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Fabien Arribert-Narce, Fuhito Endo and Kamila Pawlikowksa, eds., *The Pleasure in/of the Text: About the Joys and Perversities of Reading*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2021. 170 pp. Biographical references and index. \$57.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-789977004.

Review by Kris Pint, Hasselt University.

Perversion plays the same role in Roland Barthes's work as schizophrenia in that of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's. Simply put, perversion means to derive a transgressive pleasure from things that are not meant, or allowed, to be enjoyed. Rather than a clinical diagnosis (which would imply taking into account its more destructive, harmful side), perversion functions for Barthes as the possibility of an alternative libidinal organization to that of the normal, oedipalized neurotic subject: "perversion, quite simply, *makes happy*".[1]

In two pivotal texts published in the early seventies, Barthes explored the art of reading as a perverse practice. *Empire of Signs* (1970) was a "writerly" reading of the "text" of Japan from the perspective of a visiting foreigner, and in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) he developed a reading theory based on the pleasure and bliss of the reader's body. With these books, Barthes moved away from the text-oriented structuralism of the sixties and paved the way for his more intimate books on love and mourning, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977) and *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), and also for the phantasmatic reading he developed in his lectures at the Collège de France.

The Pleasure in/of the Text. About the Joys and Perversities of Reading, edited by Fabien Arribert-Narce, Fuhito Endo and Kamila Pawlikowska, intends to revisit these two books that would prove to be so influential, not only for Barthes's later work, but also for literary theory as a whole. However, the contributors have not always followed this editorial scope, which resulted in a very heterogenous collection. Some essays are an interesting exegesis of Barthes's work (albeit not always focusing on the two books singled out by the editors), some juxtapose Barthes to other theorists and artists, and one text does not even refer to Barthes at all. On the one hand, such lack of focus means that this volume of Peter Lang's "European Connections. Studies in Comparative Literature, Intermediality and Aesthetics" series is not as insightful about this specific phase in Barthes's work as one might have hoped. But on the other hand, the different approaches demonstrate how inspiring Barthes still is. More than forty years after he died, they show how his work can be fruitfully related to diverse historical periods, different media, and different interlocutors. And of course, the dispersed character of this collection demands, in a rather Barthesian way, a writerly form of reading: it is up to the reader to actively look for

possible other connections and associations between the different essays and with Barthes's work of the early seventies.

The two contributions of the first part of the volume discuss two elements that are often considered as being outside of, or at least marginal to, the text: the footnote and the image. Alex Watson uses Barthes to oppose the common opinion on footnotes as an unwelcome intrusion, a sentiment succinctly expressed by Noel Coward, when he remarked that having to read a footnote feels like making love, and then having to answer the doorbell downstairs (p. 20). However, for Barthes, the footnote is rather a "catalyst in epiphany" (p. 16), allowing the reader's body to lose the tread and go astray, "enabling to circumvent our customary modes of thought, and receive new insights" as Watson puts it (p. 16). The footnote is thus the exact opposite of the affirmation of the authorial function, as Gérard Genette interpreted the role of this particular paratext. The perverse enjoyment of the interruption jams the singular, authoritative voice of the text and generates its own polyphonic "podophilic pleasure" (p. 21). As Watson argues, this also helps to understand Barthes's own "irascibility, nonchalance and mischief" when it comes to footnotes (p. 24). Precisely the ambiguity of Barthes's writing in relation to the texts he explicitly or not refers to, destabilizes his own authority. At the end of his essay, Watson makes an interesting digression to contemporary culture, which creates lifestyles "in which interruption is not an edifying release, but a norm" (p. 35). This indeed feels like an important point to make: in a time when the digital doorbell seems to be ringing all the time, interruption is no longer a way to disrupt the hegemony of an ideology, but a core aspect of this ideology itself. One can indeed wonder whether in this new context, Barthes's practice is still as transgressive as it once was. Watson clearly distinguishes the revolutionary and transformative potential of Barthes's critical interruption and idiosyncratic use of references from the scattered way of consuming texts in the twenty-first century. But Barthes himself was very aware of how easily an apparently rebellious practice is recuperated and turned into its opposite, so perhaps this distinction might not be as clear-cut, certainly not in a pedagogical context.

