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Tom Conley, *À fleur de page: Voir et lire le texte de la Renaissance*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 207 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, index. €19.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3248-4.

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Few scholars in French studies have ever made lifetime contributions comparable to that of Tom Conley. In a career stretching across four and a half decades, beginning as a seiziémiste but quickly moving into one of the other fields in which he has made a major mark, film studies, Conley has given us a body of work at once erudite and imaginative, comprehensive and detailed, historically situated and in theoretically-oriented dialog with the present. It would be difficult to imagine French Renaissance studies without Conley's criticism: the many scholars who view sixteenth-century literature in terms of semiotics, psychoanalysis, geography, and more broadly as an undulating relationship between letters and images, owe a great deal to Conley. Above all, Conley brings a creative intelligence to early modern texts and images that makes them contemporary by putting them in historical motion toward the present; his work reveals the temporal chasm between past and present whose power is part of the impact of studying the sixteenth century. When readers immerse themselves in the eddies of his writing, they experience the distant vastness of the French Renaissance as intimately humbling. The steady flicker of his pages becomes a passionate, multidirectional motion of thought. Following on three prior monographs in sixteenth-century studies and two on cinema, *À fleur de page* is, its modest length notwithstanding, both a culmination and a précis of a singularly impressive career, also an introduction to his criticism that increases its presence in francophone circles.

Conley has long been fond of comparing French Renaissance texts to the cinema. For example, in *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern French Writing* (his first book on the sixteenth century, published by Cambridge in 1992) he addresses the pedagogical value of early modern literature for film studies, observing that it provides students "a working sense of *montage*, visual composition, [and] even screenwriting."^[1] It's telling with regard to Conley's intellectual trajectory that this book was his second and that his first, published a year earlier by the University of Minnesota Press, was *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema*.^[2] And it's noteworthy that the latter appeared after his forty-fifth birthday, in days when a scholar could establish a career on the basis of articles and hence engage in more exploratory, less intellectually conformist research than the present book-at-every-turn culture of the academic humanities promotes. In *Film Hieroglyphs*, for the most part written concurrently with *The Graphic Unconscious*, Conley makes clear that his own development of the poststructuralist notion of *écriture* owes a great deal to his research in early modern literature and culture. As anyone who has read or heard one of his trenchant film analyses knows, Conley treats images as not simply akin to but corporeal with letters. And as he told me when I was taking a graduate film studies course with him at the University of Minnesota in the mid-1980s, the moment you discover that movies are writing, you also notice that texts move.

From this idea, which continues to inform all of Conley's work, it was a short step to the next phase, cartography. In 1996, the year following his departure from Minnesota to Harvard, the University of

Minnesota Press published *The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France*, one of the most influential English-language books in French Renaissance studies of the last fifty years. At once an image and a text, informational and aesthetic, representational and abstract, a depiction of paths of movement and itself in motion as it is used for guidance, a map in Conley's critical hands is the kind of object that embodies all that his research had previously aimed for. Showing the sensibilities concerning perspective and montage that he enhanced through his work in film, pointing to cinema as offering a useful way of understanding certain phenomena, in *The Self-Made Map* Conley offers an interdisciplinary tour de force. His signature close analyses are marked by liberal reference to contemporary theory, cartographic studies, psychoanalysis, and art history. He showcases an encyclopedic knowledge of early modern French literature, revealing its cartographic procedures through exploring its many close connections with mapmaking. In the currents that run unfettered between image and text in early modern systems of representation, Conley also considers painting. His kaleidoscopic mix of concepts from both the present and the past is no hindrance to his historically situating the study. He opens with a discussion of David Buisseret's work, repeating this historian's question: "Why the sudden birth and growth of mapping" in the early modern period? [3] Over the course of the book, alongside the proliferation of printed writing throughout Europe, Conley treats the invention of modern cartography as the most important cultural development in early modern France. To the company of authors from the traditional core of the French literary canon, notably Rabelais, Montaigne, and Descartes, Conley brings Oronce Finé, Maurice Bouguereau, André Thevet, Jean Fouquet, and Geoffroy Tory in a constellation that has and will likely continue to have resounding effects on the way the study of early modern France is conceived.

