Leonardo Reviews

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Books

Doctored:
The Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America
Reviewed by Hannah Drayson.
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Doctored: The Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America shows how, at the turn of the last century, Philadelphia’s emerging photographic community strove to establish photography as a respectable discipline. In particular, the book explores the metaphorical connections that were drawn between photography and medicine by examining the writings of photographic practitioners in the trade journals of the time. In the public eye, a variety of allusions that linked the medical profession with photographic portraiture informed the understanding of the practice. Ideas of this type also shed light on how practitioners, and the professional bodies they formed, styled themselves and how they understood the nature and effects of the services that they offered.

Among the problems faced by photographers keen to clarify the valuable, trustworthy and professional nature of their discipline were the existing allusions drawn by the public between portraiture and the less glamorous and enjoyable practice of dentistry. The discomfort experienced while having one’s portrait taken was often noted in popular discourse; it was necessary for sitters to maintain a still position for the few minutes that were the duration of the exposure. This period of forced immobilization was often described by sitters as an ordeal, rarely improved by the involvement of various photographer’s tools, such as metal clamps that, hidden behind subjects’ bodies, would fix heads in position. As Sheehan points out, the discomfort of this is visible in the images; the dour expressions of early photographic sitters are testaments to the impossibility of holding a smile for the time period necessary to expose an image.

The book offers a breadth of approaches to understanding the apparent connections between medicine and photography, all of which are embedded in the visual culture of the time. Some are more speculative than others, for example the chemical knowledge and technical apparatus required for darkroom practice and the allusions to the darkroom practice of the photographer being to “treat” the photograph as a patient and prescribe the correct cure. Another chapter explores the use of lighting in the studio and the darkroom in relation to contemporary enthusiasms for the use of colored light for healing practices.

One of the central understandings of the synergies in emerging photographic and medical practice is the discussion of portraiture as a form of surgical operation, a theme that Sheehan also returns to in the contemporary context in one of the final chapters of the book. The pun of the book’s title of course reminds us of the double meaning of the word “doctoring” as a verb and the knowing manipulation of representation. By choosing what to include, both in the pose and costume of sitters as well as in the way that they were lighted, photographers and their sitters collaborated on the production of portraits that can be understood to serve particular purposes. The darkroom processing of the images offered the chance to undertake a range of manipulations, such as the removal of blemishes or lightening of skin. Photographers were able to make images that presented individuals at their best, offering the portrait as testimony for an idealized and healthy self, reframing the subject as a certain type of person, socially, economically and physiologically.
Sheehan’s book offers a wide perspective on a very particular historical moment and theme that connects to the visual culture and social context of the time and enriches understandings of the historical emergence of photographic culture and its motivations. Doctored’s discussion of the mediating effects of photographic technique on both individuals and social groups who sat for their portraits suggests that there is more to be understood regarding how the productive nature of representation is understood in disciplines that are traditionally considered to be external to medical practice. As Sheehan shows, photography as an emerging realist representational practice was itself understood, even if only weakly, as a way to improve health, and the role of the photographer as a doctor, as it relates to the power that is afforded to the creator of a representation, can also reflect back upon hospital practices.

First of all, The Horror Sensorium elaborates a very subtle position on the discussion on medium-specificity. Although the author rightly stresses the increasing importance of intermediality and transmediality in horror, as demonstrated for instance by the dominant position of the genre in contemporary convergence culture, and although she gives many convincing examples of, for instance, the collaboration of sound or of online and offline shaping of a storyworld, she emphasizes throughout the whole book the fact that media are not passive vehicles for migrating themes or stories; rather each of them contributes to the permanent expansion and reshaping of the horror genre. The chapter on horror romance stories is very illuminating in this regard, since it shows the extent to which a classic medium (print) is the most appropriate one to tackle issues of sexual identity that other, more directly visual media are less well equipped to explore. Another challenging example is the study of mimics in videogames, where the relationship between perceptual reality and referential unreality is quite different from what one may observe in a film theater.

Second, Ndalianis also succeeds very well in displaying the historical dimension of the horror genre, which certainly refers to universal fears and desires while simultaneously being in permanent interaction with the culture of its time. This cultural context, moreover, is never narrowed down to the works themselves but always includes the study of the cultural industries that determine the making as well as the consumption of this kind of material. An excellent illustration of this type of reading is given by the author’s historical contextualization of Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque and the redefinition of its “unholy” aspects after the fading of the religious framing characteristic of medieval and folkloric forms one still finds in Rabelais or Shakespeare. Corollarily, the sensory overkill that defines so many recent forms of horror is gainfully linked to the necessity of multimodality in modern entertainment corporations, where the mixing of signs and senses is also a way of cutting costs and producing new types of customers. On all these aspects, Ndalianis’s study offers a wealth of historical and analytical details, which help reframe the genre.

The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses

Reviewed by Jan Baetens.
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This new book by a well-known scholar in the field of visual mass media studies reads almost like a first-person shooter, but one in which the reader is less the shooter than the target. One could also say the book obeys the WYSIWYG philosophy: the reader is not only informed on the bodily impact of the genre of horror, he or she is also confronted with a kind of direct assault on the senses, resulting both from the pace of writing and the overwhelming encyclopedic knowledge the author dispatches. If the reader continues the experience online, for instance by watching some of the often shocking material discussed by Ndalianis on YouTube, it becomes easy to understand why the author has chosen a highly personal approach to the material (sensitive readers had perhaps better not Google words like “grindhouse cinema” or titles such as Planet Terror, to take just two examples that are frequently and most often voluptuously mentioned). Indeed, the reader or spectator that scholars tend to construct as abstract or theoretical notions are here replaced by the flesh and blood subjective voice of Ndalianis herself, who is not afraid of adding personal testimonies to the material under scrutiny. Together with the well-documented reflection on the existing scholarship, these very individual reactions to the horror works she examines represent the alpha and omega of the approach defended in this book.