Patrick ffrench, in his contribution, discusses another form of perverse interruption, which he defines as the "mad desire to enter into the world of the text and to act in that world" (p. 38). This desire is especially evoked by photographic images that accompany a text and evoke a virtual world outside the frame of the image: "*stills of a lost film*" (p. 46), as ffrench so aptly calls them. Just like the footnote, the image disturbs the flow of the text by creating another, affective flow in the reader. It generates in the reader "a hallucinatory belief in the existence of this world and the beings that populate it" (p. 38). Given the topic, ffrench understandably focuses on Barthes last book, *Camera Lucida*, which is precisely a reflection on the affective power of the photographic image. But given the editorial scope of this volume, it feels like a missed opportunity that ffrench does not elaborate on the specific use of images in *Empires of Signs*. One could argue that the same "mad desire" is at work here, the desire to live in a virtual world that is in a way an hallucination superimposed on an actual country.

The second part of the volume explores some of the unexpected forms readerly pleasure can take. Kohei Kuwanda discerns "an inseparable and intricate connection between pleasure and fatigue in the writings and thought of Roland Barthes" (p. 62). For Barthes, fatigue results from the continuous confrontation with repetitive stereotypes, and the constant need to nuance one's discourse in an exhausting, seemingly futile effort to escape the assertive nature of language. At first sight, this seems quite contrary to the pleasure of the text. However, Kuwanda notes that for Barthes this sense of fatigue is at the same time strongly connected to a sense of being alive,

and thus, in a way, in a strange way still pleasurable and affirmative. Kuwanda's text is by far the shortest of the volume, and perhaps too short to fully explore this intriguing relationship between pleasure and fatigue. Just like interruption, fatigue can also be said to be one of the symptoms of contemporary culture, with its overload of information. How can Barthes help us to reflect on that?

And what is the relation between fatigue and perversion? Is a sense of weariness then a mild form of masochistic reading (with masochism of course being a typical example of a perversion)? This could perhaps link fatigue to Fuhito Endo's contribution on the Freudian death drive and masochism. Just like Kuwanda, Endo points out that the pleasure and bliss discussed in *The Pleasure of the Text* is not a straightforwardly positive experience. From a Barthesian perspective, it also resides in the "ecstatic/rapturous enjoyment of something uncomfortable (disturbing) and even excessive and traumatic (shocking)" (p. 69). For Endo, using Sigmund Freud, Paul De Man, and Jeffrey Mehlman as interlocutors, this also plays out in Barthes's reading theory itself. Endo argues that the same disturbing and ambiguous process unfolds in Barthes's effort to theorize the aporia of textual bliss. Bersani's view on Freud's text as a "masochistic performance" (p. 76) could be equally extended to Barthes: "Freud's text is forced to enjoy the displeasure of its own cognitive disruption" (p. 76). This masochistic enjoyment reveals itself as a kind of perverse textual necrophilia, evoked by "a certain collapse of the very possibility of metalanguage," as Kuwanda quotes Mehlman (p. 82). It is also related to allegory as interpreted by Paul de Man: "a forced self-destructiveness or dividedness of the text, despite its own self-conscious resistance against it" (p. 75). The perverse--masochistic--pleasure is thus also disruptively at work in the very theory that tries to make sense of it.

Krista Bonello Rutter Giaponne discusses another perverse reading pleasure bordering displeasure, which she uses to define the genre of the tragicomedy. Discussing John Marston's *Antonio* plays from the beginning of the seventeenth century, she argues that "both the punchline and the catharsis are withheld" (p. 102). Following Adam Philips, she compares this with the sensation of tickling: at the same time teasing and pleasing, between painful and pleasurable, and with no climax. It is this specific tickling-pleasure that she considers to be a distinctive feature of the genre, which makes it more than just a subcategory of either the comical or the tragical. In this case, the audience enjoys the frustration of its expectations, as it is constantly forced into an "active re-thinking of learned genre formulae" (p. 95). It is very interesting to see how readerly (or spectatorly) pleasure is used here as a way to determine genre-categories, yet it feels very much a missed opportunity that this essay does not directly engages with Barthes's work. The way John Marston played with the metatheatrical and the metafictional, especially in the figure of the Fool, "which partly creates an illusion and partly violates it" (Willeford, quoted on p. 97), comes very close to Barthes's theory of reading. And when Bonello Rutter Giaponne notes about the tragicomedy that "the dual courting of engagement and alienation coerce/coax the reader/viewer into an unstable position, troubling easy alignment" (p. 93), the same could be said about what happens to the Barthesian reader as a subject who is both susceptible to the pleasurable imaginary identification in the act of reading, and the blissful, but also traumatic loss of consistency and identity. One might even go a bit further and suggest that this is also a feature of Barthes's own writing, making it, in a sense, tragicomical. Just like in Marston's plays the sense of alienation that is evoked by the metatheatrical "does not preclude 'tragic' emotional engagement" (p. 93): the metareflective nature of Barthes's writing indeed does not cancel out the sensations of lovesickness and mourning expressed in respectively *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida*.

