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Article:

Allen-Paisant, J orcid.org/0000-0002-5705-0522 (2020) Reading Wilson Harris with Gilles Deleuze: Carnival, or the novel as theatrical space. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 55 (2). pp. 294-308. ISSN 0021-9894

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418767492>

Allen-Paisant, J (2018) Reading Wilson Harris with Gilles Deleuze: Carnival, or the novel as theatrical space. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. © The Author(s) 2018. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. The published version can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418767492>

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Reading Wilson Harris with Gilles Deleuze: Carnival, or the novel as theatrical space

Abstract

This paper is an attempt at reading Wilson Harris with Gilles Deleuze, considering how the latter's writings on the image might produce a fresh understanding of Harris's art of fiction. To do this, I highlight the interest that both Harris and Deleuze have in the theatre as a medium for illustrating their conception of the image in language and thought. Discussing mainly the novel *Carnival*, I show how Harris assimilates narrative to the theatrical medium itself as both a concrete and abstract space of spontaneous multiplicity, and relate this to Deleuze's understanding of the image and of the text as objects of movement and of becoming. I also relate Harris's art of fiction to Deleuze's critique of conventional mimesis and its subject/object binarism, showing how codes and conventions of theatrical communication (and a readerly self-conscious perception of this) are injected into Harris's narrative protocols, creating an aesthetic that communicates to or, more specifically, performs with, the reader in ways that challenge the conception of narrative as self-contained representation. In sum, this paper demonstrates the way in which Harris's narrative evokes, and is evoked by, the play of theatre, in other words its quintessentially differential nature, through images that resist the very concept of representation.

Keywords

Wilson Harris, Gilles Deleuze, *Carnival*, theatricality, montage, metaphor

In the pages that follow, I want to consider the significance of theatricality in the workings of Wilson Harris's fiction, using the example of the novel *Carnival* and grounding my analysis in a Deleuzian perspective on the theatrical sign. While Lorna Burns has discussed the relevance of the Deleuzian concept of "immanence" for reading and understanding Harris's work — according to Burns, Deleuze's "philosophy of becoming and change" (2013: 6) illustrates remarkably well the crucial interplay between immanence and transcendence in Harris's work — I, for my part, seek to examine how the theatre medium, so important to Deleuze's theory of the sign, becomes crucial in the construction of Harris's art of fiction. I show that it is the field through which Harris articulates the displacement of mimesis and its subject-object binarism and challenges conventional understandings of the relationship between the reader and the object of fiction. Harris's critique of mimesis is highly

reminiscent of Deleuze's, I argue with particular reference to Carnival, in its foregrounding of metaphor, association, non-hierarchical relations between signs, and the moving image.

In the vast body of scholarship on Wilson Harris, the significance of theatricality as a phenomenon that informs Harris's art of fiction has received little attention so far, despite Harris's own gesturing toward the theatrical dimension of his work. Indeed, notions of the theatrical (of spectacle, performance, masks, actors, and so on) abound in Harris's novels, from the very first (*Palace of the Peacock*; Harris, 2010/1960). "Carnival time", a phrase Harris uses to describe the collapse of all absolute distinctions in the universe (life and death, mind and body, mankind and nature, and so on), is referred to in this same novel as the "[o]riginal medium of theatre" (Harris, 1993/1985: 7)¹ by the narrator-biographer Jonathan Weyl. Indeed, throughout his essays and his creative work, Harris develops a thought process around the links between this "assimilation of contraries" (Harris, 1967: 64) — a state in which the human being embraces the organic synthesis of self and other, of the human and the universe — and the domain of the theatrical. Accordingly, in "Theatre of the Arts" (Harris, 2002), Harris refers to the 'character' in his fiction as "a player" who "needs to come into league with the earth on which he moves, in which he swims, into which he descends, as a sentient living entity" (Harris, 2002: 266). Furthermore, in ascribing to the mask the ability to transcend conventional demarcations (Harris, 1999a: 166), Harris points to the energizing potentialities of the sort of "performative" novel that would harness theatricality as part of an art of fiction. The pre-eminence of masked guides throughout his oeuvre (for example, Masters in Carnival; Faust/Dr Faustus in *The Infinite Rehearsal*; Canaima, Proteus, and Alicia in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*; Donne in *Palace of the Peacock*), the self-consciousness of the character in its ability to reach out and communicate with the reader, gesture to the oeuvre's kinship ties to the theatrical space.

