
International Conference “Staging American Bodies”

Staging America – Seventh Annual International Conference, Université
Nice Sophia Antipolis, March 17-18, 2016

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International Conference “Staging American Bodies”

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Yaël Pouffary

- 1 The seventh edition of the *Staging America* conference series tackled the various ways in which the human form has been staged and represented throughout history and in different media across the Americas. The term “staging” was not limited to the performing arts. The conference covered a wide geographical area and encompassed a large spectrum of disciplines ranging from literature to fine art, and from pop culture to drama. The Institut des Amériques, the Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire Récits Cultures Et Sociétés (LIRCES), and the Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines of the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis endorsed the conference, organized by Nathalie Massip, Tiphaine Duriez and Yaël Pouffary.

Keynote Speeches

Plenary I: Audrey Goodman (Georgia State University), “From Fugitive Poses to Photographic Storytelling: Native Women Retell their Visual Histories” – Chaired by Nathalie Massip (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis)

- 2 Audrey Goodman argued in her keynote address that famous photographs such as those of Edward Curtis have both romanticized historical facts and demonstrated the power of photography in storytelling. The visual stories seem to have been cropped or even completely reinvented. One must ask oneself: what does a Native American portrait actually say or hide, especially when one knows how candid shots often can be ruined by the presence of a camera? As artist Jaune Quick-to-See comments: “portraits are

deceptive because of what they don't tell”. Audrey Goodman highlighted recurring terms used by contemporary female Native American artists about photos being “re-staged” or “suspicious representations” or even “treacheries”. Even so, pictures are important and, if incorporated in a storytelling process, “they can become a part of the decolonizing practice of claiming visual sovereignty”. Given that “visual storytelling can activate communal memories and direct tribal futures”, Audrey Goodman assembled a panel of contemporary female Native artists who have explored this new way of storytelling, far more faithful to the past: Joy Harjo, Leslie Silko, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, and Quick-to-see Smith, among others. In a way, these contemporary female Native artists see themselves as “keepers of the stories for those who don't come back”.

Plenary II: Wendy Harding (Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès), “Spectacle Lynchings / Textual Responses” – Chaired by Matthew Roudané (Georgia State University, Atlanta)

- 3 In her keynote address, Wendy Harding explained how African Americans were the subjects and targets of violent spectacles, even after the abolition of slavery. Their mutilated bodies were displayed in public spaces, as can be seen on photographs. Lynching acted as a melodrama; it was staged, it was “carnavalesque”. Oftentimes lynchings were exhibitions with a holiday mood, a moment where white supremacy was confirmed. Wendy Harding analyzed the staging of some of the photographs, drawing links with Christian paintings. She also drew from a corpus of African American writers who regained control of the staging and representation of African Americans' bodies through different forms of art. Those artists included Alice Walker, who “suggests horror without ever showing it” in “The Flowers”, and Toni Morrison, who places the white characters off stage—out of view—in an oblique literary style, as in *Sula* and *Beloved*. African American writers like Morrison have “readdressed violence to the black community so that it became a means of affirming hope and regenerating life.”

Staging American Bodies and/in Photography – chaired by Nathalie Dessens (Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès)

Kelly Dennis (University of Connecticut), “The Obscene Homeless Body in Documentary Photography”

- 4 By the mid-twentieth century, documentary photography had become recognized as high art, in part thanks to the contribution of Dorothea Lange's photographs taken during the Great Depression, under the very careful eye of the U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA). But after the Vietnam War, photographers “questioned the ethics of documentary practices”, wondering what is truly depicted, and whether the identities of those in the photographs are respected. Kelly Dennis presented what is labelled as “bum photography”, and the viewer's need to “gawk at others' misfortunes.” She illustrated her paper with works by two artists, Martha Rosler and Barbara DeGenevieve, who are perfect examples of the “re-invention of documentary photography”. In both artists' exploration of homelessness, the bodies of the homeless are the focal point, yet the subjects are

treated in two very different ways. Martha Rosler renders the subjects by their absence—leaving the homeless themselves out of the scene. She chooses to stage the photographs with what the homeless have left behind them (such as empty bottles). She also makes the choice to present her work as diptychs with the photographs on one side and found poetry on the other, thus pointing out “poverty” and “social inequality” by the absence of the bodies, and the complete removal of identity. Thirty years after Rosler, Barbara DeGenevieve decided to express the same misplacement of the homeless bodies by extracting these bodies from their natural environment and placing them in hotel rooms. In making her subjects take erotic poses, DeGenevieve juxtaposes exploration and photography, and thus becomes the exposé of the obscene. Consequently, in the photographs, “[the homeless] private lives are carried out in public spaces”, inevitably soliciting the viewer’s ethical response towards upper/lower class interaction, or black/white power inequality.

