

Mixed Media and Mixed Messages: Big Art Group's Exploration of the Sign

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One of the most useful services that semiotic theory of the late twentieth century provided to the field of theatre studies was a critical approach that allowed the analysis of the extremely complex event of the theatre experience, wherein the spectator simultaneously receives a very wide variety of messages and stimuli on a number of channels, predominantly visual and aural, but potentially involving all five senses. Semiotic analysis offered a methodology dealing with the operations of these stimuli both individually and collectively, as they reinforced each other, in the tradition of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*; worked in opposition to each other, as recommended by Brecht in epic performance; or operated in an open-ended and free-form manner, as became common in much postmodern experimental performance.

One such contemporary group that provides both a particular challenge to semiotic analysis as well as a useful illustration of the insights such analysis can bring to current experimental production is the Big Art Group, founded in New York in 1998 by Caden Manson, but now well known across America and in Germany. In this essay, I will consider the five productions so far created by this Group, their evolving aesthetic, and how this aesthetic opens itself to semiotic analysis. Big Art Group was founded with the stated aim of using “the language of media and blended states of performance in a unique form to build culturally transgressive and challenging new works.”¹ They have so far (until 2007) produced seven original works, several of which have toured widely both within the United States and abroad. Following their goal of expanding the formal boundaries of theatre, film, language, and the visual arts, these works may be seen as a series of challenging experiments, each one building upon and expanding the techniques previously developed.

The Group's first two works, *Clearcut Catastrophe* (1999) and *The Balladeer* (2000), were concerned with creating and developing an ensemble trained in physically rigorous presentational skills and dedicated to exploring new performance vocabularies. From the beginning Big Art Group, like its predecessor, America's best-known experimental company, the Wooster Group, built work out of improvisation, experimental structure, task-based choreography, and quotations

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from previous dramatic and filmic material. All these techniques may be seen operating in *Clearcut Catastrophe*, the Group's first production, which established many of its basic performance devices. It also combined original material with material taken from Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the Maysles Brothers' cult documentary film *Grey Gardens*, which has since inspired a highly successful and much more conventional Off-Broadway and Broadway musical.

An ever-present ticking sound by sound designer Jemma Nelson imposed a strong rhythm on the wildly varied material including monologues, handstands in buckets, digressions on the abolition of the color pink, and show-stopping chorus lines. Although the entire ensemble of *Clearcut Catastrophe* was warmly praised by such Off-Off Broadway reviewers as *Citysearch* and *Backstage*, Justin Bond as Masha was particularly noted. His drag performance, as individualistic as those of his fellows, combined Stanislavskian realism, hyper-feminine B-grade movie acting, and task-driven biomechanic actions.

Big Art's second production, *The Balladeer*, turned from high to pop culture, presenting six dysfunctional high school freshmen performing the clichés of contemporary youth culture as seen in films and on TV, with scenery provided by photo boxes and a complex plot constantly interrupted by senior-band ballads, snatches of amateur verse, a random French ballerina, and a tiny puppet show performed in a light box. (The audience was provided with plastic opera glasses so as to enjoy the varied visual scales of the performance.) The conscious exploration of dance and theatre forms intermixed with filmic and televisual motifs led directly to the technique of what Big Art has called Real-Time Film, which has become a central feature of their work.

The first fully developed example of this technique appeared in the Group's first major touring production, *Shelf Life*, which opened in New York in 2001. The stunning opening image of that production introduced the audience to the sort of technological innovation that would be central to the Group's subsequent work. Three video cameras positioned downstage captured the movements of the performers, which were shown on three large video screens which, linked together, covered the front of the stage. The audience could see the heads of the actors above the screens, their legs and feet below, and their torsos on the screens. In an opening sequence the videographed torso of the performer to the right extends an arm, which by careful choreography seems to extend onto the second and then the third screen, each portion of the arm being provided by another otherwise invisible actor. Thus the arm seems, impossibly, to stretch the width of the stage (see fig. 1).

This memorable image clearly illustrates the use of Real-Time Film as a conceptual tool collapsing performance, television, and movies by the interpenetration of live action and video. Although glimpses of the living actors are regularly seen, the "story" is primarily played out on the screens and concerns three characters in an increasingly mediatized and disposable world who become

obsessed with a fourth. Each tries to mold the other into the shape of their media-induced desires.



Fig 1. (left to right) Vivian Bang, Cary Curran, Dave Commander, Jeff Randall, *Shelf Life* (2001), Big Art Group (photo: Linsey Bostwick).