Hena Maes-Jelinek is an eminent Harris scholar and edited the abovementioned

volume *Theatre of the Arts*. Maes-Jelinek investigates the “penetration of masks” (put simply, the importance of the mask in the function and status of the Harrisian character) in *Carnival* (1989: 48). She gestures towards the importance of theatricality in Harris’s fiction insofar as she highlights the function of the mask in embodying the partialities of truths, and in dislodging “images from their fixed and therefore one-sided stance, to make them move [...]” (1989: 55; emphasis in original). Christine Pagnouille, for her part, anticipates my reading much more directly when she writes that “Carnival moves outside those forms of fiction in which the author is the all-powerful (‘authoritarian’) manipulator and the reader but a passive audience. Narrator, characters and readers are playing together in this comedy” (Pagnouille, 1992: 76). Pagnouille’s percipient observation notwithstanding, her reading, which approaches a series of highly significant functions of Harris’s fiction — such as the mutual dependence of narrator, characters, and readers; the nature of reality as depicted by the fiction; its uses of time; the revelation–concealment effect of masks and their thematizing of the notion of partiality — never links these functions to the concept of theatricality in a decisive way, despite recognizing the theatrical performance inherent in carnival (Pagnouille, 1992: 79).

In *Carnival*, Jonathan Weyl, the narrator and biographer, is a “twentieth-century Dante figure” (vii) into whose dreams Everyman Masters, a man both dead and alive, “returns” (viii) to act as a Virgilian guide. Masters arrives “from the kingdom of the dead to counsel [Weyl and his Beatrice figure, Amaryllis] in the land of the living and to guide [his] pen across the pages of [the] biography of spirit” that Weyl devotes to Masters. Overall, the structure of the work is constituted by a “series of remembered and imagined (“dreamed”) conversations between Masters and Weyl, in which Weyl is dually positioned as narrator of and character in his own fiction” (Kutzinski, 2000: 155). The author’s preoccupation is with “fractures and subtle abysses in story lines” (viii), particularly those of Dante’s *Divine*

Comedy and the “light year comedy” of the imperial age and the postcolonial era, into which Dante’s shadow returns.

Thus, the act of narration is associated from the outset with the notional field of performance. We are bidden to observe its treatment of time as a series of unstable perspectives. Chapter 1 functions somewhat like a prologue, a bidding to the underworld journey by Everyman Masters, the Virgil figure. His encounter with Jane Fisher provokes a sensation of repetition and of dream in which the distinctiveness of time frames is erased: “in her lay the climax of Carnival, the terror of dying, the bliss of reciprocal penetration of masks” (Carnival, 5). On the face of it, we “meet” this woman, Jane Fisher, as in a sort of narrative exposition at the beginning of Chapter 1. She helps an intoxicated Everyman Masters, returning home, to ascend the stairs and enter into his flat. Arriving in the sitting room, they engage in a verbal exchange. During this exchange, we begin to sense the peculiarity of Harris’s narrative protocol. First of all, there is no dialogue, though Masters emits many utterances. An omniscient narrator, who, as we discover later, is Jonathan Weyl, reveals to us Jane’s feelings, reactions and sensations. The denial to Jane of the direct speech afforded to Masters makes her into a sort of perceptual figment, a dream-like object of Masters’s imagination.

In this way, Carnival unsettles point of view (given that the narrator’s thoughts become, alternatively, his own or those of Masters, or the mind of Jane). Weyl is “biographer” to Everyman Masters, yet his perspective is also that of an omniscient third-person narrator who is able to read the inner thoughts of Masters, who is his “guide through the Inferno” (17). Point of view is also diffracted through the way in which the narrative perspective is constantly moving, unconfined by a traditional concept of space and time.

Carnival gives the sensation of a constant present, which is one element that makes it distinct from the standard protocol of a narrative text: characters “jump” from past to present

and backwards, and move between spaces, without articulated transitions or deictic markers, without the “connecting discourse” of a narrator elaborating the relationship between actions and motivations. The reader perceives the unfolding of a story in a scenic transmission, as in the following extract:

Masters led me within lapsed time to gaze almost sightlessly across the beautiful parkland of Kensington Gardens, through the beautiful trees, across the beautiful water.

Beautiful water! Sightless eyes. Deaf ears. Yes, sightless, dead. But listen all the same to the distant roar of the traffic running toward and from Marble Arch. A sounding waterfall! Listen! Listen to the friction of wheels in the waterfall, listen to the gallop of horses in the waterfall, listen to the brakes and gears of engines in the waterfall.

There was a crash in the distant waterfall, a muted explosion, a back-firing engine, water on rock. A collision! Was it a bus, was it a car, was it a cyclist, was it a dray-cart in a parade of ancient vehicles? Carnival gait of redressed machines, bus into masked cyclist, car into masked dray-cart, led me to ponder whether I saw or did not see someone crawling out from under a wheel...

“Hey you, give me a hand here. Stop dreaming.”

(127)

In the above extract, there is a blurring of point of view as the text maintains an ambiguity as to whose thoughts are being transmitted. Immediately before this extract, Masters had been situated in a factory, as a “new factory recruit” (126). The waterfall had been initially used as an image to describe the infernal sounds of the factory; in the passage above, a scene that

“appears” without transition, it is in the process of being assimilated into the noise of traffic and to the din of London’s streets. The extract above begins in the voice of the narrator, Jonathan Weyl (“Masters led me within lapsed time...”). In the second paragraph, however, the points of view of Weyl and Masters are fused, since the narrator maintains ambiguity concerning whose perspective is being conveyed, although the use of exclamation marks and the utterance from an unknown figure at the end of the extract (presumably another worker in the factory) suggest that these thoughts belong to Masters.