With these two books on the French Renaissance, Conley announced what many see as the two prongs in his critical methodology, the graphic unconscious and cartography. But these approaches are variations on each other—and cinema is similarly enmeshed with the Renaissance in his work, in ways that feed his ability to transport texts and images across long spans of time through his reading practices and in defiance of the institutional mandate to specialize according to period and domain of cultural production. Filling out the picture of his combination of methodology and interests was his second book on cinema: *Cartographic Cinema* came out from Minnesota in 2007.[4] Treating an array of Euro-American films, from René Clair's *Paris qui dort* (1923) to Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Gladiator* (2000), Conley explores the signifying and spatializing functions of maps in movies and the cinema's own cartographic energies. The tie between cinema and early modern phenomena persists into Conley's next book, *An Errant Eye: Poetry and Topography in Early Modern France* (Minnesota, 2011), in which several section headings, such as "On Top of the World," allude to movies in his critical repertory (this one to Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* [1949]), underscoring the ties between cinematic and poetic spatializations.[5]

The "errant eye" of that book's title refers to ocular motion, which, in surveying the contours of the earth and the printed page, brings together cartographic and poetic illustrations of the world. The book is a celebration of the roving act of reading and the vivid relationship with the world that it yields; during the sixteenth century this relationship expands in experimental leaps. It is a celebration he continues in *À fleur de page*, which he identifies as a sequel to *An Errant Eye* (*Fleur*, p. 8). Resuming his intertwining of cinema and sixteenth-century literature, Conley opens *À fleur de page* with an account of Jacques Rancière's critique of the *politique des auteurs* propounded in the 1950s by the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics, on their way to becoming the Nouvelle Vague filmmakers. Although in the context of postwar polemics these writers believed they were adhering to formalism in treating films as works of art for which the director is responsible, Rancière contends that what greatness they saw in certain movies had more to do with their own love of viewing than anything a filmmaker put on screen. Conley summarizes Rancière: "Il s'agissait...moins d'une politique d'auteurs, que celle d'une *politique d'amateurs*. Malgré leurs convictions fêrues et féroces ils découvraient le cinéma par le biais de la passion et de l'enthousiasme" (p. 7). Conley then suggests that the same thing is true of the reception history of French Renaissance literature, and that the phenomenon of *amateurisme* needs to be examined at a time

when passion for the subject is falling fast in the universities. The “crise générale des arts libéraux” turns out to be an important theme of the book. His wish is to counter that crisis, to make sixteenth-century literature contemporary through his own display of enthusiasm. “Ainsi ce livre modeste, produit d’un amateur, cherche un lectorat qui se fie aux plaisirs auxquels il peut accéder sans souci de faille de maîtrise ou de carence de savoir” (p. 7). Taking advantage of the dual meaning of *amateur* in French, Conley recalls the humility with which a serious scholar should approach the Renaissance from a present-day perspective, as always offering new discoveries even through the most seemingly familiar texts. Although he terms it a “paradoxe” that such an *amateur* as himself would owe so much to so many scholars—among whom he cites Mireille Huchon, Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani, François Rigolot, Dominique de Courcelles, Jean-Claude Carron, Hope Glidden, and Ullrich Langer (pp. 7-8)—he offers his own erudition with exemplary humility.

In the introduction, subtitled “Lire l’événement,” Conley develops his views on the continuing reduction, especially in the United States, of emphasis on literary studies as well as on the French literary canon, often in favor of a “francophonie édulcorée” (p. 11) whose secure place may well stem from the globalization of capital. He restates a case he has long made, that an effective understanding of the francophone world necessitates attention to the sixteenth century, “le moment par excellence où l’altérité se fait sentir à tout azimut, moment où le monde s’ouvre à l’inconnu à des vitesses accélérées” (p. 12). In response to the neoliberal subordination of the university to the deified economy, Conley says that this book “vise une naïveté: naïveté espiègle qui voudrait démocratiser le texte du seizième siècle, à savoir, opérer un partage des plaisirs et de difficultés qu’il présente aux lecteurs de nos jours...” (p. 13). Noting the uncanny, transtemporal affinities between Renaissance reading practices, exemplified through Montaigne’s description of leafing through (*feuilleter*) books “à pièces descousues” (p. 13), and those of the information age in which page images are clicked across screens, Conley details a phenomenology of textual experience by way of a discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Le Visible et l’invisible* in which pages are at once seen and read (pp. 14-18). Through this notion of interlacing movements of eye and page, Conley again reveals his conceptual sourcing in cinema studies. His interest is in bringing the often immediate-seeming attractions of Renaissance texts to bear on opening and traversing the space between present and past. Such an encounter takes place, according to Conley, through reading “à fleur de page,” reading in the space in which pages become upsurges in the present day, none other than the events (*événements*) that unmoor the complacent perspective of the twenty-first-century university and coax it to be critical.