What the book has to say on horror is not entirely new. The Horror Sensorium has a double starting point. On the one hand, Ndalianis criticizes all readings of horror as either a purely visual or cognitive phenomenon, hence the necessity to take into account the multisensory nature of our reaction to it. These reactions are ruled by synesthesia, i.e. the fact that one sense, for instance viewing or hearing, can speak to other senses, and conesthesia, i.e. the perception of one’s whole sensorial being. On the other hand, she stresses the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, of which horror remains a key cultural example (other examples being melodrama and pornography).

The interest of the book does not lie in its theoretical proposals, however. True, Ndalianis offers much evidence to support these two major claims (the multisensoriality of horror and its questioning of the frontiers between real and unreal), but that does not make these claims original or innovative. The most stimulating aspects of this book are elsewhere.

The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses
Angela Ndalianis
Theatre, Opera and Consciousness: History and Current Debates

Reviewed by Martha Blassnigg, University of Plymouth. Email: <martha.blassnigg@plymouth.ac.uk>.

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe’s book Theatre, Opera and Consciousness marks a significant extension and further development of his previously published Theatre and Consciousness: Explanatory Scope and Future Potential (Intellect, 2005) and in many references directly draws from the earlier presented approach of understanding the relationship between consciousness and theater, particularly through the filter of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s reassessment of Indian Vedanta philosophy as “Vedic Science” [1].

Theatre, Opera and Consciousness opens its first part with reflections on the history of theater in relation to consciousness and the consequent theoretical and ethical implications. What might be synthesized as an approach to historiography “beyond the text and beyond matter,” is reminiscent of a cognate starting point to Shyrock and Small’s Deep History (2011) in its recognition of the shortcomings of history in its traditional disciplinary reliance on documented evidence. Meyer-Dinkgräfe, however, addresses human consciousness as qualitative activity beyond or before materialized expression and as such ventures into a treatment of processes of consciousness that include experiences that are commonly referred to as the “spiritual” or the “extraordinary” nature of “higher”-level consciousness. In this way it is concerned with a practice of historiography that includes references to first-person accounts, anecdotes and speculation in order to address experienced aspects of consciousness that do not leave a materially tangible trace and pertain purely to the domain of consciousness. This approach follows thinkers such as Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana in recognizing the importance of first-person accounts for the study of human consciousness, accounts that go beyond the immediately observable and yet constitute most profound dimensions of human experience.

In a manner reminiscent of the rather skillful ability to synthesize, as well as the openness for transdisciplinary encounters in Aby Warburg’s treatment of affective diagrams that persist throughout periodic formalism and aesthetics, Meyer-Dinkgräfe poses the question why certain periods might have followed others. He opens the first part of the book with a brief overview on key movements in the context of the European theatrical tradition. By extending the current scientific framework he puts the Vedanta model of consciousness to test with its sequential stages of aspirational, intentional and underlying drivers of expressive activity as an explanatory model for the succession of intrinsic processes that mark the zeitgeist and the tendency of these historically defined periods. In this way he seeks to determine the traceable movements of conscious evolutionary dynamics as manifest in art (theater and opera specifically) through the Vedanta classification system of qualitative states of consciousness that ultimately lead to moksha (enlightenment). The following chapters depart from this conceptual framework and present extensive materials for discussion, consisting of an examination of biographical theatrical plays during the last 40 years, synesthesia as a neurological and spiritual phenomenon, the significance of the warming-up and cooling-down processes and an insightful reflection on ethics. This is contextualized by the “performative turn” in theater studies and the self-reflexive focus in academia revealing a similar tendency in recent theater productions increasingly characterized by self-reflective historiographical treatments and aesthetics (such as Stefan Herheim’s Wagner productions).

The second part of the book is concerned with a discussion of consciousness in relation to so-called spiritual experiences in the context of opera performance. By reflecting on interviews and biographical contexts of individual singers (Klaus Florian Vogt) and conductors (Peter Schneider, Karen Kamensek, Roger Norrington) it offers intimate and moving insights into the experience of conducting, singing, training and performing, which otherwise remain locked within the individual experience, with some traces translated via external expression and interaction. In this way Meyer-Dinkgräfe treats the “event” in its pluralistic happenings, including a recognition of its heterogeneous audiences, as a form of Gesamtkunstwerk, as Wagner might have envisaged, where all conscious players contribute with their awareness, expectations and conscious attention and not least with the elaborated skills of making and coordinating sound into music in its intrinsic relationship with listening, mental projection and aesthetic perception. The chapter “Spiritual aspects of operatic singing: Klaus Florian Vogt,” for example, touches upon a fascinating discussion in relation to the question of pure resonance—with reference to pure consciousness, “a state of consciousness that is devoid of any contents” (p. 22), an awareness of nothing other than consciousness itself. This is described as a transformative process from a “manifest sound” or Anahata Nada (as through instruments or the singer’s bodily activity) to a tendency towards perfection that removes the vibration from the individual characteristics of the performer and approaches “pure resonance” or Anahata Nada, the primordial quality of pure sound. This altered state carries the principle of Nada, “the combination of infinite life force prana and pure intelligence of eternal dynamics of consciousness Agni as the ultimate source of all existence” (p. 174). This intriguing approach invites further research around questions on the quality of sound, sound as consciousness and whether music is purely a medium or carries pure consciousness in its very organizational principles and techniques. In this section, Meyer-Dinkgräfe addresses...
spirituality in theater and opera head on—“as a sound, reliable and verifiable category of experience that must be understood beyond its conventional use in the context of religion” (p. 213). It is a stepping stone for further research in this area, in addition to existing academic thinking around the mental, emotional, mnemonic and physical engagement of the spectator during performance that reaches out into more intangible concepts and experiences of what traditionally might have been termed the “sublime,” “extraordinary” or “divine”—something that ultimately appears as a rather ordinary and common dimension of life. More than two hundred years have passed since Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart revealed esoteric Masonic knowledge that was supposed to be kept secret in his Magic Flute; today, Meyer-Dinkgräfe suggests, so-called spiritual experiences are understood more immanently and are therefore becoming more common outside established religious systems. In this way, and in this sense similarly to Warburg, he situates the arts, and music in particular, as a significant alternative for momentary exaltation—one of many recognized pathways to expand the reach of consciousness as part of a conscious individual choice and intrinsic process of human evolution.