There are strong echoes of certain of Brecht's alienation techniques in both the technological choices of the company and their acting style. Stylistically, the actors are far removed from conventional naturalistic delivery. The characters they play and the situations in which these characters operate are all drawn from the most cliché-ridden and predictable elements of contemporary mass culture, and the acting style similarly recalls the broad strokes of such mediated productions—large expressions, strongly melodramatic delivery, and clear pointing of the action to avoid subtlety or second takes. They clearly do not live, but only “present” their characters, a process intensified by the continual mediatization and even fragmentation of their bodies. Not only are bodies mixed and merged on the screen, but this process, so fluid and well choreographed as to potentially create the illusion of a single body (like the opening arm sequence) is then defamiliarized by being constructed, for example, of an Asian woman's left arm, a white man's torso, and a black man's right arm. Brechtian signs announcing locations and other visual material, both live and filmed, provide another regularly recurring distancing element.

Perhaps most Brechtian in spirit, although far from particularly Brechtian in practice, is the making visible of the means of production. The audience is constantly presented with a collage of visual images on the screens while at the same time being conscious of or able to deduce the actual mechanisms by which these images are created and which are actually composed of very different elements. The actors, for example, appear on the screens in apparently different “camera

angles,” which, the audience can see, are in fact created by rapid changes of position before actually fixed cameras; or a scene on the screen that shows certain spatial relationships or interactions of characters is actually created, as the audience can see, by combining shots of individual actors in quite different situations. Thus the audience is forced to undertake a continuous semiotic analysis, not only receiving the flow of filmic signs presented on the screens in the manner of familiar video or cinematic practice, but also being simultaneously aware of these signs *as* signs by witnessing the specific and conscious process of their construction.

Shelf Life was conceived of by Manson as the first part of a trilogy exploring the mixing of film, live video, and performance that he has called Real-Time Film. It also introduced Jemma Nelson as the in-house author of the Group. The sister piece to *Shelf Life*, *Flicker*, premiered at New York’s Performance Space 122 in 2002. *Flicker*, like *Shelf Life*, placed a three-segment screen between actors and audience and used three stationary video cameras to reflect the actors’ movements and gestures on the screens. The audience could thus see both the visual image and the often phenomenologically contradictory means by which that image was being simultaneously created.

Although similarly based on mass culture and popular entertainment, *Flicker* employs a rather different narrative structure from that of *Shelf Life*. The performance is based upon two narrative films, which begin almost identically. Actors hold up title cards in front of each of the end cameras announcing a terrible tragedy that befell a group of young friends one autumn. The right title, however, announces three friends and an unfortunate afternoon, while the left speaks of five friends and an ill-fated evening. The stories, both drawing heavily on commercial films seeking a teenage market, then unroll simultaneously, often blending into each other on the screens. The three friends negotiate a tragic love triangle, while the five, on their way to a party, are attacked by an ax-wielding psychopath.

Interestingly, the major theoretical study devoted to this production, Jason Farman’s “Surveillance Spectacles,” draws equally upon phenomenological and semiotic theory to explain what he calls Big Art’s creation and utilization of a “proprioceptive-semiotic body.” Citing Merleau-Ponty, he evokes the phenomenological critique of abstract visual or aural spectatorship to seek instead an understanding based upon a whole-body perception or a plenary gestalt.² Just as phenomenology emphasizes proprioception, our consciousness of our particular situation in the world, the “Real-Time Film” strategies of Big Art require that both actors and audience must continuously perceptually negotiate their relationship with each other and with the screen which simultaneously joins and separates them. However, Farman argues, this perception combines the “whole-body experience” of both actors and audience as well as “a semiotically read text of systems of information being scripted through information technologies.” This simultaneity of phenomenology, post-structuralism, and semiotic reading of the body’s inscriptions

he calls a “proprioceptive-semiotic body.”³

Most original in the “Real-Time Film” presentations of this proprioceptive-semiotic body is that it is a body which is coherent only as a digital construction. Let us take, for example, a sequence involving the character Amy, who is pursued through the woods by a maniac slasher. Actress Amy Miley in fact runs in place, her back toward the stage-right camera, looking back over her shoulder at the camera and presumably at her pursuer, whom we see in another digital image brandishing a knife. In fact, as the audience can clearly see, he is neither running nor anywhere near Amy, but is being filmed in another location. As Amy’s run continues, her digital body is assumed by another actor, actually male, in a red wig and costume similar to hers. As the “run” continues onto the stage left camera, a third actress, this time in a blonde wig, takes on the digital body of the running Amy.

