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Moving into the Third Dimension: Nicole Brossard's Picture Theory

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NICOLE BROSSARD

ESSAYS ON HER WORKS

EDITED BY LOUISE H. FORSYTH



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Moving into the Third Dimension

Nicole Brossard's Picture Theory

KATHARINE CONLEY

Beginning with the title reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Nicole Brossard incorporates familiar textual voices into *Picture Theory*, her densely polyphonic novel from 1982, and thickens it with cross references, casting shadows within it. The novel's intertexts are lit by Brossard's vision of the hologram as a model for writing as articulated in her essay "The Aerial Letter" from 1980, rather than by Cartesian patriarchal reason. The intellectual space of the novel drifts, according to *Picture Theory's* emblematic word (and name) *dérive* (Dérive), or turns around the reader like a translucent textual scarf, leaving the impression of having traversed a geographic space in which overlapping realities co-exist. With *Picture Theory*, Brossard moves into the third dimension of writing and seals her poetic francophone feminist vision.¹

In "The Aerial Letter" Brossard advocates "une nouvelle écriture: de dérive. Peut-être alors faire preuve d'imagination en ouvrant une brèche: spirale" (LA 50) ["a new writing: one that drifts, that slips out from under; writing that eludes. Why not then submit proof

of imagination by opening a breach: a spiral?" (*AL* 72)]. One way Brossard enacts this "spiral" strategy is through the recasting of well-known literary and philosophical texts. Evoking Pascal's injunction to consider the imponderability of the heart (which has reasons of which reason knows nothing), for instance, Brossard declares: "car le corps a ses raisons" (*LA* 51) ["For the body has its reasons" (*AL* 74)], thus rereading and concretizing Pascal's conceptual heart. In a repositioning of one of Stéphane Mallarmé's most famous titles she links chance to the writing body and texts to habitable space:

Mais qui sont ces femmes qui me donnent du texte à penser, de l'espace à conquérir [...] ? Je les appelle urbaines radicales. Le hasard, du genre de celui qu'aucun coup de dé n'abolira, veut qu'elles soient lesbiennes de peau et d'écriture (*LA* 58).

But who are these women who give me texts which make me think, a space I can take over and inhabit [...] ? I call them urban radicals. Chance, the kind no throw of the dice will ever abolish, has it that they are lesbians, by their skin and by their writing (*AL* 80).

Her focus on spatialisation culminates in her aerial vision:

La lettre aérienne, c'est le fantasme qui me donne à lire et à écrire en trois dimensions, c'est mon laser. Espace-temps-mobilité dans l'Histoire [...] voir l'Histoire à même sa peau (*LA* 65-6).

The aerial letter is the fantasy which permits me to read and write in three dimensions; it is my laser. Space-time-mobility in History [...] seeing History right down to the skin (*AL* 86).

In *Picture Theory* Brossard turns to Wittgenstein's proposition from the *Tractatus* that "The picture is a model of reality" (39). With the understanding that "one can not express reality, one can only show it [sic]," Brossard causes language to make "pictures" with white space, italics, and typography, as well as with her evocation of the hologram (Cotnoir 122). She responds implicitly to Wittgenstein's questioning of Descartes's *cogito* and explores explicitly his idea of language as a tool, from the *Philosophical Investigations*, whereby how a word is used counts as much as what it stands for.² For example, with the name Claire Dérive from *Picture Theory*, Brossard plays both functions off one another, so that they shed light on each other, because its "use" as a proper name is haunted by what it "stands for," Clear Drift. Literally *clear* and not opaque, like most unfamiliar fictional names, Claire Dérive's name announces Brossard's intention to write in a manner "that is both *derived from* and *adrift*," as Karen Gould suggests, and to embody this writing in a fictional desiring and desirable woman's body (88). Brossard's style as well recalls Wittgenstein's, who has been characterized as "the most radical of modernist writers" by Marjorie Perloff, "a writer for whom any totalizing scheme must always give way to 'travel over a wide

field of thought criss-cross in every direction.’ Only such criss-cross advances our thinking” (66).

