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Studies in Twentieth Century Literature Volume 20 • Index • 1996

Articles

Antle, Martine. The Object in France Today	315
Bilbija, Ksenija. Spanish American Women Writers: Simmering Identity Over a Low Fire	147
Carrión, María B. Geography, (M)Other Tongues and the Role of Translation in Giannina Braschi's <i>El imperio de los sueños</i>	167
Castillo, Debra. Gorgeous Pedagogy	101
Castro-Klaren, Sara. The Subject, Feminist Theory and Latin American Texts	271
Clark, María B. Usurping Difference in the Feminine Fantastic from the Riverplate	235
Cummins, Laurel. Reading in Colette: Domination, Resistance, Autonomy	451
Cypess, Sandra. Dramatic Strategies Made Clear: The Fem- inist Politics in Griselda Gambaro's <i>Puesta en claro</i>	125
Fauvel, Maryse. From Iron to Glass: Transparency and Pluralism	337
Fisher, Dominique D. The Disappearance of Objects in "Surmodernity": From Object-images to Meta-objects	323
Fourny, Jean-François. Fashion, Bodies, and Objects	393

Klaw, Barbara. Subverting the Dominant Order: Narrative as Weapon in Simone de Beauvoir's <i>Tous les hommes sont mortels</i>	467
Lindstrom, Naomi. Female Divinities and Story-Telling in the Work of Tamara Kamenszain	221
Martínez, Adelaida López. Dynamics of Change in Latin American Literature: Contemporary Women Writers	13
Mazza-Anthony, Elizabeth A. Border Crossings in Marie Redonnet's <i>Splendid [Seaside] Hôtel</i>	491
Meyer, Doris. The Early (Feminist) Essays of Victoria Ocampo	41
Nigro, Kirsten F. Filling the Empty Space: Women and Latin American Theatre	251
Rogers, Juliette M. Addressing Success: Fame and Narrative Strategies in Colette's <i>La Naissance du jour</i>	505
Schehr, Lawrence R. Body / Antibody	405
Schofer, Peter. What's Behind the Billboard: Dead Men and Private Parts. Object? Sign? Thing?	381
Steele, Cynthia. Power, Gender, and Canon Formation in Mexico	65
Strauss, Walter A. The Fictions of Surrealism	431
West, Alan. The Stone and its Images: The Poetry of Nancy Morejón	193
Yaari, Monique. Combas & Co. or the Figure and the Great Divide	351

Book Reviews

Lyotard, Jean François. <i>Political Writings</i> . Trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman	
Reviewed by Ronald Bogue	533

- Booker, M. Keith. *Literature and Domination: Sex, Knowledge, and Power in Modern Fiction*
Reviewed by Frédérique Chevillot 522
- Descombes, Vincent. *The Barometer of Modern Reason: On the Philosophies of Current Events*
Reviewed by André Pierre Colombat 528
- Sollers, Philippe. *Watteau in Venice*
Reviewed by T. Douglas Doyle 543
- McPherson, Karen S. *Incriminations: Guilty Women/Telling Stories*
Reviewed by Colette Hall 535
- Chevillot, Frédérique. *La Réouverture du texte*
Reviewed by Susan Ireland 524
- Steele, Cynthia. *Politics, Gender, and the Mexican Novel, 1968-1988: Beyond the Pyramid*
by Jill S. Kuhnheim 545
- Anderson, Stephanie. *Le Discours Féminin de Marguerite Duras*
Reviewed by Julia Lauer-Chéenne 521
- Scatton, Linda Hart. *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Evolution of a Writer*
Reviewed by Eric Lozowy 541
- Holmgren, Beth. *Women's Works in Stalin's Time: On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam*
Reviewed by Serafima Roll 531
- Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*
Reviewed by Jeff Schneider 526
- Melnick, Daniel C. *Fullness of Dissonance. Modern Fiction and the Aesthetics of Music.*
Reveiwed by Walter A. Strauss 538
- Webb, Barbara J. *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction. Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris and Eduard Glissant*
Reviewed by Nicasio Urbina 547

Studies in Twentieth Century Literature
Contents—Summer 1996
Volume 20, Number 2

French Issue:

