Exposure/Overexposure
Paris-Sorbonne International Conference, December 2008

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1 The international conference “Exposure/Overexposure”, organized by the group Texte et Image (English Department, University Paris-Sorbonne, Doctoral School 4) was hosted by Françoise Sammarcelli (Professor of American Literature, Paris-Sorbonne) and Monica Michlin (Associate Professor of American Studies, Paris-Sorbonne) at the Maison de la Recherche (University Paris-Sorbonne), on Friday December 5, and Saturday December 6, 2008.

2 As Françoise Sammarcelli emphasized in her opening remarks, the study of overexposure necessarily gives rise to a wide range of issues and approaches. Some papers had chosen to question the meaning of literary strategies of overcoding, excessive showing, hyper-stylization, and repetition; others still dealt with texts that were textual/iconic hybrids; and some focused on the use of excessive lighting in photography and film. While overexposure can be related, through its emphasis on “showing”, to pornography, it can also, conversely, function as a blinding process, with a deliberate aim to mislead the reader/viewer and obliquely reveal that what has been left unsaid is at the heart of the work. Overexposure’s destabilizing aesthetics can be read, in context, in manifold ways: as play, as a sign of trauma or as a politically charged strategy aimed at developing the reader’s or viewer’s resistance to the overload of data that characterizes contemporary human existence.

Keynote address

3 The keynote address was delivered by Steve Tomasula, Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame (Indiana), and an author and artist who has been published to critical acclaim. Anne-Laure Tissut, Associate Professor of English at the Sorbonne introduced Steve Tomasula’s work, from In and Oz (2003), a subtle parable on language and creation, to his latest opus Vas (An Opera in Flatland), a multimedia work. Running through all of Steve Tomasula’s work is the question of our overexposure to data of all
kinds, and the underlying conundrum: how are we to survive the abrasion of all meaning in the age of information technology?

4 Steve Tomasula’s keynote address, “Visualization and the Emergence of the Post-Human Narrative”, put the question “what can the contemporary novel be today?” In the age of information and of DNA codes, the art of the portrait in particular can no longer be what it was in the 19th century: today, although the human scale of portraiture remains, we live in an onslaught of information and of overexposure to both essential and trivial data: 3D replaces 2D, absence looms larger than presence, patterns seem bigger than the individual; the body itself as last place in which to define the “self” becomes permeable, as humans become hybrids themselves (through adaptation, cloning, or robotics). Steve Tomasula’s conference and visual montage embarked us on a journey of paradoxes as to the impossible portrayal of contemporary life, as contrasted with the 19th-century realist aesthetic — through a number of striking modes of representation, from warehouse inventories to Google Map zooms, to the visual charting of Napoleon’s ill-fated Russian campaign and palindromes of DNA, to the conclusion that the celebrated metatextual image of the house of fiction seems to have been reversed, from the house of many rooms a human subject can look out of, to that of the millions of humans standing at their individual computer windows “looking in”.

5 The debate centered on the very definition of “post-human” as well as on the legitimacy of contrasting 21st century aesthetics of portraiture (pixels and DNA) with the 19th century novel (painted portraits and epic novels) perhaps underexposing, for the sake of contrast, the aesthetics of the 20th century (what, for example, of stream-of-consciousness as a novelistic technique?). Another series of questions involved the perhaps inherent connection between the literature of the “post-human” and that of the post-apocalyptic.

“Overexposure” in fiction (Friday December 5)

6 Pawel FRELIK (University of Lublin) in “Reading the Background: the Textual and the Visual in Steve Tomasula’s The Book of Portraiture” emphasized how all of the visual components in the text, from illustrations to lay-out on the page, affect our reading of the book, while making it a journey through the history of narration.

7 Françoise PALLEAU-PAPIN (Paris-3 Sorbonne Nouvelle), in “Over/Exposure in The Atlas by William D. Vollmann”, read the photographs of The Atlas which portray people across the globe who have been scarred by life both in the literal and symbolic meaning of the term, analyzing the absence of sensationalism one might associate with the textual and photographic depiction of scars.

8 Jean-Yves PELLEGRIN (Paris-Sorbonne), in “An Eye for An Eye: Brian Evenson’s Merciless Art of Overexposure” demonstrated how Evenson’s narrative voice(s) remains strangely objective, as if imitating the “evidential power of photography”, even as it describes, over and over, violence committed upon eyes. His paper explored the paradox of the depiction of extreme violence and its effect upon the reader.

9 Stéphane VANDERHAEGHE (University of Cergy-Pontoise) gave a highly entertaining performance of his paper entitled “Willie & Babs, Phil & Bob – et moi, et moi, et moi… Reading Pornography”, on Robert Coover’s reading of William Gass’s Willie Master’s Lonesome Wife. The paper re-enacted, in its very aesthetics, the questions put by the text
(s): does a text have to simulate sex to be pornographic? What happens when these sexual images are in fact about reading? The discussion centered on definitions of pornography: is it only a matter of “exposure” of sexual images or acts, of specific images that form in the reader’s mind, or is it determined by reader reception and arousal? Is it the confessional mode, rather than specific images that make the text pornographic?