Picture Theory “criss-crosses” in several ways beginning with its structure: complementary first and last sections flank two tripartite middle sections. The book’s first section, “L’ordinaire” [“The Ordinary”], proposes through its title that which is quotidian and iterative as non-chronological, non-linear elements of Brossard’s “picture theory.” Brossard encourages the reader to follow a reading process that itself approximates non-linearity – implicitly with multiple cross references and explicitly by sending the reader to page 162 from page 34 and back again and to page 149 [sic] from page 115 (pages 185, 40, 167 in French text). “The Ordinary” introduces the narrator, Michèle Vallée, her lover, Claire Dérive, and Claire’s family, with poetic simultaneity. Succeeding paragraphs situate the characters in diverse spaces – Montreal, Paris, New York, together with Curaçao and Ogunquit – as they think about or communicate with one another long distance. Even apart in space, in transit, they are often together in time, just as Claire’s voice on Michèle’s answering machine, spoken in the past, articulates the phrase “*Je suis Claire Dérive*” in the present tense, and thus conjures her absent presence and prompts time periods to overlap (PTf42, PTe36).

The first paragraph opens in the bar of a hotel on Curaçao where the narrator has met a woman named Anna by chance and where she (the narration’s “I”) is

addressed as “you” by a dancer whose comment identifies one of the key elements in a hologram: that every part contains the whole:

Dans le bar du Hilton, le danseur des Caraïbes dit: vous vous souviendrez sans doute de Curaçao à cause d'un détail (Anna, que le hasard m'avait fait rencontrer quelques heures auparavant, m'avait prévenue qu'une réalité n'en recouvre pas nécessairement une autre mais qu'hôtesse de l'air entre le Venezuela et Aruba la laissait à désirer) (*PTf* 19).

In the bar of the Hilton, the dancer from the Caribbean says: you will undoubtedly remember Curaçao because of a detail (Anna, whom I had met by chance a few hours earlier, had warned me that one reality did not necessarily overlap another but air stewardess between Venezuela and Aruba left her to desire) (*PTe* 15).

With this first sentence the reader is plunged into a dialogue in the present between a woman and a man under which, parenthetically, the remembered comments and desires of other women circulate. One conversation subtends another and a community of women influencing one another's thoughts and desires instantly comes to life, but only partially. For, as the narrator states in the following paragraph: “D'instinct et de mémoire, j'essaie de ne rien reconstituer” (*PTf* 19) [“From instinct and from memory, I try to reconstruct nothing” (*PTe* 15)]. The reconstruction in question is left to the reader whose gaze upon the screen of words activates them, setting them into mental circulation.

Repeated references to a “white scene” of lovemaking between Michèle Vallée and Claire Dérive punctuate the characters’ movements and communications in “The Ordinary,” a scene evoked as having “a persistent smell of wood” thus evoking a sensual memory of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (23). The scene takes place on May 16, exactly one month before “Bloomsday” from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in an unidentified year. As Dawn Thompson has argued: “The light source for the inscription of Brossard’s hologram is the sexual intimacy” of the “white scene” even though it resists the status of either the novel’s point of origin or teleological end since each repeated evocation shifts or “drifts” according to Claire’s surname, and refuses definitive location (23).³

The final section is a book-within-a-book with a copyright in the future, from the year 2011, entitled Hologram (PTf 173-207, PTe 155-184) in keeping with Brossard’s “idea of the hologram, which applied to writing prompts me to want to explore a word, an idea, a concept in order to grasp all its dimensions. Just as I have to explore my own subjectivity” (Cotnoir 122). As Susan Knutson explains, a hologram is formed by the interaction of two light beams on a screen, one of which reflects the object to be holographed, which, through a light-wave interference pattern, can reproduce “a three-dimensional image of the holographed object. The holographic screen is reexposed to a laser beam to produce the hologram” (2000 122). Through the light source of the “white scene” together with the

illumination of her intertexts,[†] Brossard produces a hologram of “the object to be holographed,” namely the extended narrative section at the center of *Picture Theory* entitled “Emotion” which describes five women’s island vacation. In the form of a prose poem, Hologram concludes in mid-sentence, inviting the reader, “to reexpose” the narrative “screen” to the light of rereading, to spiral back and reread what came before in this “book” and in the entire novel. She thus elicits the enactment of what she called in “The Aerial Letter” “cette expérience excitante du texte qui tourne autour de lui-même” [“this exciting experience of text which turns about itself”] and then translates “au féminin par un glissement de sens allant de l’excès au délire, du cercle à la spirale” (*LA* 48) [“into the feminine by a shift in meaning going from excess to ecstasy, from circle to spiral” (*AL* 71)].

