Critical Review of Practice

PHO720 Informing Contexts

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April 2023



Adrian Bregazzi: Critical Review of Practice

> “I’m interested in language, and the way in which we interpret the world, understand the world, through the things we make.” (Craig-Martin 2021)

> “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte.” (Derrida 1967: 227)[1]

Language realises the nucleus of my work, encapsulated by a whirling sphere of contexts.



fig.1 a still from the movie ARRI-VING-LEA

The short movie, *ARRI-VING-LEA* (Bregazzi 2023a), shot in dull blue-light darkness from inside a moving train, demonstrates this literally. The incipient deconstructing of the conventionally binary opposition of leaving and arriving as gerunds; paused yet animating, unresolved yet forming “perfect reflections of those two existential states of Being, not left, nor arrived; an 80 second journey into a night of zero miles,” is constructed by the simple reversal of the time order of two contiguous clips, from inside the *Chambre noire*[2] of a sleeper berth. This practice of overturning (re-ordering) is described as a phase in Jacques Derrida’s general strategy of Deconstruction (Derrida 1982: 41).

1 “There is no out-of-context”: that is, “there is always context.” Spivak’s translation is, “there is no outside-text”. The rampant translation, “there is nothing outside the text”, is inaccurate.

2. La Chambre noire (the Dark Room), as opposed to La Chambre claire (the Light Room) - the question remains why the English translation of La Chambre claire refers to a C19th optical drawing/cheating device.

This is not domesticated deconstruction - not the synonym for analysis, taking apart, disassembling, decoding - nor “deconstructed fish and chips”, but the philosophical struggle to move away from the 2000-year-old hegemony of the principle of noncontradiction , and our predilection for understanding the world in terms of prejudicial binary oppositions. Deconstruction strives to find a way out of our chaos of oppositional thinking, without forming another oppositional state on the way.

Donna Haraway has argued, “certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions, they have been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals - in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task it is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are, self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilised/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man. (Haraway, 1991, 177)

I am interested in Deconstruction, how I may address this, employ its strategies, or at least be aware of these in my work. This may sound heavy duty, but the general strategy can be said to be that “finding a way” above.



fig.2 a fortuitously fogged image of my grandmother’s house, where *Aunt Hilde: between waking and sleeping* takes place (image from Google Street View)

3. Basically, the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction states that it is impossible for something that both *is* and *is not*.

Likewise, in *Aunt Hilde: between waking and sleeping* (Bregazzi 2023h) the child me sought a state that is on the cusp between wakefulness and sleep, asking a Spiritualist aunt, “why can’t I remember the last moment before I go to sleep? The moment in the middle of being awake and being asleep.” A very early, unwitting attempt to break through a stubborn binary opposition.

With hindsight, had I pursued this type of superstitious enquiry, inferencing a state between living and dead - demonically possessed, that is - this could have been seen as a dangerous unpicking of the binary fabric (Limbos aside) of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism that dominated my life at the time. A lateral shift today may provide a solution, if not an answer for the specific problem: the deep stream of consciousness nurtured in psychotherapy; and its different manifestations in film and literature. And my realisation that as many of my ideas and critical insights emanate from (seductive) periods of hypnagogic imagery, I should pursue this.

Leaving and arriving are triggers in Sesselja Meyer’s stream of consciousness in the first scenes of *To the Painting* (Bregazzi 2023g) while travelling by train on the coastal route to St Ives to vew a painting by a sister immigrant artist, “But leaving, departing, will also always mean going somewhere else; and still, you may not be able to get there quickly enough, or you may hope you’ll never arrive, even though there’s nowhere else for you to be. Oh, this is all rather existential!” She goes on to reflect on the seasonal leaving and arriving of migratory birds in the trackside estuary, unencumbered by human baggage.



fig.3 a still from *Brief Encounter,* Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson), mesmerised by the view from a moving train

In a discussion of David Lean's movie, Brief Encounter[4], Patrick Keiller describes the sequence in which Laura Jesson's (Celia Johnson) mind wanders through wishful possibilities while the near dark English rushes by as a, "sequence, with its superimpositions and narration, confirms the interpretation of the railway panorama […] as an image of stream of consciousness." Sesselja Meyer references *Brief Encounter* in *To The Painting*[5].

And I am interested in language, in the sense that all photographs require reading, that they are texts. Furthermore,

> "photographs are texts, inscribed in what we may call 'photographic discourse', but this discourse, like any other, engages discourses beyond itself, the 'photographic text', like any other, is the site of a complex 'intertextuality', an overlapping series of previous texts 'taken for granted' at a particular cultural and historical juncture." (Burgin 2021: 143)

My discovery of a tiny photograph of my mother and I, taken in summer 1952 when I was between 19 and 22 months old, triggered my writing a short text that referenced the one piece of maternal advice that I could still remember; a road traffic collision; and the photograph itself - part of *don't tell stories, Adrian* (Bregazzi 2023c)- later assembling a short movie and a brief meditation on the photograph, *I am frowning* (Bregazzi 2023f). The movie version of *Always wear clean underwear, Adrian* (Bregazzi 2023b) established explicit[6] intertextual links with Barthes' photograph of his mother as a five-year old little girl in a winter garden (le Jardin d'hiver), and his death in 1980 from pulmonary complications following an RTC with a laundry van (Samoyault 2017: XV and 491).

