Horizons: Introduction

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Introduction

For explorers and artists alike, the imaginary line of the horizon marks the receding distance separating the eye from planned and dreamed destinations. Because the *topos* of the journey is so intricately linked with the dynamics of creation, with its departures from well-trodden paths, its rough crossings and unnerving lulls, the horizon presents itself as a heuristic trope. Figurative horizons are invoked the evolution of literary genres, the formation of aesthetic currents, and the production of the individual work of art, along with the accomplishments they strive towards and, sometimes, the unsurpassable limit they have reached. In their explorations of the imagination, writers plot positions and trajectories reaching into the unknown.

Starting from Husserl's "structure of horizon," Michel Collot stresses the ambivalence of a concept which encapsulates contrary notions of containment and concealment (Collot 257). The horizon line circumscribes space within the scope of the visual field, but it also delineates the hazy fringe where perception dissolves, and space spills into infinite, occasionally overwhelming, possibilities. The horizon then coincides with the limit on which perception abuts when the visible vanishes, and the presence of the other is called upon to retrieve a vision out of unfathomable distances. Clearly a liminal operator, the term has a remarkable affinity not only with the sublime, but also with all aesthetic confrontations with the ineffable. In his analysis of ancient texts accounting for the transition from Chaos to Cosmos, Edward Casey calls attention to "the world-creating character of horizon," (Casey 11) as earth and sky become distinct from their original confusion. This inaugural separation is reasserted in the foundational gesture which, from time immemorial, has traced the precincts of sacred sites, setting the temple (*fanum*) apart from its profane surroundings. Contrary to the boundary line, however, the mobile horizon suggests that renewal need not arise out of a rupture, but that differentiation may also operate within forms of continuity. The essays collected in this issue all demonstrate that the horizon line allows us to think of alteration in terms of constancy as well as change. Finally, what makes the horizon so unique as an organizing principle is the way it articulates space and time together into the variables of expanse and distance. Infinitely receding into the future of the round planet, the horizon line speaks to our humanity, because it intimates that man's finitude is tempered by the fresh possibilities that arise with each new dawn.

The two essays opening the volume explore the notions of differentiation and continuity which the horizon implies by looking respectively at *Turner* by David Dabydeen and *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip. The two book-length poems readdress the *Zong* massacre of 1781, the infamous episode of the British slave

trade which inspired J. M. W. Turner's *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* in 1840. Kerry Jane Wallart shows how Dabydeen's poem relates in complex ways to the "blocked horizon" of a tradition it refutes and subtly renews. The poem questions what the perspectival construction of the painting reveals and conceals – Britain's imperial sway and a cargo of drowning bodies. By abstracting the conventions of figurative art into a set of geometrical lines, Dabydeen engages with the aesthetic of the sublime in unexpected yet remarkable ways, suggesting that postcolonial writers in their writing back to the Western tradition also contribute to its ongoing transformation. A similar point is made by Myriam Moïse in her reading of Marlene NourbeSe Philip formal strategies in *Zong!* The collection experiments with a poetics of rupture, saturating the white page with black script, fragmenting words and languages. Because it diffracts the single perspective on the historical event, *Zong!* turns into song, weaving together the myriad voices of the victims of the tragedy. The notion of linear perspective is once again central to the third essay, Anne Le Guellec's analysis of Kim Scott's *Benang*. Intrigued by the novel's conflation of genealogical and perspectival linearity, Le Guellec observes the narratorial strategies through which Scott re-introduces a decentered, Aboriginal perspective debunking the devastating illusion of a racially pure Australia. This questions the ideal of sameness which has long seemed to be the only desirable goal on the horizon of Australia's national construction.

The next three contributions are concerned with the shifting horizons of diasporic or exilic writing. In his essay on Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*, Pascal Zinck shows how the horizon has become a locus of fracture, trauma and division in a novel which interrogates in unprecedented ways the historical ruptures of the twentieth century, from the Holocaust and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the global war on terror. Fiona McCann approaches the notion of horizon in terms of generic evolution in her study of *The One That Got Away* by Zoe Wicomb. Her analysis of Wicomb's ongoing experimentation with the constraints of genre focuses on the distinctively post-modern techniques of the short story cycle, the unexpected shifts in focalisation and the *mises en abyme* that foreground the representation process by reinforcing on a formal level the aborted or confused communication between the South-African and the Scottish characters. My essay on *A Complicated Kindness* by Canadian writer Miriam Toews also deals with the horizon from a generic and a stylistic point of view. Having presented how Toews inserts her version of a Mennonite childhood into the Prairie horizontal tradition, the essay moves on to consider the narratorial strategies of incongruous literalization through which Toews's narrator challenges the verticality of Mennonite authority, and includes the reader within a community of sentiment.

Elsa Sacksick takes a fresh approach on the question of borders in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Although the horizon is literally absent from

the claustrophobic space and futureless time described in the novel, the narrative recreates scope and depth on the figurative level through idiosyncratic experimentations with the vertical, paradigmatic proliferation of language on the page. The two essays which conclude the volume share a similar interest in phenomenology and the structuring effect the horizon has on our perception. In her discussion of Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter*, Anne-Sophie Letessier shows that the pictorial motif of the horizon plays a fundamental role in the way Urquhart's ekphrastic novel interrogates the modalities of visual perception. Inspired by Michel Collot's enlightening remarks on the horizon structure, Letessier demonstrates to what extent Urquhart grapples in her writing with the rendering of "the invisible inscribed in the very texture of the visible." Myriam Bellehigue similarly analyses the strategies used by Amit Chaudhuri in his début novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, to delineate the "perceptual, intersubjective and linguistic horizons" of a young boy's summer holiday in Calcutta. In Chaudhuri's novel, perception is "an act of exploration, and writing becomes a way of probing into all these zones of invisibility – not so much to make them visible as to enhance their elusive qualities." It is no wonder then if Bellehigue steers away from exoticist readings of Indian literature in English, and firmly replaces the novel within the long literary tradition that has sought to disclose to the reader's eye the extraordinariness of the most mundane.

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Guest Editor

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