The same duality between engagement and alienation is also at the core of *Empire of Signs*, as is made clear in the last part of the volume. Fabien Arribert-Narce compares the book with Chris Marker's photographic and filmic work on Japan. Both Marker and Barthes are enamored by the sensuality and materiality of signification in Japanese culture, where signifiers are more important than fixed, meaning or truth they are supposed to refer to. For Barthes, this had clearly ethical implications: Japan is much more than a culture to be decoded and deconstructed. For him, it is also a way to challenge "Western semicracy" (Barthes, quoted on p. 110), and an invitation to turn to the existential aspects of everyday life: "from this point the word 'vie' will play a significant role in his discourse" (Michael Sheringham, quoted on p. 125, n54). But everyday life, as Barthes and Marker encounter it in Japan, is always mediated by their deformative gaze as outsiders. While they revel in the aesthetics of the everyday in Japanese culture, they are at the same time aware of their position as an outsider and of the constructed nature of their representation of the country. But for Barthes, it is precisely this ambiguity itself that forms a crucial aspect of his ethics.

This is also the point Andy Stafford makes in the concluding essay of the volume. He refers to an image Barthes uses between seeing either the windowpane of the car or the landscape outside: "It is this double seeing, this in-between two activities, that we will investigate here as a potential source of pleasure" (p. 130). For Stafford, *Empire of Signs* is not only a book on Japan, it is at the same time also a book on writing (p. 130), and implicitly also on the morality of writing. This is important, because it counters the critique Barthes's account of Japan has evoked as a form of orientalism. As Stafford argues, such a criticism overlooks the fact that Barthes in presenting Japan never forgets the windowpane. For Barthes, the intimate desire that leads to his distortion of actual Japan is inevitably part of his experience of this country, and should not be ignored. It is the core of Barthes's ethics as he develops it in the seventies: "no will-to-seize and yet no offering up," as Barthes himself succinctly formulates it in the caption of photograph of a Japanese domestic room (pp. 150-151). It is the position of a reader that understands how a text can misrepresent, distort an object, a person, a world, but at the same time does not part from his desire, the bodily affects that reveal themselves in relation to the text. It is this double seeing that is important to keep in mind when we consider Barthes as a trailblazer for the affective turn in cultural studies, and as a precursor of new forms of scholarship like autotheory, which combines lived experiences with art and theory. It is the inevitable perversion of reading that prevents a satisfying synthesis between the body, the text and the world, and contradicts any cheap pedagogy in which the act reading should be morally straightforward, and pleasurable fun.

If it is true, as Barthes argued, that perversion "quite simply, makes happy," the essays gathered in this volume all make clear that this happiness itself is never simple: the perverse pleasures of reading are tragicomic, tickling, masochistic, tiresome, hallucinatory and interruptive.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Alex Watson, 'The Perverse Footnote: Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and the Politics of Paratextuality'

Patrick ffrench, "*To Enter Madly into the Image*: Reading Projectively in Barthes"

Kohei Kuwada, "Pleasure and Fatigue of the Barthesian Text"

Fuhito Endo, “Genealogy of Textual Necrophilia or Death Drive: Barthes, Freud, De Man, and Mehlman”

Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, “Tragicomic Pleasure and Tickling-Teasing Oscillation in John Marston's *Antonio Plays*”

Fabien Arribert-Narce, “Taking Signs for What They Are: Roland Barthes, Chris Marker and the Pleasure of *Texte Japon*”

Andy Stafford, “The Barthesian ‘Double Grasp’ in Japan: Reading as Undialectical Writing”

NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 64, italics in original; and, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

Kris Pint
University of Hasselt
kris.pint@uhasselt.be

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