Some readers might find the application of an existing conceptual model such as the Vedanta model of consciousness somewhat inductive and explanatory-biased; this is, however, balanced through the exploratory and open exposition of the studied materials, which provide rich opportunity for further research. In this way, how exactly the Vedanta model might connect in each of the presented cases is to a large extent left to the reader’s engagement and therefore opens up the rich exposition for other scholars to engage with the resources from additional or possibly other perspectives. In this way Theatre, Opera and Consciousness is intrinsically transdisciplinary in the sense that it mobilizes a range of theoretical perspectives and practical methodologies (Nowotny et al. 2003) in order to identify new topics and concerns (Punt 2013) for consciousness studies. Hence quite independent of whether one agrees with the clearly defined positioning of consciousness as an ongoing, dynamic and contingent evolutionary process with its key tendency oriented toward enlightenment, the methodological and epistemological approach and the presented material, extensive in scope and depth, form a significant stepping stone in raising important questions for further research trajectories. This especially concerns new directions for research into internal processes and relationships that involve the spectators as active participants in the collaborative, dynamic conscious experience of the performance. It demonstrates that moving consciousness to the center of the discussion impacts important questions around ethics and well-being and ultimately touches upon profoundly political dimensions.

Finally, Theatre, Opera and Consciousness gives hope that after a century of, in their own right, quite important, secular and materially focused developments, the time seems ripe again to start rigorously engaging with the ancient philosophical question: “Where are we going?” The historiographical scope of the question “Where are we coming from?” recently enlarged through deep history, object ontological and new materialist-archaeological approaches, appears to catalyze a similar expansion into philosophically and anthropologically based inquiries for tentative outlooks into the future. In this sense, Meyer-Dinkgräfe contributes to the core of the humanities as they are understood as practice that proceeds from the human as intentional and reflective being (Repko 2012: 111), concerned with studies of attitudes, aspirations and the creative potentialities of the mind in the fullest sense. More space is needed to take this up and develop cognate conceptual, methodological and epistemological frameworks as they pertain to ontology and the development of “humanism” as an ethically, social-culturally and also ontologically based foundation for a spiritually and culturally rich quality of life and well-being that gives all actants agency of choice and conscious recognition of each individual’s own evolutionary path within the larger interconnected relations.

Reference and Note

1. As such it constitutes a further contribution to an ongoing debate that the author leads through a range of platforms; the Roudoph book series Consciousness, Literature and the Arts (of which this book is part), the Journal Consciousness, Literature and the Arts and the book series Theatre and Consciousness (Intellect), as well as the biannual International Conference on Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts since 2005. See Allen F. Repko, Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory (2012).
Ethnography, say the authors—all leading ethnographers of virtual worlds—is an approach to studying everyday life as lived by groups of people or individuals. Informed by methodological frameworks of ethnographic research and technological change, the practice of ethnography is, they argue, well suited to virtual worlds. In the first two chapters, the authors discuss the history, practice and promise of ethnographic methods. Chapter 1 addresses the questions “Why ethnographic methods and why virtual worlds?” and “Why a handbook?” Chapter 2 provides three brief histories: of ethnographic methods, virtual worlds and virtual world cultures. The result is intentional: to position ethnography as a tool for studying both local and distant cultures, through its attention to everyday practice and meanings and its conceptual disruptions of Self and Other. Such a lens will be revealing when focused on critical cultural issues, technology and society encountered by millions of people now inhabiting virtual worlds.

Chapter 3, “Ten Myths about Ethnography,” will, with the first two chapters, prove useful to researchers considering working in virtual or online worlds. The ten myths are: Ethnography is unscientific; less valid than quantitative research; simply anecdotal; undermined by subjectivity; merely intuitive; writing about your personal experience; contaminated by the researcher’s presence; identical to grounded theory; the same as ethnomethodology; and destined to become obsolete. These myths speak to confusions and misunderstandings about the role and value of ethnography because it “does not follow the standard hypothesis-driven model of science many of us were first taught in school” (p. 29).

Going forward, the remaining chapters walk the ethnographic researcher through the process of designing, undertaking and reporting research in virtual worlds. Chapter 4 deals with research design and preparation. Chapter 5 examines participant observation in virtual worlds. Chapter 6 focuses on interviews and virtual-world research. Chapter 7 offers solid insights regarding other data collection methods for virtual worlds research: chat logs, screenshots, video, audio, historical and archival research, virtual artifacts, offline interviews and participant observation and using quantitative data.