Anne-Laure TISSUT (Paris-Sorbonne) delivered a challenging paper on Percival Everett’s last published work: “Percival Everett’s The Water Cure: A Blind Read”, pointing to how the reading is uncomfortable because of the novel’s topic (torture), its form, its drawings, its mysterious proverbs and its unidentified language. Ultimately, the text provides a dazzling read, but one that is “blindfolded”, equating the reader with a torture victim, perhaps.

“Overexposure” in film (Friday Dec 5)

Monica MICHLIN’s (Paris-Sorbonne) “Open Your Eyes Wider: A Few Aspects of Overexposure in Contemporary American Film” examined overexposure in contemporary film as a reflexive sign of the characters’ and the viewers’ being exposed to extreme states of being. If exposure and overexposure seem dialectically connected in the dialectics of shock and revelation (whether traumatic or ecstatic), the blinding effect of overexposure points to the limits of what we can gaze upon, turning the gaze back upon itself.

This was the focus of Serge CHAUVIN’s (Paris-10) paper “Ni le soleil ni la mort : vérité, brûlure, aveuglement. Usages de la surexposition dans le cinéma hollywoodien classique”. In a hands-on analysis of scenes from various Hollywood classics, Serge Chauvin demonstrated that although the codes of Hollywood perfection initially defined overexposure as a technical blemish, it gradually became a deliberate technique associated with blinding heat and death, but also—and beyond—with revelation, either in Mankiewicz’s Suddenly Last Summer (1959) starring Elizabeth Taylor, or in The Hanging Tree (1959) starring Gary Cooper and Maria Schell.

“Overexposure” in poetry and music (Saturday Dec 6)

Laure de NERVAUX-GAVOTY (Paris-12) gave a remarkable paper on the use of overexposure in Nabokov’s Speak Memory, in which the magic-lantern show appears as the reflexive image to describe the writing of autobiography in terms of exposure, under-exposure, overexposure, and “broken” prisms.

Xavier KALCK (Paris-Sorbonne) in “Vers l’image aveugle: George Oppen et l’usage de la lumière”, focused on poet George Oppen’s objectivist aesthetics and his attempt to express the impenetrable nature of the world, while using images of transparency and light. Beyond his work on blankness, and the gaps in the text, Oppen, in Xavier Kalck’s view, went further than any other modernist towards the “blinded gaze” in his last works.

Hélène AJI (Le Mans) then “performed” her paper “‘The Weather (to) Day’: surexposition médiatique chez Kenneth Goldsmith”, a particularly entertaining reading of the author’s use of “uncreativity as a creative practice”. Indeed, Goldsmith’s trilogies meticulously “transcribe” weather, traffic, or sports reports as broadcast on radio, or “copy” an entire
issue of the New York Times (“Day”) as an unbroken text, advertisements, Nasdaq index and other items included as they appear on the page. By transforming the ordinary exposure to text inherent in reading the newspaper into an extraordinary form of overexposure, the author points to the fact that we have never really “read” the newspaper at all.

Mathieu DUPLAY (Lille 3) in his paper “Teach Mee That Nothing”: John Adams, le voir et la pensée du poème”, focused on contemporary composer John Adams’s musical reworking of celebrated poems such as Emily Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for death...”. Does music begin where the possibility for “images” ends? How does this contemporary piece play on the under- and over-exposure of what there is to “see” in the poem?

“Overexposure” in photography (Saturday Dec 6)

Marie CORDIÉ-LÉVY’s (Paris-7) paper “De la blancheur à l’ombre chez Alfred Stieglitz, de la médiatisation et de la nudité au pastiche chez Lee Miller” proved an in-depth examination of the uses of overexposure in both photographers’ work, the common factor between the two being self-portraiture, and the “construction” of self.

Claudine ARMAND (Nancy 2) focused on a contemporary artist in “Dans l’excès de visibilité : jeu du montrer/cacher dans les photographies de Lorna Simpson”. In her presentation of African-American artist Lorna Simpson’s photographs of black women, Claudine Armand deftly analyzed how overexposure of both image and text allows the photographer to subvert portraiture by pointing to a “subtext” to even the most “innocuous” images.

Jean-Marc VICTOR (Paris-Sorbonne) in “Une laine d’albâtre : quelques cas de surexposition dans la photographie américaine” took us on an insightful journey through American photography, from pioneering “photogenic drawings” and the ghostly use of overexposure, to overexposure as a sign of heightened meaning, or mystical experience, in early landscape photography, and finally, to more ironic codes of overexposure in contemporary works.

Sandrine DECHAUME (Paris 7) in “Michal Rovner’s Decoys and Donald Barthelme’s “Brain Damage” and the Ongoing Art of Telling It Slant”, contrasted the effectiveness of repetition and satire in visual artist Michal Rovner’s committed work on war, as opposed to the failure of excess in Barthelme’s posthumous satirical short story on television.

The use of overexposure whether in fiction, film, photography, poetry and music always appears symbolically loaded. Whether it is seen as a form of saturation with signification, or as an ironic questioning of signification through excessive (high)lighting, it is always meaningful, and always disturbing.

The conference papers will be published during the upcoming academic year. Keep an eye out for them!
NOTES

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