As such, the strong focus on the characters’ corporeal mediation in the narrative, on their absence, presence, disappearance, and reappearance, foregrounds the immediacy of embodied enactment in a time-conflated dramatic site around which the mind is free to wander. Harris’s scenes and their narrative presence displace the notion of the integrated plot and give way to a fictitious present in which tense and transitions are both entrusted to the active intervention of the receiver.

Returning to my point about “scenic transmission”, I would like to illustrate the merits of examining Harris’s novel in the light of Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the sign and its moorings in the concept of theatricality. Deleuze’s terminology (“movement”, “difference”, “variation”, “becoming”, “conjunction”, and so forth) allows us to grasp the opposition his work sets up between the concepts of “generality” and “repetition”. Much of his philosophy is a quest to explore how language and thought can move away from “generality” (which he associates with “representation”) and grasp the potentialities of “repetition”². This opposition forms the basis of *Difference and Repetition*, where it allows Deleuze to think of theatre without the “re” of representation, which has been his project on at least three other occasions (Deleuze, 1967; 1969; 1979; 1992). His concern with the “becoming-theatre” of philosophy, begun in “*La méthode de dramatisation*”/“*The Method of Dramatization*” (1967) is pursued in *Difference and Repetition* (1995a), where he maintains that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

“invent an incredible equivalent of theatre within philosophy” (Deleuze, 1995a: 8). He explains this by appealing to our sensual experience of theatre: on the theatre stage, there is something concrete that can be immediately experienced, and Nietzsche’s and Kierkegaard’s philosophy aspire to just such an “experienceable” quality. This is what makes them exemplars of “repetition”, he maintains, of a language and thought that cease to represent, but that set ideas in motion.

Thus, Deleuze’s qualm in *Difference and Repetition* is with the phenomenon of “representation” itself, which he sets out to critique, describing it as “the form of resemblance, under the dual rapport of the thing observed and the viewing subject” (Deleuze, 1969: 94; my translation). His conceptual opposition between “theatre of representation” and “theatre of repetition” comes from his struggle with the common image of theatre largely dominant since the emerge of the concept of the “illusion box” in the eighteenth century, solidified in that of the “fourth wall” of nineteenth century dramatic theatre, put differently, the masking of theatre’s inner reality, that of play and its evidence of multiplicity. Therefore, if Deleuze criticizes “representation” in his work which speaks abundantly of theatre, its objects and its workings, it is to offer a better paradigm which highlights the differential character of theatrical representation, its “phenomenon of pure multiplicity” (Horváth, 2016: 190). Consequently, instead of “representation”, Deleuze champions “the reign of simulacra” (“le règne des simulacres”) (Deleuze, 1969: 92). The theatre of repetition (based on simulacra – dissimulation, dissimilarity, deviation) can produce the experience of “pure forces”, Deleuze explains, of “dynamic lines in space which act without the mediation of the mind” (1995a: 10).

It becomes clear in reading Deleuze that the place he envisions for “the mind” in the system of the sign he articulates is one that oscillates within a dialectic between a self-abstraction, on the one hand, akin to what Eisenstein (1947) theorizes in his concept of

contrapuntal montage, that seeks to break up the congealed idea of thought (to create “thought without an image” [la pensée sans image]) and the apparently opposite notion of the subject’s active participation in meaning creation, one that is perhaps aided by its self-abstraction, or even by its dissolution. In championing “repetition” (“the reign of simulacra”) in his sign theory, Deleuze underscores a constitutive feature of theatrical representation, namely, variation (movement and deferral) and its mutual relationship of tension with the principle of imitation, by which the latter is constantly unsettled.

According to Deleuze, whereas representation is sameness (the nature of the copy), repetition is proliferation: “the object which no longer carries its implicit meaning within its body and its being, [...] the object which no longer wraps its meaning up ‘in itself’” (1969: 35). Repetition is presented by Deleuze as more than superficial likeness and semblance, as the French simulacre (which he uses to describe the concept) carries a notion that is etymologically closer to its root concept, that of “illusion” or “pretence”. The sign as simulacrum is thus one that is open to the world and events, and to receiving meaning from outside of itself. And the subject, in the simulacrum, is no longer an entity which, mentally conceiving of an object, is able to identify, recall, and order it. In sum, “the subject is no longer the highest level of the interpretive chain, but is dissolved” (Boutin, 1999: 120; my translation) and the privilege of meaning creation no longer belongs to it. Deleuze thus speaks of a broken subject “through whom a higher point of view is manifested [...]”. He dreams of “a world in which everything, every subject or every event ‘loses its grounding’. [and seeks to] reinvent the world with each movement” (Boutin, 1999: 120; my translation).