Chapter 8 deals with ethics: informed consent, mitigating institutional and legal risk, anonymity, deception, taking leave, accurate portrayal and more. Chapter 9 concentrates on human subject clearance and institutional review boards (IRB), especially preparing a protocol for IRB review and working with IRBs.

Chapter 10 is devoted to data analysis, working with participant observation data, images, video and textual data, and moving from data analysis to themes to narratives and arguments. Chapter 11 provides solid information and advice on writing up, presenting and publishing ethnographic research.

Either at the chapter level or as a whole, Ethnography and Virtual Worlds provides invaluable advice, tips, guidelines, principles and further resources to aid researchers through every stage of a participant observation virtual worlds research project, from choosing the online field site to writing and publishing the results. As noted by George Marcus in his foreword, this book makes online worlds and their inhabitants/participants “as accessible as physical world groups to the application of ethnographic methods at their highest standards of practice” (xvii).

**Ferocious Reality: Documentary According to Werner Herzog**


Reviewed by Nameera Ahmed, Pakistan.

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For those familiar with the documentary films of Werner Herzog, the title of Eric Ames’s book, *Ferocious Reality*, may point toward Herzog’s vision of a merciless nature, but at the same time, as the author informs us, it comes from an essay by Amos Vogel on the taboo of showing death on film. The book addresses Herzog’s “anti-romantic vision of nature” and its cruelty, which ultimately culminates in inescapable death.

This view of Herzog is emphasized in his autobiographical film *Portrait Werner Herzog* (1986). Describing a painting from the German Romantic period, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich, Herzog says, “Man is alone, small, insignificant in the vast landscape. The landscape isn’t just a backdrop, it is like an inner landscape representing the soul’s condition.” Man against landscape also becomes symbolic of the physical scale of their relationship to each other; and behind the vision of nature’s vast glorious landscapes lies the hidden truth of man’s insufficiency against them. Through his films, Herzog wants to leave his mark on the landscape and proof of his struggle with it.

Thus, rather than observing reality from a distance as it plays itself out, Herzog jumps right into it, wrestling, wrangling and, as he himself professes, maneuvering it. This manipulation of reality by Herzog is an inherent part of the cinematic forms he experiments with and deliberately seeks to invent. Thus, he blantly speaks against cinema verité, as he does in his manifesto The Minnesota Declaration. Cinema verité, according to him, is “devoid of verité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants.” According to Herzog, “There is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth.” As Eric Ames points out, Herzog’s aversion to cinema verité may be one of the reasons he has not been given much deliberation in the discourse on the documentary form (except for a few recent publications) by its scholars.

The book opens with the Minnesota Declaration, Herzog’s manifesto that he first presented in front of an audience in the form of a performance in 1999. The performative and participatory nature of Herzog’s documentary films has put Herzog in another league of documentarians, where the filmmaker himself poses as performer. His signature voiceover narrations have a “vocal presence,” as Ames puts it, and become another tool for performing his documentaries. Besides performance, Ames talks about recurring themes in Herzog’s films and life: moving landscapes, sensational bodies and ecstatic journeys. When Herzog refers to film as “physical,” he refers to both the physically daunting task of making his own films as a traveling filmmaker and also the subjects of his films, which usually have a physical element, of “moving landscapes.” These, as Ames points out, have at the same time “an insistently inward movement.”

The reflexive nature of Herzog’s films always questions the divide between fiction and non-fiction by bringing in the “inauthentic” and “put-on” elements of fiction into non-fiction, just as his fiction films have elements of...
non-fiction. His films dilute the divide between the two with much dexterity. Ames mentions Herzog’s comparison of an animal documentary playing on television one night and the hardcore porno film that he switched to out of boredom; he found the latter had “real naked truth” compared to the former, which inspired him to write his manifesto. His films also prioritize forms of embodied knowledge, of the self and other, the “sensational bodies” and the questions they raise about the body of the viewer, the viewed and the “merciless gaze” of the camera. This interest in bodies and the physical culminates again in an inevitable encounter with death. The experience of the chill of returning from the jaws of death is what excites Herzog, an interest in the representation of actual death, as also seen in his film Grizzly Man (2005), a film the book’s title makes a direct reference to.

Ferocious Reality: Documentary According to Werner Herzog gives quite an in-depth analysis of a wide range of the documentary films of Werner Herzog and through them discusses his approach to documentary cinema. Ultimately, it is about a documentary rebel, Werner Herzog, who never confines himself to the established norms of the documentary tradition. Rather, he has challenged it with each of his films for the more than four decades of his career. Eric Ames addresses the need to understand documentary through Werner Herzog and through him opens up new platforms and doors for the continually evolving journey of documentary cinema.

RUSSIA: A WORLD APART


Reviewed by Allan Graubard.

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The Russia that we know rose from the ruins that we knew, or thought we knew, or knew something of. The post-Soviet world grew from the ruins that once held its life and still hold something of our own is Marsden’s realm, and now his only realm. His was an oeuvre whose eye and touch I will miss. His photos captivate. It does not matter whether or not we have been to those places Marsden explores, camera in hand. We are there, with and within his photos, not only because of their acuity, the exceptional details and dramatic contrasts between light and dark that infrared film—his primary medium—can reveal, but also by way of their poignancy; what time can show us of loss and emptiness in the still living accent of ruins.

