

Comments on the Kalamazoo Sessions, Triangulating Our Vision: The End of Theory?

Madeline Caviness

The triangle – available on the internet at the front of my e-book-- developed in teaching as a sketch on the board, to be rubbed out and re-drawn and pushed around. The idea was to keep it fluid ... We introduced a Theory / methods / historiography course 1979 at Tufts, when some declared a Crisis in art history; there followed a whole-sale shift to contextualism (did art historians forget to look any more?).

I am glad my work has stirred up some trouble, muddied some waters, and brought so many of you here to further the project of theorizing history and historicizing theory. Especially glad that it is my e-book that has directly inspired these sessions – one of few reviewers was Corine Schleif in *Speculum* who had to request to do it because editors have not yet established reviews for e-books, even though we have on-line reviews.

I hesitate to call these remarks “The end of Theory?” In 1995 Beatrice Rehl at Cambridge University Press read two chapters (including the one on the Bayeux embroidery) and responded very enthusiastically – but three years later when the book was finished she said it was too theoretical. The University of Pennsylvania Press published a small hard-bound run of the other half of the book, *Visualizing Women* ... in 2001 and has already allowed it to go out of print. I look forward to a Japanese edition. I raise this not so much out of personal pique, but because I sense a back-lash against theorizing the humanities – we hear too often “theory is over” “feminism” is over etc. And yet constant monitoring of the intellectual base of our practices as interpreters of past culture seems to me essential. I have been particularly disturbed by recent reviews in *Speculum*, of books by two people who are participating in this series – Kathy Biddick (Jan 2006) and Rachel Dressler (April 2006). The reviewer’s were evidently intellectually challenged, and made no effort to understand more than superficial detail. Nicola Coldstream in reviewing Dressler’s account of *The Chivalric Rhetoric of Three English Knight’s Effigies*, deplores her heavy reliance on the “attention-seeking assertions” of “such scholars as the late Michael Camille,” and complains that “All her examples of sexual symbolism are taken from secular

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narrative, which is not a valid comparison," going on to bemoan that "piety has no place" in Dressler's understanding of the economy of memorials and prayers. Such rigidity, reinforced perhaps by a national climate of oil war patriotism, does not produce useful intervention. I am reminded of the nine-page letter that I received from Mary Rouse a few days after the appearance of the 1993 Speculum on *Studying Medieval Women*, and I am pleased to see that Rachel is as stubborn as I am. Assigning reviews of course is a difficult thing, and I know it is done very conscientiously by Joan Holladay for art books; but the reality seems to be that for work that engages with theory as well as "history" one now has to find a reviewer who is not just immersed in archives and artifacts; another set of compatibilities sometimes has to be sought (e.g. queer theory as opposed to women's history). There is a very high stakes game of politics here, and of course it can be all the more devastating if it impacts decisions on hiring and tenuring young scholars.

And so, however it came about, it is true that we seem to have learned to hide our theoretical frameworks by leaving them largely unarticulated. The good is that as long as we go on reading theory (that is, as Jonathan Culler defined it, any intellectual matter outside our immediate field) it will seep through, changing our thinking. The danger with that may be to stop thinking about theory at all. These sessions are particularly timely because they bring a remarkable cohort of scholars together who are actively engaged in the constant process of re-thinking the field of medieval art, history and theory. Mine is not the only paradigm around, and the important thing is that it is not a mould to pour case-studies into, but there to be adjusted, expanded, extended, and adopted or adapted in other fields, as Corine's and Aly's call for papers suggested. The result is extraordinary. The range of seniority and of topics is broad, which seems to bode well for the future of theory. Linda Seidel's work has been an inspiration to me ever since I attended her lectures at Harvard, when I was trying to make sense of an American Fine Arts Department as a beginning graduate student. Pam Sheingorn is another whose engagement with the frameworks of other disciplines – including collaborative work with Kathleen Ashley – provides an invaluable model. Sarah Stanbury and Charles Nelson, like Henri Focillon, have come to see that the texts that they so expertly address as literary critics are not complete without the pictures. I am very happy to see papers by two former students who

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are now in doctoral programs – Anna Bucheler and Sarah Bromberg – as well as those of many mid-career scholars. I hope those who do their scholarship alone will gain a sense of fellowship by being here together. I thank all of you, as well as the organizers and the session chairs, for this focus on methodological questions, and most of all I want to say to you: Carry on.

The fifteen full papers that focus on history &/or theory allow for some statistics – are there trends? The representation of sex/gender arrangements still holds a major interest– in all the permutations now allowed by the “queer turn,” and especially as it pertains to sacred images. Reception – the original viewer’s, ours now, and various moments in between – is the subject or subtext of many papers. The invisible provides the imaginary field of the visible in more than one paper. But especially the marks of physical suffering – most notably the wounds of Christ – are subjected to new gazes and probing, as if by a new generation of Magdalenes and Thomases; the abject and the grotesque loom large. Ours seems a middle ages capable of reflecting back to us the wounding and torturing of war, and the exchange systems of late capitalism. That I would claim is not a distortion – it does not prevent it reflecting back to others or in other times the serene madonnas and ideated symbols more loved by Mâle’s generation, though they can never be read the same way. New frameworks of interrogation provide new questions, and the answers sometimes disrupt not only old historicisms but the very theories that informed the framework.

What are the limits (the silences, the absences)? Thirteenth-fifteenth century works attract more of us than do earlier ones (the Bayeux EMBROIDERY – I have been urging William Diebold to use the accurate term—is an exception, but his study is of its Nazi reception, not its original viewing context). We are no longer, as was the 19th century, drawn by sweetness and light, to use Matthew Arnold’s phrase – nor to Gothic architecture. Rather, there seems to be a plethora of representational codes to suit different contexts. But do we have a new canon – by which I mean a select group of objects that we can all talk about without slides?

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Do we have or consider any new theories? Theory itself now has canonical writers – so we still really depend on a limited group of French intellectuals whose ideas were formed 75 years ago? (Barthes, Derrida, Foucault?) Semiotics and deconstruction are still strong players. Butler is important, and some of her difficult ideas are presented with extraordinary clarity – and immediately put to use – in Sheingorn’s paper. Post-colonial frameworks are not articulated here.

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