Meredith Zaring (Georgia State University), “Arresting American Bodies: William Faulkner’s Literary Study of Eadweard Muybridge”

- 5 In this presentation, Meredith Zaring interrogated the interspace in which literature and photography meet, based on the study of William Faulkner’s literature and Eadweard Muybridge’s still photography. In *Light in August* (1932), William Faulkner introduced tableaux that became a “paradoxical study of still motion in an uncanny literary representation of Muybridge’s work”, such as *Horse in Motion* or *Running Man*. Faulkner reverted to transgression, for instance putting a woman in the place of a man, and eroticizing the poses. Muybridge’s will to “temporarily manipulate time” also applied to “far stranger scenes often of nude women” where the women’s bodies are eroticized and grotesquely reanimated. Meredith Zaring detailed the literature and visual correspondence of both works and how it prompted a wider field of study attributed to American bodies, especially the female bodies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Staging American Bodies and /in Literature and Pop Culture – chaired by Christian Gutleben (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis)

Candice Lemaire (Université de Bourgogne Franche-Comté), “All the soul-and-body scars: Robert Frost’s Synecdochial Geography of Pain”

- 6 In this paper, Candice Lemaire chose to discuss some of Robert Frost’s lesser known poems, from the *West-Running Brook* collection, along with his three World War I poems. In these works, Frost concentrates on the “declining bodies” with a serious tone; the notions of addition and mutilation take on a deeper meaning, if not a sort of melancholy. Throughout her presentation, Candice Lemaire analyzed the “staging of the poetic personae’s wounds, scars and illnesses” which placed on the main stage the “fragmented synecdochial poetics of pain”, to “unveil a gallery of persecutors and victims”. Through Frost’s poetry, one is confronted with the suffering body and one’s reactions to a dying

limb, for instance: "Oh, blood will out. It cannot be contained." ("The Flood", *West-Running Brook* (1928), CPPP, 233). Frost also involves the reader with and reminds the reader of the egalitarian constitution of any bodies faced with pain when he states the "Moral" in *Steeple Bush*:

The Moral is, it hardly need be shown,
 All those who try to go it sole alone,
 Too proud to be beholden for relief,
 Are absolutely sure to come to grief.
 "Haec Fabula Docet", *Steeple Bush* (1947), CPPP, 358.

Hélène Gaillard (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis), "Singing and Painting the Body: Walt Whitman and Thomas Eakins"

- 7 Hélène Gaillard focused on Walt Whitman's and Thomas Eakins' common understanding of the body. The word is repeated more than a hundred times in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The final section of the collection, "Poem of the Body," in which the poet makes an extensive enumeration of body parts and functions, was severely criticized by many of his contemporaries, who called it "reckless and indecent." Whitman's close friend, artist Thomas Eakins, painted bodies with a precision akin to the poet's objective eye. His fascination for the body led him to paint medical surgeries and have the viewer look on the scene as would a doctor. While Eakins considered the body as "the most beautiful object in nature," his preciseness in reproducing the human body led critics to denigrate his work. *The Gross Clinic* (1875), one of Eakins' masterpieces, was regarded as "a degradation of art". In both Eakins' and Whitman's cases, the impact of Victorian-age morality, where medical advancement did not fit the "American quintessential acceptance of nature and the body", is evident. Their avant-garde passion for science led both artists to view the body scientifically, that is to say where all men are equal as ordinarily every human body is built the same way. Therefore, their view of the American body represented a political faux pas. Even though Whitman and Eakins were both ahead of their time, thus making them isolated from the rest of the world, eventually their art was recognized as the "expression of a true American spirit."

Mathieu Guiglielmi (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis), "Beauty and the Beast: The Quest for the Perfect Body in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*"

- 8 In his paper, Mathieu Guiglielmi explored the various forms that the quest for the perfect body takes in Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991). Patrick Bateman, the narrator, lives in 1980s Manhattan and is in constant search for perfection, to the extreme. Such obsession may be compared to that of an artist trying to "achieve his best piece of art, like carving a mask or even a building". In this novel, the main American body progresses through three different stages. The first phase, which focuses on this tireless quest for perfection, can be titled the "Perfect Body". The second phase is the "Body in Pain", where the narrator surpasses himself. He behaves like a beast, in complete opposition to the gentleness he displays when taking care of his body—for instance when he applies facial lotions. Having entered a Social Darwinist crusade, "the survival of the most handsome," Bateman starts killing people. Anyone that does not fit must disappear—those outcasts who do not "abide by the rules of this flawless ideal." Finally, in the last phase, he goes

through the "Abstraction of the Body". The body that feels so much pain believes it needs such pain to be alive, yet a question remains: does being alive equal feeling good? Patrick Bateman is devoid of any human emotion; behaving as a zombie, he does not exist anymore as a character. In his "quest for flawlessness" he becomes "any-body", representing a society that is slowly dying.