The first of the two middle sections divides into three books. The first book, entitled “Perspective,” is an extended poetic evocation of the “white scene” of love-making in which sense and sensuality merge – “je pensais réellement comme une peau” (*PTf* 71) [“i really thought like a skin”] – and Claire Dérive is compared to the irresistible heroine of *Nightwood* (*PTe* 63). The second “book,” “Emotion,” takes the form of an extended prose description of a vacation spent on Martha’s Vineyard talking about writing, family, and “abstractions” like “reality” and “matriarchy,” by five women friends, relatives, and lovers characterized as

“studious girls” and as “Border crossers, radical city dwellers, lesbians” (*PTe* 69, 88, 76). “Emotion” radiates from the heart of the novel. Gould emphasizes “emotion” as a “most privileged term” for Brossard which reflects her adherence “to modernity’s more general critique of western knowledge and to the debilitating split it has fostered between the body and the intellect” (91). Within “Emotion” Brossard reunites body and intellect. Desire “drifts” in an echo of Brossard’s conflation of Pascal’s heart with a writing woman’s body when Michèle unexpectedly experiences a surge of desire linked to language for her lover’s sister Florence, who is also a writer:

Je regardais Florence Dérive comme un auteur et cela m'évoquait du désir pour elle comme une liaison sonore permet de confondre deux mots et d'en jouir (PTf 92).

I was looking at Florence Dérive like an author and that evoked in me desire for her like a sonorous liaison enabling the m'urging of two words and jouissance (*PTe* 80-81).

A sensation conjoined with reflection rather than a preface to action, desire here leads from “Emotion” to “Thought,” the title of the third “book” of the middle section, which consists of short diary-like notes on the narrator’s “private Life”: “Ma Vie privée est une carte sphérique d’influences et de points de rencontre, elle tourne autour de la langue” (*PTf* 107) [“a spherical map of influences and meeting points, it turns around

language" (*PTe* 93)]. With the capitalization of "Life" in "private Life" Brossard emblemizes her theme of women as adult "studious girls" whose inner lives are populated as much by characters from modernist masterpieces like *Finnegan's Wake* (such as Anna Livia Plurabelle) as by personal sentimental preoccupations (*PTe* 91). Such women would "détourn[er] le cours de la fiction, entraînant avec nous les mots tour à tour, spirale ignée, **picture theory**" (*PTf* 99) ["divert the course of fiction, dragging with us words [that] turn and turn about, igneous spiral, **picture theory**" (*PTe* 88)]. In this "book" on "thought" Brossard explains how the writing hologram works: "D'un détail, l'ensemble du continent" (*PTf* 110) ["From one detail, the entire continent" (*PTe* 96)]. From the detail, the overall picture: while women dance inside, "Dehors il neige sur toute l'étendue de la langue" (*PTf* 117) ["Outside it is snowing on the entire expanse of language" (*PTe* 103)]. Turning women are doubled by spinning flakes and words positioned to emulate a hologram.

The second middle section also divides up into three parts: "SCREEN SKIN," "SCREEN SKIN TOO," and "SCREEN SKIN UTOPIA" (in English in the French text). The expression of Michèle's and Claire's ecstatic, utopian meeting comes through skin, through ink and writing, (which was long done on parchment or stretched animal skin), and also through voice, through the ways in which one word ("too") sounds like another ("two"). Brossard's focus on "skin"

linked to “screen,” a membrane which can be imprinted or projected upon, with ink or light, and, on a body, from either side – inside (emotion) or outside (touch) – highlights her visual and textual play with the idea of the horizon. In one of the repetitions of the “white scene” from “The Ordinary,” “horizon” is replaced with its poetic corollary “her/i/zon”: a meeting between equals, between two “I’s,” each with “her eyes on” the other, that extends into “l’horizon, jamais je ne saurai narrer” (PTf 26, 24) [“the horizon I will never be able to narrate” (PTE 22, 20)]. “Screen skins” are like materialized horizons – places where ocean and sky meet when seen from an island, whether it be Curaçao, Martha’s Vineyard, or Lesbos, and where that natural light source, the sun, rises and sets.