Animate and vital, rich with suggestion or struck by the mute splendor of forgotten places, his photos infuse perception with something that each of us seeks distinctly, within or askance of perception. They are not comforting photos in that sense; what photos that evolve from ruins are? But because of them I rediscover, and perhaps you will, too, the counterpoints and perturbations of enchantment; an intimate, evocative sensibility provoked by this survey of Russia’s 18th- and 19th-century estates, with several more current exceptions. Their visual legacy—of beauty, largess, avarice and power—is there for the taking.

The first photos set the stage: A statue from Pavlovsk Park (in the St. Petersburg region) shows a woman draped in antique white leaning in sorrow over the base of a marble plinth on which a trio of funerary urns rise. Half wreathed in Romanesque silhouette is a man, the deceased, in two views—as young and as old. Wealth, culture and vanity find the cement stamp here. The Stepanovskoye, Pavlischevo Estate (Kaluga province) presents a grand ruin at dusk or dawn. Its former glory now prey to weeds and rodents, the brilliance of the rising or setting sun accentuates the emptiness of the house, a disturbing transitional emptiness for its failure to embody in living figures the portent of the light. But those who once lived here are gone and, with them, their heritage and stories.

Another photo follows and, of course, there are many more: a rendition of Apollo’s Temple set dramatically on a grassy, terraced rise framed by several trees. Opening to the full expanse of the sky, its unroofed tri-quarter circle of columns, with the god set back toward the rear, must have fascinated visitors when the estate was at full tilt, functioning to support its owners and staff and provide its guests with the kind of pleasures that a memento like this was built for. Was there another reason for the temple, perhaps coincident with a philosophical or artistic trend of that time? I must leave that for experts to determine. I cannot say.

The fourth photo, the Church of the Kazan Virgin (Cherbnyshiev Estate, Yaropolets, Moscow Region), works its snare and establishes the arc of the book; its valorization of a world inhabited by time, not people, and the trees, briar, birds, insects and climate that wrested, and wrest, each place from our passions and practicalities; and the force of arms, money, tradition, culture and religion that came with it, that comes with it and that echoes there still.

Family fortunes lost, great houses damaged by wars and revolution, a mammoth Moorish-Gothic architectural fantasy refused by Catherine the Great, its owner, and then demolished just as it was completed for another structure still undone, and other more subtle abandonments whose details congeal in a swathe of white grass and towering clouds, a dark, nearly two-dimensional wheelbarrow turned on its side or a large dim stain on a wall—is that a woman rushing to meet her loved one?—and those glimmering phantoms from the second story of a darkened manor house.

And what of the contemporary landscape elsewhere with its polluted rivers, industrial waste, a countryside depopulated by an urban migration and the farms that feed the cities, the Russia of today: This is not Marsden’s subject per se but a background provided by his friend, the curator and writer Duncan McLaren, whose brief interpolations depict the history of each place and their passage there, as Marsden framed his shots—waiting for those moments that would help him to image intimations and emotions inspired by the setting.

As the subtitle to the book notes, a world apart...

I could go on but I will leave the fascinations of this book, of Marsden’s photos and McLaren’s texts, to you. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia are no more, just as the Soviet Union is no more. It is one thing to say this, quite another to feel it with the truthful, studied grace that you will find here.

Perhaps there is one final image I can mention and which seems, from this vantage at least, to compose for Marsden a concluding comment. It appears on page 113, a view of the Cathedral of Saint Peter and Paul from...
and starts reading. While scientific studies of falling sleep and waking are brought into the discussion, it is literature that provides the vehicle for understanding what happens just before and after sleep. Schwenger not only provides a compelling narrative for understanding what literature does, but also a strong defense for a certain type of literature that is aware of its own unique liminality. This is not a book about dreaming as a theme and topic in literature. Schwenger is more interested in a literary practice that lingers at the thresholds between the reader, the writer and the text.

Hypnagogia, insomnia, waking and sleepwalking are used as analogs for various forms of literary and lived experience. Reading, like falling asleep, is a dissolution of the self and an encounter with an unknown. Insomnia, a condition that many writers find themselves in, is an extension of consciousness into night, the workings of the subconscious and the “unwished-for proliferation of thoughts that keep one from relaxing into sleep.” Readers also forgo sleep to stay with a book. To turn the page, to stay awake at the edge of sleep, is to remain within a threshold before dissolution. Waking, like the closing of a book, is the reconstruction of the self and reality from a dissolution; the mind remembering itself and its place in the world. And finally, sleepwalking is explored as the state where the mind is never completely awake, as thoughts, dreams or the residue of a book are with us as we go about our lives. All of these liminal zones are rich terrain for literature.

Schwenger borrows the music term obbligato, the sometimes improvised musical line around a main theme, to reflect on the barely conscious mental wanderings of a reader trying to follow a text. While a text has built-in instructions for how it should be read and interpreted, a reader will, on occasion, drift away from these instructions to explore a memory, thought or distraction that may or may not be relevant to the narrative line. Writers who are aware of this “pleasure of the text” (Barthes) and the polyphony of narratives and images that a reader naturally brings to any reading can foreground the reader’s obbligato by withholding meaning, severing causal links or overwhelming logic with associations and digressions. Hypnagogia, the state just before sleep when the eyes are closed and images appear without the control of a thinking self, produces a “dissconcerting fecundity” that “eludes translation into an intellectual-allegorical equivalent.” Poets and novelists, such as Proust, de Chirico, Ashbery, Joyce and Pessoa, attempt to produce similar hypnagogic effects on the reader with word and sentence sequences that may produce meaning on a local level—the fragment one is currently reading—but that do not build into a coherent narrative line. This shapelessness of a thought chain encourages an obbligato effect, where the reader brings into play flickers of associations that accumulate around the text’s own imagery; an “artificially induced hypnagogia that takes place with eyes wide open.”

