

Henry Sussman 2011: *Around the Book. Systems and Literacy*. New York: Fordham UP. 319 pp. ISBN 978-0-8232-3283-3.

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“Leggere è andare incontro a qualcosa
che sta per essere e ancora nessuno sa cosa sarà”

ITALO CALVINO, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.

Textual display is transforming itself constantly and at high speed: from the first hypertextual fiction created with Hypercard and Storyspace software, such as *Afternoon, a Story*, by Michael Joyce (1990), or his later Web work *Twelve Blue* (1991), both authored using Storyspace (Eastgate System's proprietary hypertext authoring program) (Hayles 2008: 60), to the latest e-book platforms that offer readers hundreds of thousands of online books in dozens of formats, from .azw, to .pdb, there is a world of distance. Amidst this constant metamorphosis of the book medium, one may ask where the persistent core of the book lies, if it is material, perceptual, cognitive or textual. The fact is that the book does persist, but it is not what it used to be, and, if the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964: 8), new reformulations of the production/consumption of texts and of visual communication must be made. As Jay D. Bolter has observed, academic humanists are attempting both to use and to theorize about new media, but they tend to keep use and theory separate. In a sense, the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century became media theory, that is, the study of technologies of representation and communication, beginning with (but no longer limited to) printed books and the literary form of print (2004: 16). However, such theories may be inadequate to the task of understanding twenty-first century media, since they were occasioned by earlier technologies and were not designed to improve the practice of these technologies (Bolter 2004: 16); hence the need to rethink the theories involved in the understanding of the relation between the new media and the humanities.

Henry Sussman, the author of this sustained reflection on such matters, is Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Yale University. His extended career as a critic includes works such as *The Hegelian Aftermath: Readings in Hegel, Kierkegaard, Freud, Proust and James* (1982), a discussion of the formal laws of Hegelian texts, and *High Resolution: Critical Theory and the Problem of Literacy* (1989), an inquiry into the dimension of exteriority constructed by philosophical systems and literary works. He has also written *Psyche and Text: The Sublime and the Grandiose in Literature, Psychopathology, and Culture*

(1993), a work combining a variety of related artifacts, models, and productions, such as the theories of Freud, Lacan and Derrida with works such as *Othello* or *The Silence of the Lambs*, in a meditation on the possibilities of subjectivity and representation. More recently he has published *The Task of the Critic* (2005), where he analyzes the language of poets and thinkers —Deleuze, Guattari, Benjamin and Derrida— to trace the various dimensions of critical writing.

Around the Book. Systems and Literacy is his latest publication: a “book about books” (Sussman 2011: xvi), a volume about new systems and media, both of which constitute a cultural and economic phenomenon (Bolter 2004: 15). It is a necessary update on the book medium, which regularly transmogrifies in response to unstoppable technological advances, and a perceptive investigation of book culture and modern systems theory. As Sussman observes, all works of literary criticism are books about books. This one, however, constituting first and foremost a zone of intensity in textual processing, effecting both the scrambling of its input and the possibility of surprise or uncertainty in its output (Derrida 2006: 99), circles around exceptional instances in textual history and inquires into current borderline cases and prospects for the book medium, exploring its possibilities and its limits, as well as its relation to other cultural systems. This is in absolute accordance with Sussman’s view on language, as stated in his article ‘Prolegomena to any Present and Future Language Poetry’ (2003): language comprises the building blocks of any communicative or cultural production. It in turn incorporates its own materiality, he states, and to speak to the materiality of language at once addresses its non-ideational, non-metaphysical dimensions, and emphasizes its place within an economy of production and reception, within economy per se (2003: 198). Language, the concrete handling of words and word fragments, could, then, be understood as a generative system.

As the author himself states, *Around the Book* owes its structure to several theories of criticism: neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism, rhetoric and deconstruction (Sussman 2011: xvii). The prospects and format of the book are central to a sequence of system formats arising in the positivism and hardwiring stemming from Kant and Hegel and culminating in Deleuze/Guattari’s polymorphic strain and resistance to the intersecting centrisms and overdeterminations of late capitalism —which is defined as a book and whose indeterminacies demand to be read as intensities and accelerations, as nomadic flows of deterritorialization (18-19). Consequently, readers will be asked to contend with theoretical constructs such as faciality, the rhizome, the supplement, digital and analogue organization, turbulence and chaos.