The homonymy of “SCREEN SKIN TOO,” of “two” in “too” in this second part of the second middle section, implicitly proposes Simone de Beauvoir’s “second sex” as Brossard’s answer to the “mémoire patriarcale qui fit croire que la Sphinx pouvait être vaincue par un homme” (PTf 148) [“patriarchal memory that made people believe the Sphinx could be conquered by a man” (PTE 132)]. This homonymy echoes others in the text, most notably of the word-name *dérive*- Dérive. It anticipates the visual homonymy of the two facing blank pages, in the French language edition, at the beginning of the last book, *Hologramme*, which visually “repeat” the “white scene” (PTf 174-5). The ways in which words sound like other words enact within *Picture*

Theory the polyphonic quality of Brossard's intertextual references, "too," both explicit and implicit, from *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* to Joyce's story "The Dead" through the presence of swirling snowflakes, Barnes's *Nightwood*, Wittgenstein, Gertrude Stein, Georges Perec, André Breton, and Monique Wittig.⁵ Barnes's work may be seen in the impetus of women on the move and felt through the "smell" of wood throughout *Picture Theory* which at times blends with the Steinian odor of roses in the form of "rosewood" (*PTe* 28, 53, 68, 124, see Moyes 1995).⁶ These intertexts imbue Brossard's work with a surplus of sensuality – seeing, hearing, touching, smelling. Behind Brossard's Anna, met by chance in Curaçao, for instance, Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle lingers, in the references to *Finnegan's Wake* and by name, later on, making sense of the narrator's comment that Anna "sentait la fiction" (*PTf* 105, 29) ["smelled of fiction" (*PTe* 91, 25)].

Sensuality joins abstraction explicitly in the "utopian" third "SCREEN SKIN" section with the double horizon stretching between two thinking women's bodies: "Utopian, against my abstract body I have the sensation of Claire Dérive's body and I articulate some emotions in the room" (*PTe* 137). This utopian horizon, where embodiment and abstraction, ecstasy and text, meet, this Brossardian in-between, grounds epistemology in an ethical relation between equals, between an "I" and a "you," that speaks out through her fiction. The pronouns "I," "you," and "her" punc-

tuate her work, as words binding the writer to her reader and her lover, whose lips, in "The Ordinary," seem to "brush" a poem composed by the narrator, even when she is a continent away (*PTE* 34-35, see Knutson 2002). The utopia of "I" and "you," of "I" and "her," conjured by the holographic convergence of thought with perspective and emotion, renders real the virtual presence of others in the writer's imagination, transforming the singular subject into a social subject continually in relation with others.

For the narrator in *Picture Theory*, as Louise Forsyth affirms, "sees herself as an autonomous although integral part of a coherent and luminous whole, defined completely by the intense energy she generates and shares with other women" in a matrix of interrelationship which has its corollary in space (342). In effect, the space in *Picture Theory* cannot be contained within a linear trajectory but can only be visualized according to the overall pattern of a map, on which it might be possible to see simultaneously Florence Dérive in New York and Montréal, her brother John in New York, his wife in Maine, the narrator in Curaçao (in memory) and in Paris (in body) visiting a holography exhibit, back in Montreal with Claire, and so on – a map that presents a visual rather than a textual image of this "luminous whole" (Forsyth 342).