Working with *Always wear clean underwear* has itself triggered an interrogation around the photograph of my mother and I, Lacan's mirror stage (Lacan 2002: 75-81), and core ontologies of photography. This interrogation first took the form of photograph and prose, *I am frowning* (Bregazzi 2023f), but this may well become a moving image piece.

I was at an age where the child is shifting from their oneness with the Maternal and what Kristeva has called The Semiotic (Sadehi 2012). I am frowning (ibid) looks at when, "I am living in the interstitial zone between the Real and the Conceptual - in

4. Brief Encounter (1945): directed by David Lean, screenplay by Noël Coward.
5. Sesselja Meyer also references Virginia Woolf's To The Lighthouse.
6. Explicit, as opposed the implicit intertextuality of the photograph referenced in Burgin: 2021.



fig.4 a still from the movie *Always wear clean underwear, Adrian*

the process of, or actually beginning to come to terms (literally) with the 'I'. Moving from a world of the purely sensate and iconic, to the world of Difference, the world the 'I' and the Other - language."

Kristeva's and Lacan's psychoanalyses shear off in radically different directions around the mirror stage, while in the context of this paper, I am interested in the general shift from what I am content to see as total dependence on others, a world associated solely with the sensate and the iconic (the Maternal), to a world nurturing the awareness of the Self through developing skills in language (for this paper, the Child).

In contrast to what may be seen as my predilection for soulless Deconstruction, I also subscribe to Flusser's "The magical power of images lies in their superficial nature, and the dialectic inherent in them - the contradiction peculiar to them - must be seen in the light of this magic." Flusser mentions magic 65 times in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Flusser 2012), critically, he states that, "the significance of images is magical."

My reading beyond photographic media allows me to place these Flusser's statements in a literary (intertextual) context that identifies a single photograph taken in 1851 as the terminator of (real) magic:

> "When the shutter opened to capture that first perfect image of the eclipse, magic ceased to function across all human societies." (Stephenson 2017: 36)

This seemingly outrageous claim is based on the idea that (real) magic summoned a simultaneously alternative reality in which it could take place. Photography broke magic by “embalming a specific moment - one version of reality - into a recorded image. Once that moment is so recorded, then all other possible versions of that moment are excluded from the world that contains that photograph.” (Stephenson 2017: 35)

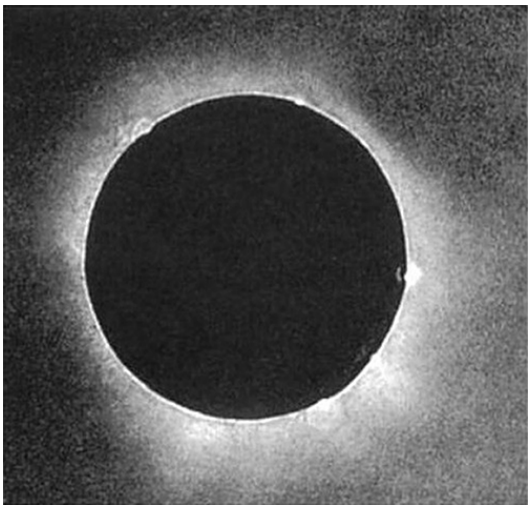


fig.5 copy of a Daguerreotype by Julius Berkowski
at the Royal Observatory in Königsberg,
Prussia, 28th July 1851

And in my broader range of interests in the use of photography by others, I cite two important influences, who also have a close intertextual relationship.
W. G. Sebald rose to fame in the English-speaking world after astonishing reviews by Susan Sontag: “W. G. Sebald has written an astonishing masterpiece. It seems

