to be fully understood by those producing it, let alone anyone else. The philosopher Dan Lloyd—well known for his thriller novel about consciousness, Radiant Cool—suggested that the current enthusiasm for studying the brain by using momentary snapshots taken with magnetic scanners might mislead us about the true nature of what the brain is doing. The working assumption in such techniques is that the slices of brain activity shown in the scans represent the “present” state of the brain (and by implication, the mind) at the moment the image is taken. Yet, applying Husserl’s concepts of “protention” and “retention,” according to which a given thought carries with it a sense about the future and the past, Lloyd argued that each momentary state of the brain also embodies anticipations and memories, something that is largely unaccounted for in current interpretations of the scanning data. This seemed to be a case in which an argument from philosophy could potentially affect the method and object of the scientific research.

Are we any closer, then, to understanding what consciousness is and how it works? Probably not much. However, it is clear from events like the ASSC conference that the problem of consciousness is having a profound impact on our contemporary intellectual landscape. If, as some suggest, it is a purely mechanical problem, like understanding how a bee flies, then perhaps it is best left to those with the expertise to objectively study the mechanics. If, however, as others hold, it engages the deepest metaphysical aspects of subjectivity, then it may remain impervious to objective investigation and mechanical explanation. Recent attempts to fuse the empirical and philosophical approaches, as in neurophenomenology [1], or to combine neurobiology and aesthetics, as in neuroaesthetics [2], seem to be symptomatic of a wider recognition that the nature of conscious experience is both objective and subjective. In that case the broadly accepted and historically pervasive distinction between these two categories of knowledge may be in danger of collapse. Understanding consciousness becomes then the basic question facing those who try to make sense of our existence—arguably even more basic than what the universe is made from. Moreover, it is a question in which we all share a stake.

The conference itself was very well organized and amply accommodated within St. Anne’s College. There was a variety of keynotes, symposia, workshops and poster sessions, covering a range of topics—from animal consciousness to machine consciousness—and provision to encourage students and new researchers in the field. The meeting moves to Las Vegas in 2007, and is highly recommended for anyone seeking access to the state of the art in the study of this most elusive aspect of the mind.

References


FILMS

RIVER OF TIME


Reviewed by Andrea Dahlberg.
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Igor Novikov is a Russian astrophysicist living in Denmark who has a gift for communicating complex theories of time to a broad, non-specialist audience. In this short film he draws the viewer in by placing his theories in a personal context, describing how he grew up in Russia and became fascinated by a complex theoretical world
that allowed him to escape the social world of Stalinist Russia, where his mother was sent to the gulag and his father vanished. The film follows much the same trajectory as it moves from biography into the increasingly and counterintuitive world of time. Archival footage from the U.S.A., Russia, Germany and Denmark is used to illustrate the development of Novikov’s theory that time is cyclical and that time travel is possible but only back to the point at which the “time machine” or the technology that enabled it came into existence.

The film is a fascinating introduction to the subject because of Novikov’s ability to communicate and his willingness to situate his work in the context of his personal life. He becomes a kind of personal guide for the viewer. The film also succeeds visually because of the use of archival footage. While the film is an excellent, very basic introduction to this abstract subject that defies most aspects of our everyday experience of life, it is not good at showing how the concepts it presents fit together. For example, Novikov describes how (theoretically) one could travel back in time to meet one’s mother as a child of 4 years old if the technology that enabled this to happen had existed at the time the person’s mother was 4 years old. At another point in the film, he states that matter cannot change such that present matter is indeed shaped by matter past. The film does not show how these concepts are related, and the question of how one could meet one’s mother aged 4 if she herself had not been through the time-machine experience is raised and left unanswered. The problem here is not that the film leaves questions unanswered (this is obviously inevitable with such a subject) but that Novikov is such an excellent and willing communicator that there is no doubt that he would have been able to answer such questions (and probably did) in terms simple enough for the most unsophisticated viewer. One is left with the impression that the problem is a consequence of the way the film was edited.