The Object in France Today:
Six essays collected and edited by
Martine Antle

With five essays on French narrative

Articles

- Introduction: The Object in France Today
Martine Antle 315

- The Disappearance of Objects in “Surmodernity”:
From Object-images to Meta-objects
Dominique D. Fisher 323

Abstract. This article examines various modes of disappearance of objects from modernity to the latest stage of postmodernity. From the loss of the aura to the proliferation of fractal images, whether it be in literature, contemporary art, or daily life, objects undergo a series of mutations (object-signs, image-objects, object-images, meta-objects) that lead to a new kind of obscenity in which “jouissance” ‘pleasure’ is released into the madness of a vision obdurate by pathos and panopticism. (DDF)

From Iron to Glass: Transparency and Pluralism

Maryse Fauvel

337

Abstract. The author reads a number of recent architectural constructions in Paris (mainly the Louvre pyramid, but also the Musée d'Orsay and the Institut du Monde arabe) and argues that they affirm the plurality of contemporary France while at once inscribing and subverting the conventions of its (once) dominant culture: the Arab world in the heart of Paris, the museum cum railway station as the focal point of conflicting tastes, the pyramid as both accomplice and critic of history. Their pluralism qualifies them as postmodern. These monuments also propose a new role for today's museum. The building itself becomes an art object, and the museum is not reduced to its function as a place for education and edification; it demands an inventive and exploratory initiative on the part of the visitor. (MF)

Combas & Co. or the Figure and the Great Divide

Monique Yaari

351

Abstract. The young painter, Robert Combas, leader of the 1980s "figuration libre" 'free figuration' movement, is seen here both as representative of stylistic and thematic trends in contemporary French art, and as illustrative, through the unfolding of his career, of the object "painting" and its sociology in contemporary France. Examined are: first, the "Postmodern convergence" of figurative, indeed narrative art, with the collapse of the "great divide" between elite and popular art forms; and second, traits such as hypertrophic verbal paratext, high erotic content, and political stand. Similar threads are followed in the work of a number of other artists, old and young, established or not, female and male—hence the "& Co." of the title. The essay raises, without claiming to solve, a set of sociologically and politically informed questions: What forces have shaped Combas' sensibility and style? What forces have made him a minor celebrity domestically, one that France's awesome cultural apparatus considers worthy of export? What, in the formation of contemporary mentalities and tastes, may account for the parallels found among artists as diverse as Combas, Quardon, Pierre and Gilles, Ben, and Klossowski? (MY)

What's Behind the Billboard: Dead Men and Private Parts. Object? Sign? Thing?

Peter Schofer

381

Abstract. It is a truism that objects and visual sign systems convey meaning. But the meanings shift radically according to the viewer and

how the signs are read. Several years ago I asked an American student to photograph scenes which either shocked her or perplexed her upon her arrival in France. One photo is of a publicity panel at the entry to Le Père Lachaise cemetery. The panel consisted of nine magazine covers, including covers for magazines on children, cooking, hunting, and computers, as well as two pornographic magazines. The young student focused on just the last two covers, thus masking out the others to create her shocked meaning. Other viewers, such as a housewife, would have been expected to mask out the pornographic magazines and be enticed by the magazines centered on the home. A more global reading of the billboard reveals rhetorical links, narratives, and ironical juxtapositions between the magazines, thus creating dispersed and contradictory meanings drawn from this miniature map of contemporary France. (PS)

Fashion, Bodies, and Objects

Jean-François Fourny

393

Abstract. This essay is based on the assumption that the body has undergone a process of fragmentation that started with “modern” art and commodity fetishism that is being amplified today by an increasingly fetishistic high fashion industry itself relayed by music videos and a gigantic pornography industry. This article begins with a discussion of fetishism and objectification as they appear in high fashion shows where underwear becomes wear (turning the inside into the outside), thus expanding (or dissolving) the traditional notion of pornography because they are both reported in comparable terms by mainstream magazines such as *Femmes* and less conventional publications such as *Penthouse*. A comparable phenomenon takes place in the novels of Hervé Guibert where internal organs (that is the inside) become literary characters (as “outside”) through medical imagery. Finally, an issue of the French *New Look* magazine is analyzed because it features a high fashion collection next to a pictorial/essay on Issei Sagawa, a.k.a. “the Japanese Cannibal.” Here again, the objectification of the dismembered body is taken a step further both by designer Jean-Paul Gaultier and Sagawa. It thus appears that the human body is nowadays being totally invested by commodity fetishism, rendering gender difference obsolete and opening a new space that so far has no name, and announces the final merging of high fashion, literature, pornography, and music videos. (JFF)