What Deleuze seeks to underscore here in opposing representation and repetition is a conception of difference as foundational and constitutive of any given image: “modern thought is born of the failure of representation, of the loss of identities, and of the discovery of all the forces that act under the representation of the identical”(Deleuze, 1995a: xix). What

his thought foregrounds is a notion of the unrepresented, of that aspect of meaning that escapes the visible and the representable, insofar as the representable lies within the perceptual object. The notion that is suggested is, therefore, of forces that represent themselves and their presence outside of and beyond visual and sensual “equivalents”. The image is thus placed in a framework of movement and relations and, therefore, realizes itself in time and space (“movement is opposed to the concept and to representation which refers it back to the concept” (Deleuze, 1995a: 10)). It thus has the ability to be multiple and, therefore, to contain difference within itself; to be, qualitatively, an object of difference (which is what makes Harris’s novels striking illustrations of Deleuze’s conception of the image, as we shall see). The appeal to the imagery of the theatre (in works such as “La méthode de dramatisation” (1967), “Différence et Répétition” (1969), “Un manifeste de moins” (Deleuze, 1979), and “l’Épuisé” (Deleuze, 1992)) is just this illustration of the refusal to pin the image to a static point of view. The theatre, the artistic genre par excellence of the event, puts the image in motion and in time, rather than fixing it, reducing it to an essence. In short, of all genres the theatre has a paramount ability to confer movement on the text: “Theatre”, Deleuze underscores, “is real movement, and it extracts real movement from all the art it employs” (Deleuze, 1995a: 10).

For Deleuze, the “image never stands alone. The key thing [being] the relation between images” (1995b: 52). In the same vein, Harris’s images are what I would call mutual catalysts, ceaselessly passing and transforming themselves into each other. His use of images can be considered as the ushering in of difference in a manner evocative of “the theatrical space, the emptiness of that space, and the manner in which it is filled and determined by the signs and masks through which the actor plays a role which plays other roles” (Deleuze, 1995a: 10).

Eccentrizing the text

The reader notices from the outset that there is no one entry point into Harris's work. That is to say, rather, that the entry points are myriad, and that there is none that is real, "true", or that is "the right one", that "leads in the right direction": the work is eccentric. In searching for the starting point, one is sure to wait for a long time, to wander in the work's mazes and depths. Yet, as long as one searches, looking for this starting point in the text, eager for a thread of signification, one enters into the text and fully participates in its game. The reader is carried along madly, ecstatically perhaps, by the movement of the writing, responding to it and being "played" by it. The text becomes a dynamic sign which she learns and which leads her into an act of decoding. It is a labyrinth haunted by the past, in which the reader becomes dizzy, in this case by the reading and by the "events" of the narrative. The reader will remain dizzied until she decides to find a thread, or threads, of her own.³

This is the crux of Harris's concern with performance and with the mask: How is the past incarnated in a present (twentieth- and twenty-first century) reality? How do the story lines and characters of the present provide new lives and retroactive meaning to those of the past? What remains the same in a return and what changes? This observational stance posits the organic nature of time and the porosity of its frontiers, highlighting the interpenetration of perceptual realities and flux in the meaning and status of signs. It is illustrated by Harris's approach to the figure of Dante and to his *Divine Comedy*.

For Harris, Dante's is a fundamentally theatrical world: "Dante is a theatrical figure, and you could speak of the *Divine Comedy* as a theatre" (Harris, 2017: n.p.). The seemingly primordial link between Dante's *Commedia* and the medium of theatre in *Carnival* seems to be embodied in the rhetorical trope of metaphor. In Harris's own words, "metaphor extends a work of the imagination beyond any one frame or any one particularity, into other frames, into other particularities, and into pluralities" (Harris, 2017: n.p.). Doubtless, this conception

of metaphor is consistent with the nature and functioning of theatre, on numerous different planes. In fact, consistent with Harris's statement, metaphor is an essential, constitutive aspect of the functioning of theatre. This understanding of metaphor is particularly apposite in light of Harris's remark, above, concerning Dante's *Commedia* and is, moreover, one which he seeks to exploit in his fashioning of an art of the imagination.

It is a fact that the theatre creates an extended consciousness by creating multiple images from particular ones. The theatre produces multiple images, based on objects in a visible space, through its creation of a virtual other world. Secondly, through its bringing together of different perceiving subjects within a gathering, it creates complex networks of visual perception: the theatre object offers itself to its different spectators from numerous, infinite angles. The spectator's perception is "diffracted", mediated by their physical position vis-à-vis the perceptual object, by their social positioning, by their cultural and historical location, and by their lived experience. The single perceptual object therefore becomes multiple, under the continual mutation of perspectives within the theatrical space. The space of the theatre is thus a field of infinitely diffracting perspectives and theatre is, irreducibly, a complex play of perception. If, for Harris, Dante's visual world is a theatre, then theatre becomes the quintessential metaphorical object, and the medium that illustrates most remarkably the link between particularity and plurality that inheres within metaphor.