The rest of the book is an elaboration of this project. Conley’s placement of a traditional field in the context of current technology and ideology makes it clear that *À fleur de page* shouldn’t be classified as a late-career plea. Although he treats authors he has written about in previous books and articles—besides Montaigne and Rabelais, he discusses Jean Lemaire de Belges, Gilles Corrozet, Marguerite de Navarre—this context allows the book to be a defense and illustration of its opening argument. In the first chapter, on Lemaire, Conley recalls the advent of digital technology that has made so much more of sixteenth-century French literature, and that of many other times and places, widely available, if only to underscore the marvels of experiencing an early edition: “Dans le sanctuaire des salles de réserve, ‘loin de chiens et de bruit’, mieux qu’ailleurs, nonobstant Gallica et la remarquable innovation du numérique, en ces lieux clos nous nous rendons compte de ce que sont les plaisirs du texte de la Renaissance” (p. 29). Here Conley’s presentation runs into paradox: the pleasure of reading early editions to the point of touching them, “surtout si le livre n’est pas gâché par une reliure moderne” (p. 29), is only available to those researchers fortunate enough to work in the proximity of a well-endowed special collections library or to receive generous travel funding. But *À fleur de page* itself answers the paradox: showcasing thirty-four images, grouped in sets following each chapter, of the *fleur* of the pages of which Conley is rapturous, the book exemplifies the advantages of digitization by offering so many good reproductions in an inexpensive edition. The author’s enthusiasm for reading and viewing hence becomes contagious. Some of what he finds in French Renaissance texts, in the absence of the French Renaissance itself, his own book conveys, in the absence to readers of the touching he lovingly does. And it is the play of

presence and absence of Lemaire's encrypted signature--a reading in which Conley borrows liberally from Jacques Derrida as well as Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok--that the transtemporal force of *Les Illustrations de Gaule* subsists.

The readings in the subsequent chapters work along similar lines. Rabelais presents a woven texture of movement between self and other, familiar and strange, near and far, past and present. Under the influence of the Pantagruelian "science utopique," writes Conley, "[s]implement en tournant la page le lecteur saute d'un monde à un autre, d'un monde de folie à celui d'une sagesse, et vice versa, l'un n'étant que l'envers et l'endroit de l'autre" (p. 58). Corrozet's *L'Hécatomgraphie* and *Fables d'Esopé* figure, through the interplay of emblem and text, "le 'monde' à même la page, par le support de la matière" (p. 86). Conley shows how these works take on a topographical life in their relationship to the world. In the third chapter, he describes the material communication of passion in the synesthesia of seeing, reading, and touching three texts to which Bernard Salomon brought emblems: Maurice Scève's *Saulsaye* and Marguerite de Navarre's *Suyte des Marguerites* and *La Coche*. Finally, in a demonstration of the power of digital technology to apprehend the distant scene of early modern writing, via the Montaigne Project (<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/montaigne/>) Conley re-enacts Montaigne's reflections on the distance between his writing self and, respectively, the New World, ancient Rome, and his lost friend Estienne de La Boétie.

À fleur de page summarizes a great critical career, while also redirecting it to a critique of our present-day institutional life. For those new to Conley's work, it's an excellent introduction to his capacious readings of French Renaissance literature. And for veteran *amateurs* of this work, reading the book is like seeing another movie by a director long recognized as a maker of classics and realizing that in some cases the *politique des auteurs*, according to which everything by a particular artist is well worth experiencing, holds sway.

NOTES

[1] Tom Conley, *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern French Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 170, n. 4.

[2] Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

[3] Tom Conley, *The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 1.

[4] Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[5] Tom Conley, *An Errant Eye: Poetry and Topography in Early Modern France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

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