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Henri Garric, *Parole muette, récit burlesque: Les expressions silencieuses aux XIXe-XXe siècles*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 469 pp. Bibliography, index, and fiches techniques des films. 49.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3708-3.

Review by Christophe Wall-Romana, University of Minnesota.

Its title a faint echo of a work by Rancière, *La Parole muette, essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* [1], with which it is only tangentially in dialogue, Garric's book seeks to disentangle "une fascination pour le silence au cœur de notre civilisation" (p. 17). Symptoms of this "nostalgie du silence" include Pascal Quignard's view of literature as a silent/stoic cultural resistance; the "néo-muet" genre represented by Hazanavicius's *The Artist* (2011), reprising silent cinema as clichés; or the inflation of silence in contemporary arts and their staging. Garric's driving hypothesis is that the invocation or implementation of silence in contemporary artistic practices is essentially strategic and agonistic: "...le silence est l'outil d'une stratégie destinée à écraser un pan entier de la tradition silencieuse.... Le silence impose silence à un autre silence" (p. 41). Although he does not cite Bourdieu, this amounts to a Bourdieusian move of self-authorization by practitioners aiming to wrest control of the cultural/artistic field. Garric examines, in particular, displacements from the "high" artistic tradition to newer, "low" artistic forms: "Si je voulais être un brin provocateur, je dirais qu'ils s'agit pour moi de réexaminer une certaine tradition de la poétique mallarméenne et blanchotienne...à l'aune d'un album de gags comme *Game over...*," a comic strip series published in the journal *Spirou* (p. 45). The book proposes accordingly a vast number of readings and case studies, examining this broad and, at times, loose thesis in a variety of fields from cinema (especially silent, with some contemporary films) to the BD, from novels to poetry, and from pantomime to music, informed by an equally vast critical array ranging from Henri Bergson and Walter Benjamin, to Alain Corbin and Jean Bessière.

The book is divided into ten chapters with over fifty subsections and seven historical-theoretical "digressions" (p. 47). The overall structure, therefore, is less meant to prosecute an argument transparently, methodically, and historically than to take the reader on multiple journeys through the variegated landscapes of the invention and reinvention of the "tradition silencieuse." While some readers will find such journeys taxing or disorienting, others such as myself will enjoy the fresh and unexpected perspectives afforded by this wild walk through modernism. In the chapter "Lectures silencieuses," for instance, Garric reflects on the evolution of reading practices from out loud and collective to silent and individual by taking us from Goethe and Schlegel back through the Middle Ages, on to the development of ironic and dialectical models in Poe and Vico, then through Rousseau and Romantic poetry in French (Lamartine) and English (Coleridge), allowing a return to Schlegel's *Witz* and Hegel, before launching again into Symbolist poetry and the silence of Rimbaud, ending with Germaine Dulac's film *L'Invitation au voyage* (1927) adapted from Baudelaire's eponymous poem. That is to say, Garric's project embraces the wager of transnational, interartistic, and, although he does not use the term, intermedial scholarship, which links literature, graphic arts, music, and cinema, through silence as synonymous with Romanticism's idea of a pre-language, a wordless language, or a language by other means crossing genres and arts. Against a contemporary horizon in which humanities scholarship, in part because of

competition for jobs, often tends to hyper-specialize in protectively reduced niches, the aerial span of Garric's book reminds us of the crucial importance of articulating ideas peripatetically across eras and domains.

I don't want to suggest that while Garric often moves fast from terrain to terrain, he does so without precise and tangible yields. In a key chapter on Blanchot and Bergson, for instance, he makes a fine analysis of the "*solitude essentielle*" of the writer for Blanchot (p. 141), which involves interrupting the surging of language in order to silence it by decisions through the very words the writer puts down on paper. For Garric, that interruption is akin to the absolute laughter of Bataille, an experience of excess over the excess of language, whereby a momentary fusion with the other or with the world is achieved. To this stoic or mystical call of silence, Garric opposes another interruption, that of Bergson's burlesque laughter, which he complicates from its animate-inanimate cliché in order to make it a yawning and prolific perceptual gap, an essential "*séparation*" between a person caught in a disastrous situation and the physical, as well as critical reactions to it by others (p. 144). With this model of "*double interruption*" (p. 125), Garric then provides an elucidating reading of theatrical identification and distance in episodes of Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and Keaton's *Sherlock Junior* (1924). Complicating the scheme of Marx's tragedy returning as parody, the book develops this double interruption into original analyses cutting through critical commonplaces regarding the paradoxical use of silence in late modernism. Garric, for instance, rightly takes Gérard Macé to task for associating, in a problematic nostalgic vein, the ghostly pantomimes of Symbolism with musicians forced to play in the Terezin extermination camp. Thus, it is also a tradition of careless associations of all silent expressions that Garric seeks to interrupt.