For Harris, then, metaphor allows Dante's world to encapsulate the pluralities that inhere within time, space, and the lived experience. Implicit in Harris's position is that Dante's pilgrimage in the *Commedia* depicts a journey of mind and consciousness whose signs are of an infinite plenitude, extending into the twentieth century and into the lived experience of the postcolonial. As the writer remarks in the preface to *Carnival*, Dante's import for the imagination and for an "art of fiction" lies in the nature of the mask, a recurring and significant figure in Harris's fictional and theoretical writings. His well-known

fascination with the mask is transmuted into his style of writing that deploys the visual and sensual effects of montage and links them with the rhetorical trope of metaphor.

Consequently, Harris's Dante necessarily wears a mask. In the Dantean figure and the Dantean world, we can "perceive other faces" (Harris, 2017: n.p.), "figures that appear" (Harris, 2003: viii) in a postcolonial art of the imagination. In essence, "the metaphor links parts [...] that appear separate [...] [producing] a continuity of wholeness which can be approached (more and more closely) but which cannot be seized absolutely" (Harris, 2017). Likewise, in Carnival, each image activates or catalyses another image, in the manner through which Deleuze has defined "repetition", as we have mentioned above, in terms of the image that contains difference within itself, a virtuality always waiting to be actualized through its contact with other images.

The mutual catalysis of images is a process by which each image can create or activate another image and yet remain itself. It can be illustrated by the way in which the image of the dancing rocks of Waterfall Oracle (in Chapter 6) is "developed". This image is described by Jonathan Weyl at the moment when Amaryllis is first introduced to him:

I thought I saw boulders dancing together, embracing each other. At first they looked terribly sad, terribly sad, and then I was astonished to see their elation, profligate or extravagant mood, drunken abandon. They were drunk. That was plain to me. Drunk! I too was drunk. They had infected me [...] I wondered if somewhere in the elements, at the epicentre of the elements, seismic elements, that clothed both hope and hopelessness, lay the genesis of the dance. (104-105)

This image of the waterfall, crucial in Harris's fiction from his very first novel *Palace of the Peacock* onwards, and which evokes spaces of contradictory energies, is resumed in Chapter 8 at another level: in the factory, the Inferno of the modern world. Here, the dancing rocks of the waterfall become transmogrified into the skeleton *Frigidaires* (or "ice boxes") of the factory, and their drunken elation becomes infernal noises that terrify Jonathan Weyl. This "development" of the image allows one to see the factory in relation to another image, thanks to aural and visual connections:

The din in the factory was tremendous. And yet through it all I could hear the rush, the clamour, the phantom El Doradan rapids. It was drought, a drought that ignited a torrent etching its premises into rock utensils, smooth stripped half-bodied ice boxes, agitated washing machine souls, skeleton birthday funeral stream and dance...

"Hey you, give me a hand here. Stop dreaming."

Masters was back upon his chain from Waterfall Oracle. We stood in the factory, lapsed noon had fallen back into the brilliantly lit night of the cave. A stack of guillotined sections of metal had slipped, half-crashed, onto the floor and needed to be shored up again. (126-127)

In other words, the waterfall and the dancing rocks are freed from their function of representation (they do not stand for true waterfall or true rocks), and the attitude of the reader (to these rocks and to the waterfall) is no longer monovalent but multiple. This waterfall provokes one response and then another; or a certain response in one person, and a different reaction in another. If the waterfall represented and we understood it as such, we could also draw from it the conclusion that here is a real waterfall. We would then be faced

with a relation of identity: this fictional waterfall stands for a real waterfall. However, if the waterfall is liberated from its function as waterfall, the way the tree on Beckett's stage in *Waiting for Godot* is liberated from its function as tree, it may be perceived in numerous different ways. The dancing boulders of *Waterfall Oracle*, once liberated from their function of representation — a univocal function: the boulders for the Boulders — open up a world of underlying forces.

Consequently, liberating an image from its function of representation is to confer a mask upon it: the image that takes on a mask becomes plural. In other words, if an object has no mask it reduces itself to singularity. A mask conceals other faces within itself. As revealed to me in an interview (2017: n.p.), this idea first dawned on Harris while he was still a child in Guyana and observed the masks of its Amerindian peoples. The young Harris was struck by the idea that masks contained other (invisible) presences within them. His well-known fascination with the mask of Odysseus (to which the novel *The Mask of the Beggar* (Harris, 2003) is intimately linked) is connected to that moment.