A decision was taken to focus on the sequence of the way the film was edited. Archival footage from the U.S.A., Russia, Germany and Denmark is used to illustrate the development of Novikov’s theory that time is cyclical and that time travel is possible but only back to the point at which the “time machine” or the technology that enabled it came into existence.

Nevertheless, the film is a fascinating and accessible introduction to a subject that confounds our sense experience of the world.

**Mademoiselle and the Doctor**


Reviewed by Rob Hasle, Australia.

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This is a powerful, beautiful and memorable film. *Mademoiselle and the Doctor* is not only the story of Lisette Nigot’s voluntary euthanasia but also the story of many others, named and unnamed, who believe in an individual’s right to self-determination in respect to choosing how and when to die.

Janine Hosking has created a provocative and confronting film that is done somewhat paradoxically, in a gentle and sensitive way. The film is in color, runs for 90 minutes and features some wonderful background photography and excellent camerawork. While the theme song is good, I think a more appropriate background instrumental music would have added an extra touch.

The Mademoiselle of the film is Lisette Nigot, a 79-year-old academic, in apparently excellent mental and physical health, living in Perth, Western Australia. Lisette decided she did not wish to live past 80 and would therefore commit voluntary euthanasia prior to her 80th birthday. Enter the Doctor of the film, Philip Nitschke, founder and leader of Exit International, an organization that provides information and support for those seeking advice regarding voluntary euthanasia.

Lisette’s story is woven into the film and features many frank discussions with Nitschke both prior to and after Lisette’s death.

Lisette was somewhat of a rebel; she never married, lived alone, had no children and pursued a fairly high-profile career. She could not handle the way the body deteriorates and the mind in many cases stays young. She did not wish to suffer what she saw as the indignities of old age, and made the decision to end her own life in a gentle and peaceful way while she was still able to do this. As Nitschke points out toward the end of the film, it was not only the issues of voluntary euthanasia that Lisette’s case raised but also the fact that she was a healthy woman with possibly several good years left. Many people, regardless of their attitude to voluntary euthanasia of terminally ill persons, found this action very confronting, given that most of us try to stay alive as long as possible. In Cicardi’s words, “Life will do anything for a living.” Public opinion regarding voluntary euthanasia seems to be polarized into two factions: the majority, who agree that voluntary euthanasia for terminally ill persons should be a legal and dignified option, and those who are vehemently opposed to it. This film, while very much pro-voluntary euthanasia, also shows footage of the incoherent, hysterical protests of the minority — which in most cases is underpinned by fanatical, fundamentalist religious beliefs. “Dr. Death” and “Nitschke is a new Hitler” are some of the absurd labels applied by these people to Nitschke.

One of the most poignant scenes in the film is the story of Max, a very old man with terminal stomach cancer. He pleads with nurses, doctors and Nitschke to help him pass away peacefully and with dignity. Because of the laws in Australia, these caring, sensitive medical workers can do no such thing. As the film points out, Max’s extreme suffering is directly caused by those who oppose voluntary euthanasia and those who make legislation or overturn existing legislation.

Since this film was made, the situation has changed in Australia. In January 2006 legislation came into force that makes a person guilty of an offense if the person “uses a carriage service [i.e. fax, e-mail, telephone, web site] to publish or otherwise distribute material” and “the material directly or indirectly counsels or incites committing or attempting to commit suicide” [1]. This new criminal law has forced Exit International to move its web site and operations to New Zealand, where freedom of speech is still allowed! If this film, as it stands, were to be made now, those involved would face heavy penalties and prison sentences. The film discusses methods, drugs and examples of how a person may peacefully and gently commit suicide. In Australia we have the absurd situation where it is legal to kill oneself but illegal to assist in any way someone else in killing themselves.

Opponents of voluntary euthanasia (for terminally ill persons, with medical safeguards to prevent abuse) usually cite religious reasons why it should be unlawful or shy away from reasonable debate by saying voluntary euthanasia...
is such an emotional issue we cannot discuss it calmly. Both these reasons are invalid and have nothing to do with the matter at all. The only issue at stake is allowing another human being the right to self-determination both in life and death.