Body / Antibody

Lawrence R. Schehr

405

Abstract. Unique object in the exchange-system, the gay body occupies a locus where a phantom identity and an imagined reciprocity define the poles of the subject-object relation. Made of the right stuff, it is an object circulating in a system that tends to reproduce the concept of identity in its search for mirror images of itself. Often rejected by the world, it has recently become a cynosure equated with sickness, pestilence, and death in the age of AIDS. The representations of that object change: no longer perceived as a part of libidinal economy, it has become a mass of symptoms, having changed from being an index of sexuality into being the visible dissipation of the flesh. The gay body in the age of AIDS is the mark of a pariah with the abject nature of the outcast. The body with AIDS takes the form of a text made of many signs and with many ways of reading the checker-board pattern of the flesh. And the AIDS-narrative turns the body into the limit of the representable. (LRS)

* * *

The Fictions of Surrealism

Walter A. Strauss

431

Abstract. Surrealism is an attitude toward life, even more than a literary and artistic movement. It aspired to no less than the remaking of man and the world by reintroducing “everyday” magic and a new idealization of the Female. In many respects, its goal was spiritual renewal. This enterprise was most prominently successful in the domain of poetry and painting. The major spokesman for the movement, Andre Breton, disliked the novel. Nevertheless, the members of the movement and their associates made numerous ventures into prose fiction, with notable results. Four types of fiction are delineated: the neo-Gothic romance; the adventure diary of “magic” experience—this one being probably the most typical of all the kinds of narrative invented; the erotic (or pornographic) *récit*; and the linguistic extravaganza, in which language becomes the major instrument of sorcery. In many ways, the Surrealist “experiment” could be characterized as an attempt at the liberation of languages. This observation raises a number of questions about the impact of Surrealism on subsequent developments in French fiction (and the theatre), as well as upon its impact on Western fiction in general. The conclusion drawn is that Surrealist

fiction has been a major contribution, a pioneering effort, in the shaking up of narrative concepts and techniques in the second half of the twentieth century. (WAS)

Reading in Colette: Domination, Resistance, Autonomy

Laurel Cummins

451

Abstract. The act of reading on the part of Colette's characters reveals itself as a dynamic involving domination and resistance. A study of passages from two of her semi-autobiographical works, *La Maison de Claudine* and *Sido*, brings to light both a positively connoted model of reading, exemplified by the character 'Colette,' and a negatively connoted model, exemplified by the older sister Juliette. While Juliette approaches texts with no sense of self, and seeks instead to be defined by the texts she reads, 'Colette' remains in relation to texts and to the discourses they contain, and resists them. Gender complicates the process. Both father and mother intervene in 'Colette's' apprenticeship as reader. While the censorship that constitutes the father's intervention proves both debilitating and disempowering, the mother's modeling of reading as dialogue and resistance empowers 'Colette,' both as a reader and a female being. (LC)

Subverting the Dominant Order: Narrative as Weapon in Simone de Beauvoir's *Tous les hommes sont mortels*

Barbara Klaw

467

Abstract. This essay argues that through the narrative techniques of point of view and embedding, Beauvoir carefully constructed her narrative and those of her male and female characters in *Tous les hommes sont mortels*, her third novel, published in 1946, in order to explain why males dominate society and to encourage women to fight against the current patriarchal social order. Many critics view Fosca as the principal character, and his 400-page embedded recapitulation of his past as the predominant text, but shifting the focus from Fosca to Régine, who constitutes the only focalizer of present events in the embedding text, clarifies many details previously judged as faults. This study advances that the awkwardness of the characters and of the linking of the narrative strands needs to be reinterpreted in relation to thematic repetitions and contradictions, the narrator's reliability, the use of time, psychoanalytic theory, the author's life at the time of writing, cultural history, and theories concerning *énonciation*. The interplay of these elements indicates the ways in which narrative is wielded as a weapon which ultimately promotes female independence in the struggle between the sexes. (BK)