As a result of the interaction between the two scenes mentioned above (a result of superimposition rather than juxtaposition), we read the dancing rocks in terms of the convulsive, infernal landscape of conveyor belts and the capitalist factory's production lines. Conversely, we also read the factory scene as producing strong visual and auditory convulsions, with the emotional valence of the seismic boulders. What Harris seeks to achieve in creating a metaphorical thread linking the dancing boulders, the capitalist factory, and the infernal plantation, as he later does, is to highlight the return of a mode of capitalist domination of bodies (and attendant physical and emotional effects) through the variation within one image, namely that of the dancing boulders, which also evokes the seismic paroxysms of conquest and slavery in the so-called "new world".

As such, Harris's work is an art of space and movement in which "the partial nature of each image" gives way to "correspondences with other partial images" (Harris, 2002: 267). Like Deleuze, Harris defines the image not only by what it is but by what it lacks: the image must come out of itself to realize itself: it must be "extended". It is activated in motion (and consequently in time). Consequently, the reader's contact with the text assumes prime importance. In the Preface to *Carnival*, Harris urges the reader "to read backwards and forwards, even more importantly forwards and backwards" since "All the imageries are partial, though attuned to a wholeness one can never seize or structure absolutely" (viii). There is no self-contained wholeness of the image. It is no longer the sign qua sign that is important but the way in which it acts on, and is acted upon by, other signs (as has been mentioned above in relation to the theatre). The text is no longer a work that is, but that becomes. By giving different faces to the same image (characters have different lives and deaths, different existences, different points of view, etc.), Harris accomplishes a kind of text that strikingly resembles Deleuze's "plane of consistency" in which heterogeneous images form a what he and Félix Guattari (1987) call a "rhizome". "The ideal for a book", they state, "would be to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority [...], on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 9). Instead of focusing on the linear development of singular elements, the authors argue, the ideal book thus emphasizes the way in which different images cohere and act in relation with each other — in other words, what becomes important is the different lives of the image. Though they cite Heinrich von Kleist as an example of such a text, Harris's work is remarkably illustrative of this "broken chain of affects and variable speeds [...] always in a relation with the outside" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 9). In the opening scene of Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, we are confronted with an attempt at creating just this sort of text, through a constellation of images that act and react

with each other on a plane of simultaneity. The horseman, Donne, appears to be shot; simultaneously, however, he is suspended in the air like a “hanging man” (Harris, 2010: 19) bowing to his executioner. Later, we learn that he may have “drowned”: all of these realities are presented in their all-at-onceness, as three visions of Donne’s death, as three planes of his existence. Behind every image in Harris’s art of fiction, there is another virtual image, and behind every existence, another shadow existence, so that there can be no closed image, no closed text that is not open to receiving meaning from outside itself. To use Deleuze’s (1995b) felicitous formulation, the “actual image comes into relation with its virtual image” and “crystallize[s]” so that the image is “always double and duplicated” (Deleuze, 1995b: 51-52).

Montage: technique of multistability

It is thus in this context of the multistable that we can read Harris’s use of montage. The diffracted visual imagination he calls upon emphasizes a refusal to be pinned down to the definite and, as such, the impossibility of communication’s encapsulation in language. The links between montage and metaphor were long known in the theatre of the twentieth century, where the knowledge and enrichment of cinema are undeniable. Of significance here are the retroactions between theories of cinema and theatre at a time (the twentieth century) when cinema emerged and when the theatre underwent some of its most radical developments and innovations (including through the practice of *mise-en-scène*).⁴ Eisenstein’s conception of montage was linked to the function of metaphor as montage, in his theorization, allowing for the reading of one image in terms of another. The sense of a scene arose from the contingent metaphorical interaction of images, and not from their mere juxtaposition (Eisenstein, 1947: 57). Whether consciously or unconsciously, Harris was no doubt deeply cognizant of this principle. Deleuze himself, in his use of the theatre medium in

Difference and Repetition, surely calls upon a sensitivity to the concept of metaphor as extended consciousness and to its links with both cinema and theatre in the twentieth century.

As such, montage creates images that are multistable, and through the sheer volume of movement and its effect on the mind, the reader (spectator) must surrender thought, or at least, a congealed idea of thought, under the work's sensual command. She is faced with "thought beyond the dogmatic image of thought", in the "refined interweaving of the fabric of a single thematic picture" (Eisenstein, 1988: 268). This is exemplified in the following extract from the early part of the novel, one of the many scenes of Masters's childhood in Guyana as described by the narrator Jonathan Weyl:

He crawled on with precocity of age and childhood, nine years old, nine centuries old, and came at last within Thomas in his shadow, in my shadow as well, falling from the sky with its wheel of lights, to the wild cherry tree that had been reduced to blackened limbs and stumps though I had seen it, or thought I had seen it, in all its glory. This was the primal gateway into the underworld and overworld of the cosmos [...] I looked for the axe that had cut the tree, as the bone had cut the spirit of childhood into light-year bandaged ghost, and thought I discerned it far out upon the retreating tide when a glimmer of sun upon a wave transfigured the ocean into liling, sighing, singing sharpness. This was the shaman's axe! It was he (El Doradan shaman or space-priest) who had axed the tree a long time ago and sculpted from it El Dorado himself (18)