Claude Chastagner (Université Paul Valéry – Montpellier III), "Happy Bodies. Staging Happiness in Pharrell Williams's 'Happy'"

- 9 Written, produced and performed by Pharrell Williams—artist, clothes designer, political and social activist—"Happy" became a worldwide phenomenon in 2014. Running for twenty-four hours, the video of the song is unusual and displays approximately four hundred dancers from all types of social and ethnic communities. This video has been viewed so far sixty-three million times, and the condensed version more than eight hundred and ten million times. Many cities have made tribute videos or even parodies. According to Claude Chastagner, about ninety-five percent of the dancers in the video communicate happiness through constant movement of their bodies. Claude Chastagner asserts that there are limited ways to communicate happiness while dancing, contending only seven expressions meant to communicate emotions are universal. Claude Chastagner wondered if there was an American way to display emotions. Furthermore, the effect of globalization is the focal point, as one essential question remains: should/must everybody be happy? The fact that this video was viewed all over the world is a reflection of the wide diversity which constitutes American society, because these dancing bodies were able to communicate happiness to an eclectic and international public.

Staging American Bodies and/in Drama – Chaired by Matthew Roudané (Georgia State University, Atlanta)

Sarah Dyne (Georgia State University), "It's so queer – in the next room': Docile / Deviant Bodies, Performativity, and Spatiality in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*"

- 10 Through this presentation, Sarah Dyne explored the different ways in which performed identity and "docile-turned-deviant" bodies act in the "heteronormative and heterotopic spaces of boarding schools," drawing from the work of Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. By focusing on Karen and Martha, the two main characters of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, Sarah Dyne exposes the lack of space in society for those American bodies that do not fit in the norms of the heteronormative institutions; in this play, society is staged through the all-girls boarding school whose headmistresses are Karen and Martha. Therefore, on this stage, public and private spheres meet and conflict. Martha terminates her life voluntarily when her mind and body are not "docile" anymore. One is led to question whether all American bodies are allowed to have a role in society, as Martha shoots herself offstage, "ultimately 'queering' the space that once served to reinforce societal norms which she no longer embodies."

Emeline Jouve (Université Champollion, Albi), “Hybrid Bodies on the Intermedial New York Scene”

- 11 In her paper, Emeline Jouve studied how bodies are represented in the New York drama scene referred to as the “New American Avant-Garde”. This New York drama movement is based on intermediality, more specifically the “superimposition of different artistic media”, which triggers diverse reactions from the public and leads to the creation of “hybrid bodies”. Emeline Jouve concentrated on three different theatre companies and how they perform and represent bodies. The first one was the Wooster Group, which could be characterized as the “uncanny” group, since characters are illusions; because of the use of technology, only the characters’ imagination lingers. Therefore, the split between the characters and technology creates a sense of dread, a sense of uneasiness. Emeline Jouve also analyzed The Big Art Group, which could be characterized as the “carnavalesque” group, as the negative space holds the dancers while the positive space is found on television. This group pushes the “frontier of avant-garde,” according to Emeline Jouve. Finally, Andrew Schneider may be said to produce the “reality defect.” This artist wishes to communicate the feeling of the “here and now” through his unusual use of technology and his original choice of staging the public space. Emeline Jouve’s presentation led to the understanding that direct human interaction is necessary in drama, and that technology does not equal loss of control but, on the contrary, it can be perceived as a plus, as human bodies still have power over technology.

Staging American Bodies: Politics, Memorialization, Representation – Chaired by Anne Stefani (Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès)

Céline Geffroy (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis), “The Metamorphosis of the *Qhalincha*. Cross-Dressing and Inebriation in the Bolivian Andes”

- 12 In this presentation, Céline Geffroy described how Andean life has strict rules about community living. Examples include the fact that nothing may be done on one’s own, and that homosexuality is not tolerated. Identity metamorphosis is not uncommon, however, and it is found in many rituals. One rule must always be followed in order to assume another persona: to be drunk. During carnivals and celebrations related to death, men who cross-dress are allowed to be whoever they wish to be. The community allows inebriation and transgression of the rules, because everybody knows that it is temporary. These cross-dressers are called the *qhalinchas*. *Qhalinchas* take the identity (and gender) of persons who have passed on; thus they may dress—and act—as babies or métis, for example. The staging of these events can last for days, verging on the grotesque. A new gender through inebriation is completely allowed, and bisexuality is embraced, as alcohol can be labelled at the sole reason for these actions. Consequently, during a few days a year, homosexuals can be themselves. Despite many taboos, drunkenness brings all bodies together, no matter what sex, gender or sexual orientation. As the *qhalinchas* often experience loss of memory and can represent any body in the community—even animals—one is led to wonder if they could not be seen as “embodying humanity”.