In the first chapter, titled ‘Introduction: Around the Book’, Sussman states that although the latest cybernetic phenomena may still be *bound* to the same degree as a traditional paginated book, the rhizomatic electronic universe that a computer device accesses is vaster and even more ‘open’, in terms of data capacity and storage, as well as in the ramification of links between those pieces and stores of information, than the most elaborate encyclopaedia ever printed (10-11). Furthermore, the book has embraced from its very outset the contingencies and proliferating network of possibilities, now

unavoidably invading, disrupting, and tempering large-scale systematic organization (11).

Subsequent chapters reveal the devices employed by a number of writers —Derrida, Kafka, Benjamin, and others— when approaching a variety of systemic impasses, ranging from Gregory Bateson's double binds to how the selections inevitably executed by Niklas Luhman's social systems are used in their process of differentiation. *Processing, zones, intensity, display, translation* or *draft* are among the terms in which the prospects for the book may be couched at the present juncture (14).

The second chapter, 'Extraterrestrial Kafka: Ahead to the Graphic Novel', addresses the irreducibly visual component of Kafka's imagination, and extrapolates its features and potentials toward powerful and memorable innovations in writing, painting, photography or cinema (50). As Sussman further states, the instability and imminent collapse that Kafka intuited in imperial, national and municipal institutions of his day had tangible repercussions for the present-day book, both as a communication medium and as an institution, in an age of cybernetic technology and comprehensive overload in the systems and infrastructure of communications, demographics and critical resources (52-3). This leads into an analysis of works of graphic fiction (specifically those of Ben Katchor, Luc and François Schuite, Leo Leonhard and Otto Jägersberg), which Sussman reads as a weather map of inscriptive possibilities from one historical moment or epistemological configuration to another —as he explains, in Leonhard and Jägersberg's *Rüssel in Komikland*, for example, Hieronymus Bosch's apocalyptic landscapes are combined with the gaudy colours of contemporary advertising (Sussman 2011: 79).

'Kafka's Imaginary: A Cognitive Psychology Footnote' follows and develops the line set out in the previous chapter. Sussman takes Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) as "the very book implicated by the unanticipated figurations orchestrated by the mutations of his Imaginary" (86). The novel, he states, is the labyrinthine medium in which mutually disqualifying perspectives, inferences, and explanations coexist in a condition of growing dissonance and unease (87). The author continues by analysing a number of other works by Kafka, such as the fable 'The Great Wall of China' (written in 1917 and published in 1931), where the Czech writer employed the figurative resources of the sublime and fragmentation in the service of fantastic literature. As Sussman explains, the fable is surely the cornerstone of Kafka's standing/role as an important political theorist although it is a largely neglected narrative of thinking, perception, and corporeal experience under the regime of late capitalism (96-7). The exception of Deleuze and Guattari's hybrid account, expounded in the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* diptych and elsewhere —where energy and activity (language, information, money, desire, etc) are interpreted as flows (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 20) is, however, acknowledged. Sussman stresses the importance of Kafka's work in this respect by stating that it "revises, corrects and contributes to the prevailing . . . imaginary when the work augments how its audience will henceforth see, think or process images and words, and when the work facilitates cultural access to new conditions with fundamental bearing on climatic and socio-political experience" (105).

The fourth chapter, 'Booking Benjamin: The Fate of the Medium', firstly ponders the vertiginous convergence of the design and the text encompassed in books, focusing on Walter Benjamin's love for the book medium, which he sees as the very "volume, space, forum, foyer, scene, and abyss for cultural articulation and public discussion and for critical apprehension" (111), which is subject to progression —a line he sets out in *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (2008). Further to this, the chapter also examines the destructive as well as generative forces and flows of literary works: from Benjamin's "illuminated book", or his "mystical book", to "the dissolving book" (the book that provides for its own marginality and dispersion) (136).