Like cinematic montage, narrative montage allows images to interact so as to suggest meanings from their interaction. We can isolate certain isotopes: seed and child evoke the

notion of birth. As often in the work, seed and birth are associated with the image of wound (cut, slice), which, in turn, generates a sense of the female sex or, alternatively, the idea of a rape, as linked to the violent penetration of imperialist conquest. This passage comes after one where the narrator envisions a crawling Everyman Masters on a beach on the Guyana coast at the moment when the colonizers first arrive. Harris's moving images then allow discourses to be woven around the linkages between trauma and birth in the context of a colonial/postcolonial lived experience.

Similarly, the passage below offers another demonstration of Harris's use of montage in generating multistability in images:

“I am a mudhead though I ride high in your estimation, biographer,” Everyman Masters confessed to me. His words invoked the Atlantic foreshore of New Forest, South America. It was a complex gateway into the underworld of the cosmos. Sometimes it was littered by husks of coconut sculpted to reflect a straw caricature of the human brain, at other times to invest that caricature with lopsided genitals of the mind of place the human brain was. Sometimes it was the theatre of branches and trees, eroded, riven by the action of wind and wave. Etched into these, etched into branch or tree, one sometimes came upon the skeleton of a fish or the staring eye of a button to be pressed in the gallows of species.

“All in all,” said Masters, “you need to seek a gateway here in the underworld, and overworld of the cosmos, an Orinoco-esque or Dantesque gateway” (14)

Through the images of husks, straw, brain, trees, branches, skeleton, and also the Orinoco river, we perceive an underlying notion of complex arterial networks. The reader must abandon all notions of “absolute linearity” and embrace the notion of a reality accessible

through “a series of windows” (Harris, 1999b: 206). Under the effect of montage, the subject as rational ordering mind is disempowered, and thinking is forced into other media, disseminated as it were. (“Can one think through the body?” is a question implicitly asked by Harris’s fiction. It also asks whether we can think through the spirit, as that which exceeds and mediates mind and body. Hence the link to Dante’s *Commedia*, whose pilgrim is simultaneously in the body and out of it, and who, like the theatre spectator is both bodily present and projected into the elsewhere space of a virtual dramatic world.) The reader acquires new capabilities of sensual interaction with images when the subject abandons rational control.

The intellectual and sensual are interdependent categories in this performative narrative. The word provides the means of the transcendence of word, for the crafting of a text in which meaning is created through the intellection of the sensual, since the dissolution of the subject allows for a loss of control, for openness and unlimited potential of meaning. An understanding of the sensual implies a breakdown of the *logos* — a breakdown of the rational — and of the subject as centre of meaning. The theatre medium itself fosters a certain loss of control of the perceiving subject, since real bodies gather within a collective space to participate in a collective experience, in which the action of each body can impinge upon the experience of the others. The spectator’s circular gaze with respect to the complex site of the fiction represented thus moves in ways she cannot always control: between the fiction represented on stage, the fictional space beyond the stage, the social performance of the gathering (in which the spectator takes part), and the physical space beyond the theatre. Likewise, in applying the principle of interference to the space of narrative, Harris seems to insist on the breakdown of the traditional perceiving subject, underpinned by a Cartesian model of the mind. As in Brecht’s epic theatre, montage displaces realism and creates a feeling of “estrangement” (Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*). However, unlike in the Brechtian

epic theatre that foregrounds the agency of the spectator's consciousness, in Harris's fiction, the body becomes a field of perception where meaning is worked out. Montage, to deploy Deleuze's terminology, amounts to thinking beyond "the dogmatic image of thought". It fosters "thought without an image", "vibrations, [...] dances or leaps which directly touch the mind" (Deleuze, 1995a: 8).

The eccentricity of Harris's performative practice is thus integrally linked to this idea of the subject and to an eccentric reading of Dante's text: "eccentric" is taken here in the etymological sense of a thing not centred, situated out of the centre or away from it. This encapsulates Harris's very relationship with Dante's text. Indeed, Harris's engagement with the *Commedia* is that of a performative translation of the poet's work: a translation of its inexhaustible network of signs and the inexhaustible nature of the signs themselves. This translation, then, is part and parcel of his understanding of metaphor, as a conception broader than the classical notion of a figure of speech that substitutes a literal term for a non-literal one. Metaphor, in Harris's theorization, is the conceptualization of one image in terms of an implication arising from another. In other words, metaphor is the principle by which different meanings are given to the same image depending on the different images associated with it. It is a passage of implications from one image to another that allows one to read into an image a particular meaning that was not there in the beginning. Fundamentally, this understanding of metaphor displaces the notion of a hierarchy concerning the original and the copy, and foregrounds the sense and sentience that arise from the collision and interaction of different images. The play of difference, of plurality rather than sameness, of visible and invisible presences, is thus key to this understanding of metaphor. The discovery of a metaphorical thread allows the performer (the author, the text, and so on) to ex-centre an image: to displace it from its centred-ness, to extend it into another space.