My own obbligato effect while reading this book was thoughts around literature’s current liminal stage: the technological transformations of the codex into digital books, the single text into a vast web of texts and the radical transformations of reading as an activity. What happens to literature in a field of distraction and digressive thinking? At the Borders of Sleep is a reminder that literature is so much more than the containers, genres and formulas of language construction; that it has always occupied the liminal zones “that we must necessarily inhabit” in our everyday lives.

Leonardo Reviews
Creativity and Academic Activism

Established field of cultural studies in the Anglo-Saxon universities.

For many reasons, this is a very timely publication, which should be read by all those interested in cultural studies as well as in one of the key notions mentioned in the title of the book (creative industries, activism, academic life, institutionalization). First of all, the texts gathered by Morris and Hjort are deeply rooted in the financial, managerial, ethical and professional crisis that has been shaking the humanities for nearly two decades now (Bill Readings’s The University in Ruins dates from 1996 already!). In such a context, the traditional, yet often slightly hypocritical, reluctance of cultural studies scholars to institutionalize their activism needs of course to be questioned in new ways, and the examples given by the contributors to this book should provide traditional cultural studies scholars with many new ideas, a lot of new energy and, why not, a certain degree of shame. For it would be absurd to imagine that the working conditions in East Asian universities are by definition more open to cultural reflection and cultural activism than those in U.S., U.K. or Australian ones.

What are the most important lessons one can draw, in this regard, from Creativity and Academic Activism? First of all, this book defends a new stance toward institutionalization. Instead of considering the step from activism to institutionalization as a way of giving up one’s ideals (of criticism, of social commitment, of political labor, etc.), the authors of this book demonstrate that institutionalization is not only valuable in itself, but also the inevitable result of a job well done. Institutionalization is no longer seen as something that signifies the end of a process, and even a dead end, but a tool, a springboard, a warrant that further action can be undertaken. Second, the book also criticizes the idea that there would be an incompatibility between institutionalization and participation in social, cultural, political and economic life outside academia. To institutionalize does not mean to turn away from society but on the contrary to open the walls of academia to the needs, the interrogations and the expectations of society, in particular to those groups in society that are waiting for support from critical engagement with mainstream culture most. Third, Creativity and Academic Activism also makes very clear that there exists no single answer to the need for institutionalization. Struggling with the imperative to adopt the standards of U.S.-dominated academic life (as far as publication issues are concerned), the authors of this book, not all of them Asian-born or -raised but often working in East Asian institutions, insist without any exception on the necessary local aspects of what it means to do cultural studies, although this localism is also a tool for rethinking in a glocal manner with regional (inter-Asian) and global (mass media and creative industries-related) aspects.

The courage and openness with which the innumerable smaller and larger difficulties of humanist research in East-Asian academia are tackled in this book should be taken as an example by all those working in institutions where cultural studies have now been part of the core curriculum for many decades and as encouragement to make room for much needed self-criticism (which is not the same as masochism).

However, the importance of the collection by Morris and Hjort goes far beyond the many examples of critical and political engagement at the crossroads of academia and society. It also touches upon a certain number of theoretical discussions that may be extremely important for cultural studies in general, which can learn a lot from the case studies discussed throughout the book. Particularly interesting in this regard are for instance the essays by Dai Jinhua (who teaches both in Beijing and at Ohio State University) and Koichi Iwabuchi (from Monash University). The former analyzes the spread of a certain type of popular amusement in Chinese mainstream culture to critically question the basic concepts of cultural studies itself: culture, popular culture, mass culture, audience, minority, mainstream, hegemony, etc. The latter tackles no less important issues: culture, soft culture, national culture, international (as well as inter-national) culture, cultural marketing, etc., using the (not always successful) Japanese attempts to take economic benefit from the circulation of certain mass media products such as manga, anime and soaps.

It would be unfair, however, to single out just these two essays, when the whole book contains so many fascinating discussions of notions, debates, theories, struggles, demands and tricky situations which cultural studies scholars all over the world will immediately recognize. Tensions between pedagogy and research on the one hand and ever-increasing bureaucratic control and managerial measurement on the other hand make a bell ring in Anglo-Saxon institutions as well. The shift from culture to cultural industries and the growing impact of financial and legal dimensions of culture will definitely do the same. And so also will the permanently renewed desire not to abandon political and social commitment to what one is doing after hours (if there is still an “after hours” in the 25/8 enterprise university). In a very honest, modest and direct way, the examples given in this book all show that cultural studies can only exist in the doing, and that doing cultural studies remains possible even in situations and environments that, at first sight, seem to condemn it as something of the past.

THE MELANCHOLY ART


Reviewed by Giovanna Costantini. Email: <costantini.giovanna.t@gmail.com>.