At the same time that *Picture Theory* invokes a utopian dream of wholeness, of a network of the intersecting trajectories of sensual, thinking women, it

resists, self-consciously, the illusion of totalisation. The parts never quite fit into a perfect assembly or, to use Barbara Godard's apt term, "combinatory" of words and images "in which each unit is constantly redeveloped in new combinations" and which, spatially, translates into an "operation of folding, an unfolding to infinity" accompanied by "an infolding of infinity." ("Preface" 8-9). The hologram, after all, is an optical illusion. Brossard evokes it with self-awareness in order to make visible the "horizons" between reality and fiction. Making visible is an important component of her "picture theory" which involves making lesbians visible in a way they mostly have not been in patriarchal histories, allowing them to catch the light like snow flakes at night as they turn, at once individual and collective.⁷

Thompson suggests that Brossard's sense of "the fragmentation of reality" in contemporary "ordinary" life prompts a vision of the world as "a museum of fragments taken out of context precisely by the way we look at it" (39). The ideology of the museum in the nineteenth century, according to Eugenio Donato, was founded on the fiction that "the set of objects the Museum displays [...] somehow constitute a coherent representational universe" as the result "of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world" (223). Whereas such juxtaposed fragments could produce a convincing dream of wholeness in the

nineteenth-century museum, by the late twentieth-century in *Picture Theory*, illuminated with Brossard's thematisation of illusion, the idea of a "museum of fragments" expresses blanks and silences as much as totality. Going back to Wittgenstein, Brossard presents all the elements necessary for the reader to reconstruct a "picture" of Michèle Vallée's relation to her lover, her friends, and her work while at the same time making us aware of her silences.

The book's many sections repeat and refer to one another, refract each other, intertwining the narrative pieces and characters into a prism that "pictures" as much as tells the converging emotions, desires, memories, and thoughts in a writing woman's life. At one point Brossard even lowers the "screen" of her narrator's "I," referring to Michèle Vallée in the third person and stating: "je savais que derrière elle l'écran serait baissé et qu'elle serait projetée dans mon univers" (*PTf* 165) ["I knew that behind her the screen would be lowered and she would be projected into my universe" (*PTe* 147)]. Behind "woman" as abstraction stands Michèle Vallée, behind whom Brossard thinks and writes, allowing herself, "Nicole Brossard," the authorship of the final book-within-a-book, *Hologram*.

Brossard situates her *écriture au féminin* "au bout de la nuit patriarcale" ["at the end of patriarchal night"] where body and text fuse in the light of the reader's gaze: "le corps s'anticipe à l'horizon que j'ai devant moi sur un écran de peau, la mienne, dont la réson-

nance perdure dans ce qui tisse le tissu la lumière" (PTf 167) ["the body anticipates on the horizon I have in front of me on the screen of skin, mine, whose resonance endures in what weaves the text / ure t/issue the light" (PTE 150)]. Within history while slipping out of it in space-time-mobility, *Picture Theory* is exemplary of feminist fiction from the 1970s and 1980s. Rejecting the masculinist reification of originality with its quotations, the coherence of the singular narrator with its polyphony of voices, and the linear narrative structure of the nineteenth-century novel, Brossard both knowingly follows in the footsteps of her vanguard forebears, from Wittgenstein to Joyce and Barnes, and imagines a new, interactive holographic model for writing and reading, which, with her dance of "I," "you," and "her" invites readers to erect their own holographic maps of the public and private lives of adult, desiring, writing, and mobile "studious girls."

Notes

1. In an interview Brossard confirms: "*Picture Theory* is a novel that I wrote with the feeling of having a three-dimensional consciousness" (Cotnoir 123).
2. See David Edmonds and John Eidinow's *Wittgenstein's Poker* for their presentation of Wittgenstein's questioning of Descartes's *cogito*, which "overturned several hundred years of philosophy" (230), and for more on "language as a tool" (228).
3. In *Narrative in the Feminine* Susan Knutson also argues that "Brossard's text deconstructs the inherent teleology and inherited gender bias of the quest" (115).
4. In this spirit Barbara Godard refers to *Nightwood* as *Lightwood* ("Preface" 8).
5. For more on these intertexts see Lorraine Weir's "From Picture to Hologram" and Liane Moyes's "Caught in Each Other's Dreams." I argue for a surrealist intertext from André Breton's *Nadja* in *Automatic Woman*.
6. For more on mapping in Brossard see Thompson and Huffer.
7. See Godard's "Producing Visibility for Lesbians" for more on Brossard's project of making lesbians visible as "desiring subjects."

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