Metaphor, whose quintessential image is the mask, is an intermediary, a pathway and a conveyor by which seemingly distant images are made to connect. Through metaphor consciousness can approach, though without ever fully grasping or structuring, an “insoluble” wholeness (Harris, 1999c: 252): the nature of being in the fraught time-space of a post-imperialist, post-conquest world with its complex network of cultures, and therefore signs, that Harris has at his disposal – Amerindian, African, European, Chinese, and Indian. Like theatre, Harris’s extended images carve a virtual space which forms a pathway to a limitless circularity. Thus the importance of conceiving narrative through the visual imagination of the theatrical space lies in the desire to foster various levels of perception that perhaps escape the rational. In this way, the verbal becomes a function of the visual imagination in its urge to unveil the invisible.⁵

Conclusion

Crucial to Harris’s critique of mimesis and specularity is “how the subject’s production of representation and meaning through visibility mirrors the procedures of regulated perception” (Murray, 1997: 12). Through this production, the subject is separated from nature, the masterful human from the world of the inanimate, the world of the visible from the world of spirits and the invisible, and the present from the absent. In rejecting the Western conventions of the master-subject and mimesis, Harris thus points to a reconceptualization of the relationship of the subject to itself, to its other, to the inanimate, and to the divine; a reconceptualization which cannot be divorced from his own “engagement” with the animist Amerindian traditions of Guyana. The comfortably centred, masterful subject appears then to be the philosophical and historical corollary of the notion of closure traditionally attached to representation. As Timothy Murray suggests, the ethics of mimesis also found the epistemological grounding of the absolute self of imperialism, nationalism, ethnocentrism,

and their cognate ideologies of “excessive anteriority and difference” (Murray, 1997: 13). Mimesis thus becomes a “production of understanding” by which the subject positions and locates itself as a force ordering the “external” other of its consciousness, and deploying meaning around itself, as a function of this ordering, in specular and linguistic terms. Consequently, Harris’s anti-mimetic rapport with representation and his treatment of the sign pertains to an underlying critique of the “structural traces of the [...] ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism” (Murray, 1997: 13) that have often informed and been reflected by the Euro-American “realist project”. Harris’s tacit affinity with Deleuze serves, however, to underscore the false dualism of all binaries, invalidating the notion of the quintessentially “Western” or European, and highlighting the eccentricity of all identities. Harris’s conception of language, thought, and the work of art through the optics of difference, virtuality, and becoming finds much resonance in Deleuze’s theatre of philosophy, which eliminates problems of preeminent forms, transcendental subjects and original genesis through its foregrounding of complex networks of forces, connections and affects, “relations of movement and rest” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 295).

The break with the mimetic (and the use of a differential theatricality in narrative) serves to problematize not only the conventional subject, but also time. Harris repudiates specularity and origin, and therefore the anteriority and linearity through which the subject constitutes itself in time and space. If the subject is constituted, it is in the space of performance, “a space produced from within itself” (Derrida, 1997: 46), thus one of constant presentness, that displaces the notion of origin and copy; in which ancestors speak and in which masks produce an infinite doubling of the subject. By making his fiction a performance space, Harris engages the reader sensually and bodily and, therefore, turns them into the object of their own performance. Transposing theatre’s multiple, shifting perspectives into narrative form involves the use of montage and the appeal to the celebrative

aspects of the art, its communal, and, therefore, ritual aspects, its festive dimension, wherein the individual engages with the space and with the fiction in supralogical ways. This festive, ritual dimension is, of course, what ‘carnival’ (and its manner of “turning things on their head”) is meant to analogize. However, as I hope to have demonstrated, it is the theatre that offers a framework of diffraction that creates the delight of the instability of perspectives, and their moving discontinuity, by which representation is destabilized.

NOTES

[¹] Subsequent references are to this (1993/1985) edition of *Carnival* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

[²] As we will see more clearly, “repetition” in Deleuze’s work describes language and thought which are opposed to representation through their emphasis on what one might refer to as acts of “presencing” or “co-presence” — in other words, language and thought in which images are presented in terms of their action and the connections they form, rather than their ability to distil knowledge.

[³] I follow Frédéric Boutin (1999) here, who uses the metaphor of Ariadne’s labyrinth to describe the act of reading Deleuze’s text of *Difference and Repetition*.

[⁴] As an example, Sergei Eisenstein’s (1988) ideas and understanding of the principle of montage were notably influenced by his conception of *mise en scène*.

[⁵] The invisible is often that which moves on that other stage (*der Andere Schauplatz*) which is the unconscious.

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