Art historian Michael Ann Holly’s The Melancholy Art, a recent addition to Princeton’s illustrious series Essays in the Arts, interrogates the history of art as an endeavor distinct from other historical sciences for its capacity to entice scholarship through the unique resonance of objects present through direct experience. The “power and poignancy” of material objects, she
maintains, elicit complex psychological associations replete with memory and evocation that compel art writing, research and pedagogy. Motivated largely by psychic undercurrents that reflect a desire to discover or recover a tattered cloth of fragmentary, ultimately irretrievable meanings lost to time, she proposes the trope of melancholy as an overarching thematic to elucidate a discipline aimed at the collection of disparate visual narratives estranged by era and insight. Addressed directly to the scholarly community of art historians concerned with the metonymic quality of art objects represented in art historical discourse, this eloquently written collection of essays examines the creative potential of melancholy as a reflection upon the mutability of experience and the insufficiency of human comprehensibility to encapsulate the past within writings about art. At the same time, Holly points to a loss of aesthetic focus that accompanies empiricism in art historical writing, one that emphasizes contextualization over poetic and philosophical inclination, a striving to reveal the deeper structure of the discipline, penetrating below the surface of conventional and iconological meaning to psychic forces that motivate and condition art historical inquiry. To this end, she advocates a professional practice whose rhetoric captures the compelling visuality of the artwork rather than its absence, restoring its initial sense of wonder and emotive power. In the manner of Martin Heidegger’s lyrical paean to archaic temples, she urges writing that extends beyond the accumulation of information and classification to wisdom, rapture and “warmth of human heart.”

Chapters advance methodically from the establishment of a psychological premise based on the paradoxical conundrum of historical artworks whose reception is not synchronous to their creation, viz. the psychological distance, transience, and irrecoverability of meaning that separate artworks and writers. She proceeds to examine art historical case studies that trace the development of art history in relation to competing schools of psychoanalysis and Viennese historicism, relying heavily on the object-relations theory of Melanie Klein and the British School of psychology in support of a melancholic predisposition of art historical writing predicated upon aggrieved loss. Renaissance models of “incantatory” writing about art such as Adrian Stokes’s Stones of Rimini illustrate the melancholic ethos that pervades art writing as a form of art-making as attempted reparation. Her analysis extends ultimately to the elegiac, hence melancholic quality that informs postmodern perspectives of art history with its temporal disjunctions, rhetoric of mourning and the semiotic obfuscation that accompanies art’s irresolute dialogue with the present and pluralistic grammar.

In support of her argument, Holly marshals a wealth of erudition indicative of formidable trans-historical, interdisciplinary expertise. Interweaving citations from psychoanalysis, literature, philosophy, historical and art historical scholarship, she adroitly orchestrates interpretations of melancholy from Dürer’s iconic emblem of saturnine Melancolia I (1514) to John Milton’s poem Il Penseroso (1633) to Marcel Proust’s reveries of temps perdu (1913–1927). She cites with assurance Frances Yates on esoteric reminiscences of “cold” and “dry-hot” melancholy; Kant’s aesthetic evocation of memory as an undercurrent of melancholic renunciation; Alois Riegl on the aesthetics of formalistic disintegration; Walter Benjamin on the redemptive capacity of art historical retrieval; Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl on poetic melancholy; Michael Baxandall on the impenetrability of pictorial intention and the functions of critical discourse; and Julia Kristeva on transference of meaning. These examples are a mere scintilla of a kaleidoscopic intellectual history enlisted to document the theme of melancholy in writings on art.

With the utmost refinement, Holly’s own poetic resonance echoes from artful analogy and suggestive imagery. One interpretation proceeds from a deft comparison between twin Renaissance paintings of St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata attributed to Jan Van Eyck and a theoretical tautology that she reconstructs surrounding Van Gogh’s painting A Pair of Shoes of 1886 as it was investigated by Heidegger (as a sign of nationalistic socialism), Meyer Schapiro (explained through epistolary art historical evidence) and Jacques Derrida (deconstructed as a metaphor of loss). In a circular manner, Holly unites these works, ostensibly through an iconic art historical trope—viz. shoes, familiar also from other postmodernist theoretical debates (Andy Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes and Frederic Jameson’s late capitalist interpretation)—one that alludes to the foundational nature of her investigation. Through these examples, she compares the inconclusiveness of attribution in the case of the Van Eycks (despite advanced technological analyses) to the disputed significance of Van Gogh’s painting as pendant illustrations of the irrecoverability of meaning, the “constitutional inability of the [art] historical discipline to possess objective meanings,” resulting in the effect of melancholy that accompanies such narratives of desire as the lingering wounds of St. Francis’s Stigmata. Extending this analogy yet further, a postscript ruminates over the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston with its conjoined historical and contemporary identity: founded in relation to its namesake’s personal history of loss, composed of a collection of works in their original, oftentimes damaged condition, with notoriously plundered works recollected via empty ornate gold frames hung in dusty galleries as “lingering wounds.”

While the art historian’s pursuit of knowledge may be motivated by a cornucopia of purposes that include intellectual curiosity, the enlargement of human experience, the discovery of truth and correction of error, espousal of humanistic and social values, universality, aesthetic aspiration and oneness with nature, the suggestive language of art history, as Holly emphasizes, holds the capacity to make present that which is absent through evocative writing that marks “the most poetic discipline in the humanities.” In its finest moments, it remains attuned to the sense as well as the sensibility of artworks that it endeavors to chronicle and illuminate.
Why Prague as “capital of the 20th Century,” and not Berlin, Tokyo, Los Angeles, or, of course, New York? The answer that Derek Sayer, renowned specialist of Czech Modernism, gives to this question is multiple, but most crucial is the symmetry he elaborates with Walter Benjamin’s landmark description of Paris, cultural capital of the 19th Century. Just as the Ville-Lumière could appear in Benjamin’s eyes—and don’t we all look through his eyes nowadays—as the laboratory of 20th-Century modernism, Prague may be the city that foreshadowed the world in which we live today, a world that is less simply postmodern than the epitome of what Baudelaire defined as the landmark feature of all modernities ahead: “the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (“The Painter of Modern Life,” 1863). More than any other city in the (Western) world, Prague has become the symbol of that singular mix of constancy and instability that singles out modern as well as postmodern life. Much more than a city like New York, Prague is deeply rooted in history, and much more than a city like Paris, this history is a never-ending chain of upheavals, turmoil, changes, revolutions and destructions in which the only certitude that remains can only be that of uncertainty itself.