The definition of a hero is “a person of distinguished courage or performance.” This brilliant film gives a glimpse of three such heroes: Philip Nitschke, Lisette Nigot and Janine Hosking. The film will become a classic and a landmark in the humanitarian fight for individual human rights and self-determination.

Reference

MALICK SIDIBÉ: PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A PORTRAITIST

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Malick Sidibé: Portrait of the Artist as a Portraitist, by Susan Vogel, is co-produced with the National Museum of Mali in Bamako and distributed by First Run/Icarus Films. Of its many virtues the most outstanding is that it is a very good example of a documentary film that compresses its essence into just the time it needs to make its point. It is a well-constructed and intelligently conceptualized “short,” which, many filmmakers agree, is often more difficult to accomplish than a long film. Susan Vogel shot this warmhearted portrait of the famous photographer Malick Sidibé, from Bamako in Mali, and compressed her material into 8 minutes. As a consequence of her skill, every shot has meaning, and its particular place in the montage; nothing seems redundant. Vogel presents an interview with Sidibé in the open air, in bright sunlight, in close-up, in which he shares a brief history of his photographic career, his passion for photography and love for his subjects, the liveliness of images and the intense experience of the present moment. Vogel also shows us Sidibé in his studio at work, arranging the lighting and his very relaxed and lively style of interaction with his clients, intended to make them feel comfortable and gay. These sequences are interposed with black-and-white photographs from Sidibé’s archive, especially from the 1960s. They show us dancing couples, rock-and-roll teenagers, and the latest “hip” fashion; along with his portraits, they capture vital moments, and always motion, never just a posture or fixed form. The dance photographs are accompanied with music indigenous to Mali, gay and rhythmic, which underlines the Malian context. Perhaps most revealing is that clearly in the 1960s Bamako was as stylish as New York and Carnaby Street.

This film stands also exemplary of a documentary film that does not need any introduction, explanation or commentary. Through visual language and sound alone, the film shows with brilliant economy what it intends to tell and, beyond that, what the viewer is enabled to sense. It is a subtle portrait that, in contrast to the common information-driven documentary film style, liberates the story from its narrative constraints and instead expresses a joie de vivre, the joy and passion for life and the celebratory expression of that passion through photography. Something of Sidibé’s spirit and wisdom is captured in his photographs and, certainly, is also captured by this film. At first glance, an 8-minute video hardly seems worth the effort; however, since Susan Vogel has made such a brilliant and exemplary documentary, and Malick Sidibé’s portrait is so full of energy and his photographs of historical significance, I can only recommend this film and also express the hope that it may be distributed in a more “lively” and accessible format than that of a videotape.

YLEM JOURNAL SPECIAL ISSUE: SCIENCE FICTION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Reviewed by John F. Barber, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Texas at Dallas. E-mail: <jfbarber@utdallas.edu>.

YLEM, pronounced “eye-lem,” after the Greek for the exploding mass from which the universe emerged, is an international organization of artists, scientists, authors, curators, educators and art enthusiasts who explore the intersection of arts, science and technology. YLEM strives to bring the humanizing and unifying forces of art to contemporary culture. Their newsletter, YLEM JOURNAL, provides periodic reports of the group’s efforts.

This particular issue, Volume 25, Numbers 10 and 12, titled “Science Fiction and Its Discontents,” collects interviews with four noted science-fiction writers: Rudy Rucker, Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss and Gregory Benford. All interviews are conducted/editing by Executive Editor Loren Means, who also authors an introductory editorial and a brief essay entitled “Low-Voltage: Ontological Currents: Robots in the Fiction of Brian Aldiss and Rudy Rucker.”

Despite his omnipresence, Means never clearly defines, either overtly or through his editing, the discontents of science fiction. This determination is left to the reader, and the process becomes one of interpretation and extrapolation.

For example, in his review of depictions of robots by Aldiss and Rucker, paying particular attention to what he calls the “three provocative aspects of contemporary robotics,” Means says each author deals with, in “more or less predictive ways,” robot emotions, emergence as a way of creating robot behavior, and mind transfer to robotic bodies (p. 15).

