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Crispin Lee, *Haptic Experience in the Writings of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Michel Serres*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, Modern French Identities Volume 116, 2014, viii + 308 pp. ISBN 978-3-034301791-7.

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Crispin Lee's instructive and clearly written book is a valuable contribution to French intellectual history and to studies of twentieth- and twenty-first-century French literature and thought. Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot were immensely important figures in this context; both produced an important body of fictional work which stands at the more extreme end of the French literary corpus, Bataille because of the central importance of experiences of sexual and other forms of ecstasy and abjection, Blanchot because of the relentless force of withdrawal and abstraction that pulses through his writing. Both Bataille and Blanchot were also, moreover, the authors of a significant body of critical work which, as an alternative to Sartrean existentialism, was a crucial influence for the generation of thinkers that would intervene in the mid 1960s, in the explosion of "French theory." Blanchot's critical writing, in works such as *L'Espace littéraire*, *L'Entretien infini*, or *L'Écriture du désastre*, has been fundamentally and irrevocably formative of the ways in which literature has been understood and discussed.

In his fragmented and interruptive critical essays Bataille, too, like Blanchot, would attend to literature as imposing a specific and absolute type of demand, and as being in this way problematically disruptive of social and ethical norms. Michel Serres, as I will elaborate below, belongs to a slightly different context, and to a different generation. Although his importance to French intellectual history, and to the (ongoing) enterprise of French philosophy is no less crucial, Serres has enjoyed a less obtrusive dissemination in Anglophone contexts than the other two figures in Lee's orbit. He is nevertheless the author of a voluminous corpus, including five volumes under the title *Hermès* devoted to the broad question of communication, published, as it happens, in the *Critique* book series of Editions de Minuit founded by Georges Bataille in the late 1940s. Despite this sign of apparent proximity, Serres is, as will become apparent below, a philosopher of a radically different kind from both Bataille and Blanchot.

Lee's book is also a valuable contribution to discussion of a concept in aesthetics that has become a specific focus in the relatively recent past: the haptic, which we can define provisionally as a mode of perception that privileges tactility and three-dimensionality. The haptic emerged as a recent critical topos in the work of Laura U. Marks in particular. Marks' book *The Skin of the Film* (2000) deployed the notion of haptic visuality to promote a film theory in which the optical distance between spectator and screen is undermined by sequences and images that invite touch. Marks drew the concept of the haptic from the work of the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl, and Lee returns to this origin, adding to the discussion a consideration of the attention to touch and related issues in the work of contemporary writer Mark Paterson, who is more concerned with the vicissitudes of the haptic in relation to our current technologically saturated moment. The contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who has written extensively on both Bataille and Blanchot, is also an important theoretical presence in

Haptic Experience. Lee acknowledges that he does not consider the theorisations of the haptic in the work of French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, nor in the work of Gilles Deleuze, in whose work on the painter Francis Bacon it was acutely prominent; this is arguably a significant omission, but the real impetus of Lee's study lies elsewhere.

The association of Georges Bataille with the question of haptic visibility is not immediate. Is not Bataille's oeuvre initiated by a transgression of the taboo against "touching the eye," in the murderous corporeal permutations enacted by the protagonists of *Histoire de l'oeil*? This violence, resonant and contemporaneous with the infamous image of the eye slit by the razor in Bunuel and Dali's *Chien andalou*, would seem to expel Bataille's writing far from the somewhat benign perceptual mode of seeing in the mode of touch. Further on in Bataille's pre-war writing this aggressivity against the visual is extended in figures of eruption and blindness. If the pineal eye conflates the image of the eye with that of the phallus, straining upwards towards the sun, this erection fails catastrophically.[1] Bataille's work might best be placed under the figure of a castration of the eye; the violence of the cut seems to militate against the poetics of touch, of the caress, of exploratory palpation which seem integral to the haptic.

In similar vein, the post-war writing, dominated by the monumental projects of the *Somme athéologique* (the successive volumes of which were *L'Expérience intérieure*, *Le Coupable*, and *Sur Nietzsche*) and the aborted project of *La Part maudite* (of which only the first volume would appear in Bataille's lifetime), seem to turn away from the body--inwardly, in the first instance, towards the extremities conjured by what might be called a method of negative meditation, focused on the self as an absence, on the dissolution of form, the collapse of boundaries, and, in the second instance, outwardly, towards the expenditure of cosmic energy and the dissipation of the body in the circulation of all things. Where, then, in Bataille's work, would one look for the haptic, for examples of seeing in the mode of touch proposed by Riegl, and by Marks and Paterson, among others, after him?

We could ask the same of Maurice Blanchot. At first glance his work appears haunted, or driven perhaps, from the innermost point of an absence of corporeality, of any possibility of touching the concrete or engaging with it perceptually. Does Blanchot's work not emerge from the foundational moment of the deferral of the real thing far from language and thought, the step taken in Mallarmé's "Je dis: une fleur..."?[2] Even if we might detect, in Blanchot's writing, perhaps especially in his fiction but also, perhaps, no less in the images and figures that punctuate his critical writing, instances of a reference to bodies, such as the adventures undergone by Thomas's body, his eye especially, in the *récit Thomas l'obscur*, or all of the permutations of the hand in *L'Arrêt de mort*, these figures seem so removed, so withdrawn from the tangible as to make the concept of the haptic inoperable with respect to them. The agency that inhabits Blanchot's writing lacks a particular location and seems to have irredeemably taken a distance from the physicality of the perceptual realm. Insofar as Blanchot's work is devoted to literary space, to the disturbance of the world provoked by the literary act, does it not constantly instantiate and transgress the same injunction conjured and dissolved in Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil*, not to touch, the *noli me tangere* which defers and incapacitates reference, representation, the real at an infinite distance?