Yet there is also a second reason to choose Prague as a new case in point for a Benjaminian revisiting of cultural history, in the very broad sense of the world: bringing together art, politics, ideology, business and daily life, combining both the well-known signposts of culture and the forgotten or despised details in order to give as close a view as possible of Prague’s contribution to modernity. This concern of readability encourages the author to also include quite a few analyses of French and Pari sian material, often with very refreshing insights (a good example here is the comparative analysis of the Surrealist shows in pre- and post–World War II Paris and Prague, a brilliant case of reading the center as seen through peripheral eyes and vice versa).

From that point of view, Prague, which is a fabulously good read, is not at all an attempt to write history in modern or postmodern ways. It is, on the contrary, an example of good old-fashioned storytelling, often with a strong feeling of suspense and cliffhanger tactics. Thus Derek Sayer succeeds in doing what might have seemed at the beginning an impossible task: to offer an almost exhaustive, yet also passionate and thought-provoking overview of what actually happened in and around Prague in the first half the 20th century in particular, and of the many ways in which Czech Surrealism helped shape the figure of modernism in general. The necessity to reconsider modernism by taking into account the many fragments and sections left out by the culturally dominant position of Paris and New York and their influence on our current ideas of modern art has become a ritual invocation in contemporary historiography. In this new paradigm, Derek Sayer already stands out as one of the most convincing representatives of how to rethink our cultural past today.
OUR CURRENT GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL DRAAMA, VIA GIBSON'S APOLCALYPTO.


THE EDITORS INTERVIEW 18 CONTEMPORARY SOUND ARTISTS WORKING WITH FIELD RECORDINGS: ANDREA POLLI, ANNEA LOCKWOOD, ANYTE GREIE, BUDHADITYA CHATTOPADHYAY, CHRISTINA KUBISH, DAVIDE TIDONI, FELICITY FORD, FRANCISCO LÓPEZ, HILDEGARD WESTERKAMP, HIROKI SASAJIMA, IAN RAWES, JANA WINDEREN, JEZ RILEY-FRENCH, LASSE-MARC RIEK, MANUELA BARILE, PETER CUSACK, STEVEN FELD AND VIV CORRINGHAM. EACH IS ASKED THE SAME QUESTIONS, BUT AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED, ANSWERS SOMETIME COALESCE AND SOMETIMES DRIFT APART, WITH INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS ADOPTING PERSONAL, PARTICULAR PROBLEMATICS. A RECURRING THEME, HOWEVER, IS THE EMPHASIS ON LISTENING CONDUCTED ALONGSIDE RECORDING.

CAREFUL LISTENING MAY FUNCTION AS A PRELIMINARY AUDITORY INVESTIGATION THAT INFORMS CHOICES FOR MICROPHONES AND THEIR PLACEMENT, INSPIRATION FOR FUTURE COMPOSITIONS, A CONCURRENT MONITORING OF THE RECORDING IN PROGRESS, AS WELL AS THE LABELING, CLASSIFICATION, PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF RECORDINGS, THE LAST OF WHICH IS THE SUBJECT OF ONE OF THE QUESTIONS ASKED TO EACH SOUND ARTIST.

IN THE FIELD: THE ART OF FIELD RECORDING


REVIEWED BY JOHN F. BARBER, THE CREATIVE MEDIA & DIGITAL CULTURE PROGRAM, WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY, VANCOURVER. EMAIL: <jfbabar@eaze.net>.

“How do you use and distribute your sound recordings?” Concert venues, installations, CD releases, audiovisual augmentations for films and other media, sound maps and online forms are among the answers provided. There is also the choice of letting the audible nature of the recordings themselves provide an acousmatic referential frame that is at once technical, creative and conceptual.

Each sound artist is asked, “When you recorded there what attracted you to that place, to those sounds?” The answers reveal much of what is important and original about field recording and provide fine-grained details about the development of particular pieces. At the same time, these answers are limited, as the artists frequently assert a kind of knowledge about their works and the sources for their recordings that can only be acquired through a process of listening.

“Why field recording?” is another question each sound artist is asked, and forms the basis for the research focus that forms the wider context for this new book. Again, the answers vary, but, as many of the artists point out, field recording is becoming increasingly widespread, both in practice and consumption. Concurrent with becoming more extensive, field recording is also more diversified, with artists finding new approaches to recording, production and distribution.

The real value of field recording, according to the editors, lies in its ability to provide insights into the world unmatched by any other medium. This insight comes through attentive listening to the sounds encapsulated in field recordings. Their complexity, and the pleasures they bring, are powerful justifications for the practice of field recording, for both these sound artists and their listeners.

Reading In the Field: The Art of Field Recording may convince you to seek out the numerous works cited for each artist and listen carefully. Doing so will raise awareness of listening and issues in the world soundscape and place you inside a world of sound where you relates to a perceptual, sensual level through your ears, which become more and more aware. This book is good reading. The upshot is good listening.

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Game Play, presented by The Brick Theater. Reviewed by Yvan Tina.


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