As the title of the fifth chapter, 'Pulsations of Respect, or Winged Impossibility: Poetic Deconstruction', indicates, deconstruction theorists are aware of the dual potential of books to codify and facilitate the structures of ideology, thus making them binding, on the one hand, and, on the other, prompting/forcing them to fan outward toward impossibility (140). This interest is further developed in the following chapter, 'Hegel, *Glas*, and the Broader Modernity', where Derrida's most architectural work, *Glas* (1986), is analysed. As settled in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1998), the Book, as theocratic, canonical, and juridical instrument, pushes up against its limits when becoming a medium for unfettered and unconditional thinking. Philosophy and literature have, for Derrida, a supplemental relationship, and in *Glas*, he explores this relationship through its bicolumnar structure. In Sussman's own words: "*Glas*, in its typographic architecture and its motifs of splitting, reverberating, ringing, and castrating . . . performs the relation between the ideology of Western culture(s) and its margins, the reflexive achievements of speculation and 'the mirror's tain', the dialectical, organic, and consummate fate for the West that Hegel envisioned and Genet's gay-criminal 'underworld'" (164). That is, *Glas*' architecture situates an interiority of Western idealism in the Hegel text that is counterpointed by the Genet text, which traces out the emptying or in-difference of the 'same' tradition. As such, the typography and the textual architecture of *Glas* engages new artifacts and transpires in a zone characterised, in arbitrary turns, by totalitarian closure and untrammelled possibility (189).

In the seventh chapter, 'Systems, Games, and the Player: Did We Manage to Become Human?', Sussman delves further into system theory, and conceives of the game as a system that is slanted in such a way as to afford players the illusion of control, allowing them to participate in the programming and output of the system (195). So play, he argues, turns out to be a core concept related to whatever freedom prevails in any number of interconnected domains: our personal liberty and a matrix of cybernetically implemented systems. Complexity, adaptation, self-reference and autopoiesis are revealed as key elements in contemporary systems theory which help in the understanding of literature and game. Sussman argues that thinkers such as "Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida demonstrate that systems are also the interface to open-ended networks of signification that proliferate, disseminate, verge toward no specific point or destination" (211). He continues by stating that random dispersions and haphazard coincidences of the constitutive signifiers make systems playful.

The next chapter, 'Atmospherics of Mood', reveals the ethical call of critical options mentioned in the previous chapters. The normal citizen, Sussman explains, devotes most of his/her time and energy to negotiating systems that are, in their irreducible configuration, arbitrary and intransigent. In this context, he goes on, "art and critique are indispensable media of noise and resistance introduced into systems whose momentum and efficiency are only too well entrenched" (219). In this way deconstruction could be envisaged as an alliance with turbulence (or noise) in checking the multifarious momentums of executive and judgmental systems. However, he claims, there are multiple occasions upon which it is perfectly clear that the smooth functioning of the systems of which we are part (educational, informational, professional, economic, etc.) demands our compliance, which consists in giving up our 'noise' and ceasing and desisting from our inscription (240-41), as part of the system's very openness is its resistance to the mutating *static*. Therefore, "criticism is situated in the very systole and diastole of movements and conditions making systems possible and enabling the environmental discourse that would seem to lend them coherence" (243).

In 'Thinking Flat Out: Back to Bateson', the book's closing chapter, the different paths signposted in preceding chapters converge. Starting with Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1987) and his analysis of systematic arrangements of societal life, readers are offered an overview of both loose and strict scientific thought, which clearly undermines Cartesian either/or models. Bateson's reading of (Balinese) culture as a system throws some light onto communicative processes, which structure cognitive and interactive processes. Close reading, Sussman argues, is "tantamount to meticulousness in the pursuit of circuits and what transpires along their compass, as well as acuity with regard to the architectural housing of systematic components" (2011: 272). This messianic aspiration marks the point at which the writing of systems swerves unmarked into the metaphysics of ethical perfectibility and redemption (273).

This comprehensive and complex book is a must-read in contemporary criticism on literature and systems. Perhaps not every one of the aspects dealt with in this work will appeal to each and every reader, as the chapters are varied and dense. The style can also at times be opaque for non specialists, even if they are experienced readers. The fact that they are obliged to contend with complex theoretical constructions in a sustained manner might limit the book's accessibility to those already familiar with the fields of both literary theory and system theories. However, taken as a whole, *Around the Book. Systems and Literacy* speaks for the importance and relevance of deconstruction in system theories. Useful and thought-provoking, this book is a most thorough examination of the readings and uses of systems and literacy.

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