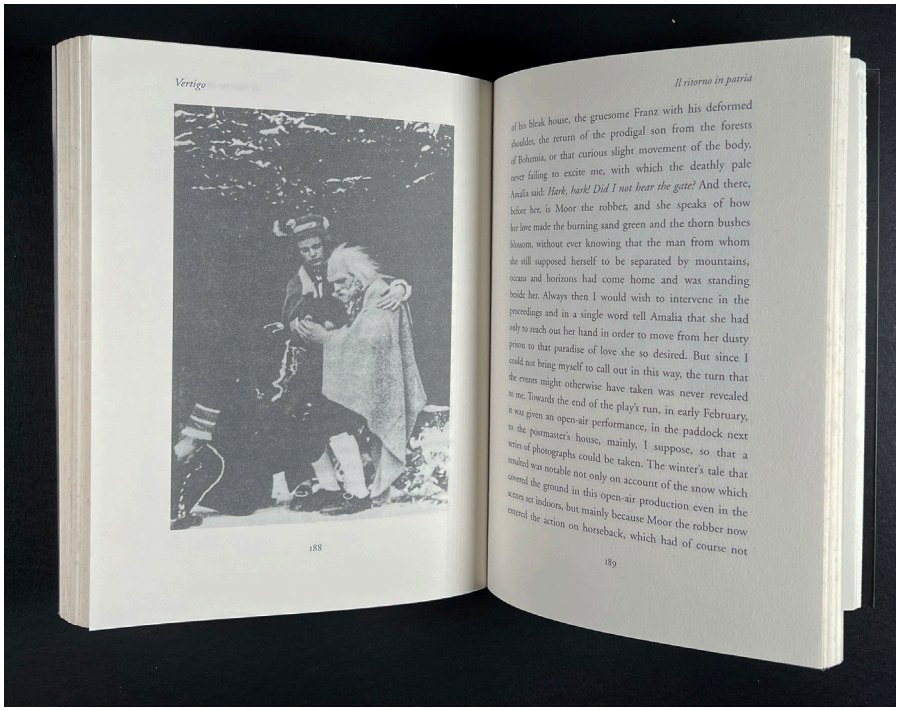


fig.6 W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, pp 188 and 189

perfect while being unlike any book one has read."(*The Emigrants*) And "Is literary greatness still possible? One of the few answers available to English-language readers is the work of W. G. Sebald." (*Vertigo*) Sebald peppers his writing with photographs and imagery that juggles issues of history, truth, and memory. (Kolenda 2017)

But it is Sebald's posthumous and image-free, *Campo Santo*, that triggered a series of photographs in the book, *Sebaldiana: Memento Mori*, by Elina Brotherus (Brotherus 2022). She picks up on Sebald's description of old Corsican burial customs: "The old custom was to bury the dead in some beautiful spot on their own land, perhaps under a particular tree, or on a hillside behind the house where the dead could contemplate their ancestral home." And "I looked for places so beautiful that if I were Corsican, I would want them to be buried there."

The series of photographs she made, "became a tribute not only to the Island of Beauty and to my favourite author, but also to my mother [the artist], Ulla Brita Brotherus, née Sommar (1944-1985)."



fig.7 Elina Brotherus, *Sebaldiana: Memento Mori* 2020. *Tombeau imaginaire 5*

7. TLS, 29th June 1996
8. TLS, 25th February 2000

Brotherus says that her work, “has been alternating between autobiographical and art-historical approaches,” referencing, intertextualising, if you will, a wide range of artists’ work from Caspar David Friedrich, to Amaldus Nielsen, and through to the Fluxus group. But she has nearly always had a visual presence in her images.



Fig.8 Elina Brotherus, *The New Painting* (2007). *der Wanderer 5* (2002)



fig.9 Elina Brotherus. *Why Not?* 2021. *Araki* (2016)

My thoughts have been heavliy influenced by Elina Brotherus' broad range of work from large exhibiton prints and diptychs, extraordinarily crafted books, and short video work. There is no visual evidence of this in my current work, though it had a palpable influence on *Sites of Incantation* last year. I intend that Don't tell stories, Adrian will be come a physical book when I feel that there are sufficient stories to be included, and this book will pay attention to both surfaces and photographic objects therein.



fig.10 Lia Mice, 2022. a still from *I Don't Wanna Change* (Official Music Video)

I have very recently rediscovered my 70s interests in (analogue) electronic sound production. I am actively acquainting myself with new digital technologies with a view to delivering more depth to the soundtracks for my moving image and AV work. I am particularly impressed with the sound and moving image work of multidisciplinary artist, Lia Mice. "*I don't wanna change*" includes a long sequence of overlapping images shot from a moving vehicle that may even be a train.

I am not interested in making photographs in terms of the language employed by this course - language that references and espouses the discrete photographic object. I am interested in using photographic images, photographic objects, moving images, sound, and movement *in* work that goes beyond the dominant photographic aesthetic. That is the territory that I wish to inhabit. To this end, I have been keen to explore and develop new skills relevant to working in this territory - this last three months I have been working with moving images and sound, accruing skills in sound recording, video recording, sound and video editing, and learning *when to stop*. I have also been looking into "live work".

The recent frenzy over Boris Eldagsen's "*PSEUDOMNESIA: The Electrician*", and claims that "*From Today Photography is Dead*" are both melodramatic and tardy.

It can be argued that photography has been dead, at least comatose, for years. Asked by Scientific American, about the source of inspiration for the image, Elgasen said:

> "I did it for myself as an exercise, and I just love the result. It sparked off from a project that started years back. My father was born in 1924. So he went to war when he was 17 but, like most of that generation in Germany, never talked about it. After his death, I found some images from the forties my mom and I hadn't seen before. I learned a lot about their time just looking at these images, and I started to collect images from the forties at flea markets, and also on eBay, but didn't know what to do with them. So my first experiment was: Can I recreate images of that time using AI? And then "The Electrician" just grew." (Eldagsen 2023)

Interactive image making - simultaneously seductive and disarming.

But it is the primacy of the "real" photograph that was being threatened here. The honest photograph. The photograph that the man [sic] in the street and the sophisticate in gallery are used to. The ever new nostalgia.

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