Conversely, he reads the silence of Blanchot on the unmistakably burlesque aspects of Joyce's *Ulysses* (already present in *The Portrait of a Young Man as the Artist*, both of which Blanchot commented on during the war) as an arbitrary delimitation of one form of "*indicible*" against others involving burlesque contaminations between codes and languages (p. 361). Yet such contaminations too, for Garric, lay at the core of artistic modernity. One of the central chapters of the book titled "Pantomimes et mimiques," accordingly makes a very strong case for the centrality of burlesque puppetry. A continuation of Töpffer's anti-academic comic strips, he follows this theme in the theater of Maeterlinck and Jarry, considered as representative of an alternative to a modernism of seriousness, thus at a remove from its recuperation, for instance, by Derrida's comments on Mallarmé's "Mimique" (in "La Double séance"), which could have been extended to Paul de Man's essay on Kleist (not referenced). This is an especially strong chapter because it connects historical practices of pantomime (Debureau, Margueritte) to the esthetics of Maeterlinck and Mallarmé in a way that implicitly puts pressure on these latter authors' centrality in Rancière's burlesque-less theorization of the esthetic regime of the arts.

All things being equal, Anglo-Saxon scholarship often tends to value historicization more than continental scholarship, and, as a hybrid reader, I alternated between the pleasure of trans-historical connections and some impatience with easy leaps that bracket historically informed treatments. For instance, Garric goes along with Stanley Cavell's dated assessment in *The World Viewed* that contemporary cinema tends towards silence as part of its medium specificity.^[2] Like Rancière, Garric thus takes medium specificity for granted as a direction of "contemporary" art, which is never quite defined, even though that Greenbergian cliché has been considerably critiqued for a good while now. Garric fails to mention, in this regard, the debates around pure and geometric cinema in the 1920s or the new research on the French narrative avant-garde, all of which proceeded from inter-art and intermedia inspirations circumventing the prominence of narratives in favor of experiments with text, title cards, rhythm, or musical correlates within the image. The book's last chapter, "Silent Movies," misguidedly argues for the position that silent film was actually received in the first decades of the twentieth century as both silent and "mute" (*cinéma muet*). Garric does not hesitate to state that the alternative—that silent cinema was incredibly full of noise and speech—is "parfaitement fausse" (p. 365). Although he acknowledges the role of live music (briefly addressed on pp. 214-218), he ignores live commentators, recorded music, Foley art, speaking spectators, and projector noise as producing a

complex soundscape in silent film exhibitions that only disappeared with the Talkies. Film scholars have shown that only in some cine-club environments was silence, in fact, the rule. Garric relies on well-known, but highly strategic reactions by writers and theoreticians (from de Gourmont to Canudo and Balázs) as if they translated the reality of all genres of films, all venues, all modes of exhibitions—again, against the careful and now canonical analyses of early film historians such as Rick Altman and Richard Abel's *The Sounds of Early Cinema*.^[3]

Garric cites very few English sources in general, but in this chapter he omits even key sources in French, such as the collection by Giusy Pisano and Valérie Pozner entitled *Le Muet a la parole: cinéma et performance à l'aube du XXe siècle*.^[4] The last chapter as a whole makes persuasive readings of a number of classic silent films, and its argument could have been reframed more modestly as inscribing them within the “tradition silencieuse.” However, by willfully dismissing and ignoring several decades of silent cinema scholarship in favor of a gratuitous thesis, Garric has simply shot himself in the foot. Similarly, while Mallarmé is quite central to the book, the secondary literature that has thoroughly debunked the myth of the spiritual poet (which Valéry and Stevens entertained) by showing his intense preoccupations with mass culture and everyday life, is entirely absent. This means that some of the transversal developments given for new in the book are idiosyncratic in the weak sense that they fail to include existing research.

These oversights needlessly mar the overall ambit of the book, though not the quality of its analyses. In many places, holding in abeyance the habit of duly researched historicized contextualization serves the useful purpose of interrogating the latter's very limits. Hence Garric links the “unheard [melodies]” of Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and the “*musicienne du silence*” of Mallarmé as bookending a strain of “Muta Poesis” that looked towards the muteness of the visual arts (p. 220). Crosscutting to the comic strips of Töpffer and Caran d'Ache as the obverse strain (i.e., visual arts breaking their own silence via a new visual language), Garric then synthesizes both currents by reaching to Kafka as doodler and burlesque absurdist novelist, and Benjamin as aficionado of Mickey Mouse cartoons. Such keen developments provide a convincing framework for the productivity and transformations of a dialectical esthetics that is easy to miss through more periodized, domain-specific, or “high culture” approaches. All in all, Garric's book pays the price of interdisciplinary projects: enlightening and stimulating connections at the detriment, at times, of rigorous disciplinary scholarship.

Still, I like this book in spite and even because of its flaws, since in the vast terrain that it embraces, readers will discover new networks of circulating ideas, and be provoked into refining, contesting or extrapolating some of its propositions while certainly re-evaluating the minor arts of the comic strip, the pantomime, and (a certain version of) silent cinema within modernism. As such, it is a generous contribution meant to share with the reader research on how non-canonical esthetic paths wormed their way into more dominant esthetics.

NOTES

[1] Rancière, *La Parole muette, essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris: Hachette, 1998).

[2] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[3] Rick Altman and Richard Abel, *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[4] Giusy Pisano and Valérie Pozner, *Le Muet a la parole: cinéma et performance à l'aube du XXe siècle* (Paris: AFRHC, 2005).

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