Nathalie Massip (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis), "Staging Native American Bodies: Sports Mascots and Cultural Appropriation"

- 13 Playing Indian is a persistent tradition in American history and culture. The most famous example of appropriation of Indians is the Boston Tea Party, when some protesters dressed up as Mohawk Indians. In her paper, Nathalie Massip showed how cultural appropriation of Native American imagery has dominated American sports at the high school, college, and professional levels. In 2016, more than two thousand American sports teams use Indian names. For decades, Native Americans have denounced the use of these stereotypes, which they consider as a form of cultural colonization. They have organized different forms of protests, forcing high school and college teams to change their names and/or mascots, as is the case for the Stanford Cardinals, previously known as "The Indians". However, the practice endures, especially at the professional level. The biggest controversy as of now is around the Washington, D.C., Redskins. Indeed, it seems that as long as the name and logo of a team remain economically profitable, team-owners will have no real incentive to consider a name-change.
- 14 **Tiphaine Duriez (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis), "Bodies in Motion and Citizenship: The 'Internally Displaced Person' in Colombia, a Community of Exiles"**
- 15 Through this presentation, Tiphaine Duriez offered a summary of the internal exiles of Colombia forced to flee because of the ongoing conflict in their country. The issue of refugees within the country arose in the fifties with the beginning of the internal armed conflicts. The government acknowledged the problem as late as 1997, and "formulated a political response to these migratory phenomena". A law was thus passed to help these refugees, calling these bodies "desplazados forzados por la violencia." These refugees soon became "migrants of war," since from the moment they were displaced, their displacement was repeated again and again. Thanks to this law, the government granted them public police, legal representation, services and so forth. Tiphaine Duriez questioned the stigma affecting these citizens, and how these bodies are "marked into the Colombian conflict war experience."
- 16 **Thibaud Danel (Université Nice Sophia Antipolis), "Bodies of War and Memory: Remembering the Korean War in the United States"**
- 17 In this presentation, Thibaud Danel offered a large panel of art, social mobilizations, memorials, ceremonies and historical reconstructions that have played a key part in the memory of the Korean War. This war, which lasted three years, resulted in a death toll almost as high as that of the Vietnam War, yet the conflict is known as the "Forgotten War", and human remains in Korea are still being recovered. As bodies are staged, they are also the reflection of history and, thus, of the war. This is perfectly expressed in *Big Fish* (2003), in which Asian twins share the same body, as a metaphoric image of the two Koreas that once were a single body. Furthermore, there was a binary unyielding vision of the war situation, exemplified for instance in *Gran Torino* (2005). Therefore, Thibaud Danel detailed how bodies, as they play a role in society, have at times impacted a collective representation of history. The staging of bodies has had an important role, even political at times, as in the case of propaganda images found on both sides of the ocean.

Conclusion

- 18 This conference showed how diverse the definition and use of American bodies can be, whether the bodies are real or imaginary. The transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary dimension of this conference was a reflection of the diversity of the American continent, and the diversity that constitutes the bodies of America. It also demonstrated how art and history are intricately linked.
- 19 Through art and the “staging of American bodies”, questions were raised. How can history be passed on so that the memories, linked to the bodies, can be preserved, while having new doors opened? Likewise, if portraits can communicate by the omission or the addition of layers of reality, can photography then take on a new dimension, such as a political one or a historical one? If drama can question the limits of the American body by involving technology as an ally, instead of a competitor, then new views for the future are allowed. If poetry and literature depict the American body by giving a voice to each bodily part, new scientific or existential questions may be resolved. If historical stereotypes can be used in staging American bodies, then which staging is necessary in order for the truth be in fact unveiled? Finally, one could ask if in fact some staging of American bodies have been used in order to conduct the decolonizing or the re-staging of a historical fact.
- 20 All communications of this conference have at different levels solicited the need to constantly question the context in which a staging of the American body has been produced, the events that have led to this staging, what place this staging holds among the many other ‘stagings’—past and present—of the American body, and finally, to what future staging it will lead. The presentations and the debates throughout these two days have shown how there are visible links as well as innumerable invisible links that constitute the chain of staged American bodies, and the step to unveiling more of these links is in the transdisciplinary inquiry of the staged American bodies.
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