According to Means, Aldiss contends that emotionless robots may be seen as a warning to humanity to retain some chaos instead of favoring automatic responses to given situations. Rucker, on the other hand, says Means, sees emotions as “weights” assigned to certain situations. Evaluations of outcomes predicted by alternative courses of action can, then, lead to a course of action (emotional response) with the highest satisfaction rating (p. 16).

Both Aldiss and Rucker, according to Means, present robots that teach themselves to be intelligent. Both say unexpected behavior and artificial intelligence programs will merge, all through a randomly evolving process.

As for mind transfer to a storage device, both Aldiss and Rucker postulate how this might work and some of the outcomes, which, according to
Means, point to eventual positive acceptance of the practice by humans.

Where then is the discontent? Lacking clear evidence, the reader is left to infer the source when Means notes three new aspects of contemporary robotics not anticipated by Aldiss or Rucker: Emergence is exhibiting intelligence not programmed into robots, the reasonable anticipation that robots will make themselves into something unanticipated, and the increased effectiveness of distributed intelligence.

The interviews with Aldiss, Rucker, Moorcock and Benford also hint at discontent, but again the reader is responsible for identifying its sources. Rucker’s discontent seems to come from his sense that the “market for science books these days is geared towards books having precisely one idea, which is then buttressed with what he describes as ‘water-cooler-level discussions of pre-digested news stories that have been fed to us by the media’” (p. 7). Science, says Rucker, must learn to synthesize multiple theories for strange phenomena, or if that is not possible, consider holding multiple views simultaneously.

In his interview, Moorcock says, “I saw science fiction as being able to develop intellectual ideas, new sorts of ideas, and to produce what people talked about existing rather than just talking about it” (p. 10). Moorcock’s discontent seems to be with the apparent failure of science fiction to fully evolve its ability to respond quickly to the news of the day (p. 11). “That’s why I gradually lost conventional science fiction, because it wasn’t suitable for what a lot of writers wanted to say” (p. 13).

Discontent for Aldiss seems to evolve from multiple sources. First, he admits to a lack of rapport with any particular professional role. He is a successful writer, which is supposed to bring status, but being a science-fiction writer negates that status. Second, as Aldiss says, “Things have advanced so far, that in that aspect, they are science fiction” (p. 23). Finally, he notes discontent with the settings for science fiction stories. Localized stories are only interesting to readers in that location. If one sets a story on Mars, however, it will be interesting to more people across a broader number of places, says Aldiss (p. 23).

For Benford, discontent seems to come from the fact that current science fiction rides a trend as a branch of fantasy, which, says Benford, is ultimately unsatisfying to a large percentage of science-fiction readers and writers.

These points are buried in each interview. None are mined or questioned or clarified by editor Means. In fact, it would appear that each that has emerged, quite by chance, from rambling interviews lacking an overarching thematic approach by the editor. Instead, by his own admission, Means inserts himself far too much into each interview, at times seemingly only to drop names or establish pedigree.

In his conclusion, however, Means makes a salient point when he says that what is needed to dispel discontent is a viable new trend in hard science fiction, one that will invigorate its writers and inspire its readers. The particulars of this trend—its focus, application and content (perhaps intelligent robots?)—are left unstated. Means only says the trend is “probably coming” to London (why?) or San Francisco (because of YLEM?) to be born (are trends born, or do they emerge, like robot intelligence?).

In the end, then, Means exhibits the same lack of prediction he notes of Aldiss and Rucker, and the reader who has stayed this far will feel genuine discontent.

The reviews published in print are but a small selection of the reviews available on the Leonardo Reviews web site. Below is a full list of reviews published in LR October–November 2006

<www.leonardo.info/lr.html>

November 2006


The Dreamers of Arsham Land, by Christopher Walker. Reviewed by Jonathan Zilberg.


Live at the Stain Bar DVD Adventure, by Quartet of Happiness. Reviewed by Kathryn Adams.


October 2006


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