One might also hesitate at first, and only partially, with respect to the group portrait proposed by the title of Lee's book. The friendship of Bataille and Blanchot is well-known, and was recognised and consecrated by both of them in their own work--by Blanchot particularly in the book *L'Amitié*, written as it were under the sign of his encounter with Bataille and the communication (which was *major*, in the Bataillean sense) that ensued, but also in *La Communauté inavouable*, in response to Jean-Luc Nancy's assessment of the limits of Bataille's thinking of community. Much of Bataille's work, from *L'Expérience intérieure* on (Bataille met Blanchot in 1941) is written as if in implicit dialogue with Blanchot. In respect to this *folie à deux* Michel Serres appears an intruder, an unwelcome third. Born in 1930, he is, as Lee points out, of a different generation; he is also more comfortably categorisable as a philosopher (which

one could not say of Bataille or Blanchot), and unlike Bataille and Blanchot produced no work of fiction, strictly speaking.

The “intrusion” of Serres, as I have put it, into the portrait, is unlikely, as indeed, it might seem from the above, is the circumscription of Bataille and Blanchot in the topical space of haptic experience (which “fits” Serres to a far greater extent). It is this intrusion, and this lack of “fit” that, in fact, gives the book its inner coherence, an improbable coherence of disjunction, we can call it. If, as Lee concludes roughly halfway through the book, the relation of Bataille and Blanchot to haptic perception is “disconnected,” “discontinuous,” “disjunctive,” “*exscriptive*” (a term proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy), Serres’s work, he claims, offers a “piquant rebuff” to the problematisations of empirical perception and the knowledge that might be derived from it (p. 186). Serres, in effect, “claims more or less explicitly—but not without caveat—that haptic perception is rich in intellectually instructive potential” (p. 186). Serres’s work seems driven by an implicit and robust faith in the grounded nature of the interaction of the body with the real, in the empirical, by “broadly empirical principles” (p. 187).

Yet—and this is where Lee’s work takes on a crucial explanatory value in an exploration of Serres that has a haptic, palpable quality all of its own, as if feeling its way, Serres’s conception both of the real and of the act and agent of perception is radically discontinuous. Serres conceives of “heavily localized and individualized moments of empirical discovery” (p. 187), of bundles of information intercepted and exchanged in a non-uniform information or data network, a network which appears as without agents and which thus comes close to the actor-network postulated by Bruno Latour (see the work *Éclaircissements* of 1992, a series of dialogues with Latour).^[3] No subject, no sovereign, emerges in this space, either as transcendental, or as a negative instance of dissolution, as seems the case with Bataille and Blanchot. This would seem to definitively place Bataille and Blanchot, on the one hand, and Serres on the other, on either side of an unbridgeable philosophical chasm, separating post-Hegelian philosophies of the Subject from more empirically oriented philosophies in the wake of Spinoza and Leibniz.

There may be surprising connectives flashing across the gap, for example around the issue of community. Lee cites Serres in *Hermès II*, for example: “La con-science est la communauté qui a pour sujet la communauté de nous” (p. 193). But the unworked or unnameable communities hypothesized by Blanchot and by Nancy in the wake of Bataille appear as luxuriant and obsolete indulgences in the negative compared to the actual communities and networks constructed around what Serres calls the “quasi-object” for example. Lee writes of the demand implicit in Serres’s later work to think the “ability of modern society’s manufactured objects to create new perceptual interactions between themselves and us without our knowledge” (p. 205). At some points Serres’s dissolution of the conventional categories of subject, object, and body, in favour of a heterogeneous interacting and overlapping of surfaces around interchanges seems to Lee to offer purchase for comparison with the other two thinkers in his remit (such as over the question of the Bataillean *informe*, for example), but as the book moves on the reader increasingly has the impression that this is a lost cause.

With Serres we have moved into a different dimension, and a different idiom. The later work, in particular *Les Cinq sens*, *Le Tiers-Instruit* and *La Guerre mondiale* feature dense written analyses of perceptual events—swimming, being stung by a bee, witnessing a brawl—in which Serres moves increasingly towards a philosophically constructive argument for an *integrated* and *integrating* consciousness of our perceptual interactions. Lee cites Serres from *La Guerre mondiale*: “Cette puissance cognitive changera les consciences” (p. 274), and comments as follows: “The more integrative rather than exclusive that our approach to issues of perception, language and society becomes, the better our chances of feeling the positive, as yet unrealized potential of (haptic) sensory interaction that Serres evokes so passionately” (p. 274).

In this light, it looks to the reader as if Serres plays the role of a Trojan horse; under the guise of a comparative discussion the resources for a fairly thorough superseding of the negative space of Bataille and Blanchot have been released and allowed to do their paradoxically constructive work, moving (back) towards a positive empiricism which posits a certain faith in the body and its encounters. Lee marks this in his conclusion when he writes that in the work of Bataille and Blanchot “sensation is doomed to become a less and less relevant topic of critical or literary exploration” (p. 277) and that “hapticity is accordingly most significant in its absence” (p. 277). These tensions and differences make for a fascinating critical trajectory.

NOTES

[1] See Georges Bataille, “Dossier de l’œil pinéal” in *Œuvres complètes tome II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 13-51.

[2] The complete sentence from Mallarmé’s “Crise de vers” runs as follows: “Je dis : une fleur ! et, hors de l’oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d’autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée rieuse ou altièrre, l’absente de tous bouquets.” See Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crise de vers” in *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dès* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 251. In the essay “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” Blanchot adapts this as a programmatic statement of the capacity of language to definitively distance the real, the referent. See Maurice Blanchot, *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 316.

[3] Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Éclaircissements: cinq entretiens avec Bruno Latour* (Paris: François Bourin, 1992).

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