Border Crossings in Marie Redonnet's *Splendid [Seaside] Hôtel*

Elizabeth A. Mazza-Anthony

491

Abstract. Marie Redonnet crosses previously established boundaries in *Splendid Hôtel* and *Seaside*. Her writing flows across traditional literary genres as she revisits certain motifs, characters, and situations in her novel and play. In addition to crossing the border between the novel and theater, she echoes the works of other authors—specifically Rimbaud and Duras. Moreover, within a particular text Redonnet erases subject boundaries. That is to say, her characters are not individuals; their uniqueness is washed away by a continual ebb and flow of common characteristics and traits. By creating such fluid personae, Redonnet captures the societal homogeneity that is symptomatic of “surmodernity” as defined by Mark Augé: “the acceleration and overabundance of events and space and the individualization of references [are] the three elements of excess with which we have tried to characterize the supermodern condition.” As she weaves her “literary” text and intertext she also incorporates elements from other disciplines. Indeed, her references to the cinema as well as to the family photograph obscure conventional distinctions between “high” and “mass” culture. At the same time, Redonnet’s blurred boundaries create a sense of longing for the past, or more precisely, for past representations. This element of nostalgia sends the characters and, at times, the reader/spectator into the familiar. Thus, traces of past representations emerge in Redonnet’s writing as in a palimpsest. In conclusion, by crossing previously established borders, Marie Redonnet paints the permeable “supermodern” boundaries among individuals, text/intertext, and photography/film/literature. (EAM)

Addressing Success: Fame and Narrative Strategies in Colette's *La Naissance du jour*

Juliette M. Rogers

505

Abstract. Colette's *La Naissance du jour* (1928) is probably her most renowned work on the complex mother-daughter relations between her mother Sido and herself. Yet, as I demonstrate in this article, the book is just as much about renown itself. Beginning with the theoretical works of Leo Braudy (*The Frenzy of Renown*), John Rodden (*The Politics of Literary Reputation*), and a close analysis of *La Naissance du jour*, I look at the ways in which Colette manipulated her narratives to create her own public images of herself. These manipulations would allow her to perpetuate the fame that she had enjoyed for the

first twenty years of her writing career as a “daughter” figure, while simultaneously allowing her to begin to shape the public’s reception of her to include a more mature authority figure for herself and her prose narratives in French literary circles of her day. (JMR)

Book Reviews

- Anderson, Stephanie. *Le Discours Féminin de Marguerite Duras*
by Julia Lauer-Chéenne 521
- Booker, M. Keith. *Literature and Domination: Sex, Knowledge, and Power in Modern Fiction*
by Frédérique Chevillot 522
- Chevillot, Frédérique. *La Réouverture du texte*
by Susan Ireland 524
- Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*
by Jeff Schneider 526
- Descombes, Vincent. *The Barometer of Modern Reason: On the Philosophies of Current Events*
by André Pierre Colombat 528
- Holmgren, Beth. *Women’s Works in Stalin’s Time: On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam*
by Serafima Roll 531
- Liotard, Jean François. *Political Writings*. Trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman
by Ronald Bogue 533
- McPherson, Karen S. *Incriminations: Guilty Women/Telling Stories*
by Colette Hall 535
- Melnick, Daniel C. *Fullness of Dissonance. Modern Fiction and the Aesthetics of Music*
by Walter A. Strauss 538

Scatton, Linda Hart. <i>Mikhail Zoshchenko: Evolution of a Writer</i> by Eric Lozowy	541
Sollers, Philippe. <i>Watteau in Venice</i> by T. Douglas Doyle	543
Steele, Cynthia. <i>Politics, Gender, and the Mexican Novel, 1968-1988: Beyond the Pyramid</i> by Jill S. Kuhnheim	545
Webb, Barbara J. <i>Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction. Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris and Eduard Glissant</i> by Nicasio Urbina	547