In the traditional analogic and live theatre, such a run (actually rather difficult to present on stage since its spatial demands are much more suitable to film), would be presented as a brief sequence presented by a single actress. In *Flicker*, on the other hand, this coherent body exists only digitally, while the audience is simultaneously aware of that digital coherent body and of the contributing and varied analogic bodies of which it is digitally composed. The tension between these simultaneously offered perceptual modes is emphasized by the fact that the semiotic systems of the contributing bodies are consciously foregrounded by inconsistencies—wearing different wigs and costumes, even having different genders. Thus the semiotic systems utilized in traditional theatre to reinforce the impression of a unified presentational body are here placed in contradiction. There is, as already noted, a certain similarity between this performance strategy and the Brechtian concept of alienation. While Brecht set different semiotic systems into opposition, or exposed (as in the case of lighting) their means of production, the availability of contemporary digital technology allows Big Art Group to take this demystifying or denaturalizing process to greater extremes and to destabilize the central semiotic figure of the actor to an extent never attempted in the Brechtian theatre.

Although there are consistent political implications in the work of Big Art, such as its seeming critiques of the prevalence of commodification and violence in contemporary culture, the work does not seem, to this writer at least, as centrally concerned with politics as is that of Brecht. Its use of digital technology to call attention to the constructedness of visual and aural performance images in both film and theatre seems to me more concerned with phenomenological questions of how visual and aural material is perceived and interpreted than with its social or cultural implications. Perception is constantly negotiated, always in play. As Farman remarks: “The semiotic link between what takes place on the material stage and what takes place on the virtual stage of the screens requires not simply a phenomenological experience of the body but a simultaneous semiotic reading

of various signs and multiple referents.”⁴

Farman also argues that the particular kind of fragmented cognition, the play of signifiers and signifieds offered by this process, suggests the post-structuralist space of pure difference, the aporia characterized by Jacques Derrida as involving “abandonment of all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute archia.”⁵ The spaces established between screens, cameras, cameras and screens, and the digital images and living bodies of the actors are all exploited to create moments and sequences of difference (and *différance*). The sign which, in Derrida’s analysis, replaces the center becomes a supplement, a floating signifier, which calls attention to the lack of closure both in itself and in its presumed signified.⁶

The third and final part of the “Real-Time Trilogy,” *House of No More*, was presented in New York and in several locations in Europe in 2004 and 2005. The text, again by author and sound designer Jemma Nelson, “starts in the shape of a paranoid thriller, but it mutates, becomes aberrant and invasive,” according to Nelson and Manson. Like the other parts of the trilogy, it drew its primary inspiration from mass culture, especially films, but was “not told through the devices of conventional dialogue and narrative, but across an extended field of meaning in which the method of delivery contaminates the message.”⁷ Once again the audience was bombarded with multiple and contradictory signs and encouraged to reconfigure them continuously in shifting clusters of signification.

The central figure is Julia, a Marilyn Monroe-style beauty queen, played by three different actresses who may or may not represent the same person and who constantly fade into one another through such technological devices as digital imaging and lip-synching. The other characters are similarly or even more unstable, created by both black and white, both male and female actors. Once again the bank



Fig. 2. (left to right) Amy Miley, Ebony Hatchett, and Micah Jennings, *House of No More* (2004), Big Art Group (photo: Caden Manson).

of onstage screens merges images in order to provide the audience with the only reasonably coherent visual story line and characterization (see fig. 2).

This semiotic privileging of the digital image over the live presentation might seem a perfect illustration of the process discussed in Philip Auslander's book *Liveness*, which is centrally concerned with the relationship between the live body and media technology in an increasingly mediatized culture. Auslander's basic thesis is that since more and more in contemporary society we perceive and understand the world around us not directly but through the operations of media technology, this has created a condition of what he calls "media epistemology,"⁸ wherein our knowledge of reality is based not on direct sensory impressions but upon media reproductions. Thus Auslander postulates a culture in the not too distant future when digital reproduction would be privileged over the live artist or artistic event which it was recording:

[W]e can begin to imagine a culture in which more prestige would accrue to someone who said she had seen Anderson on videotape or listened to her on CD than to the person who had seen her live. It is actually not at all difficult to imagine cases in which owning the mediatized version of a performance is worth the same, if not more symbolic capital as having attended the event.⁹

A similar concern is widespread among theorists of postmodernity. Here one frequently encounters the assertion that one mark of contemporary culture is the undermining of both the concept and the authority of the original, and its replacement by reproduction. Thus, for example, cultural theorist Stephen Connor speaks of postmodernism's "inversion of the structural dependence of copies upon originals."¹⁰

Actually, however, the digital image of the "Real-Time Films" of Big Art is rather closer theoretically to Derrida than to Auslander, because the digital "copy" in their work does not in fact mechanically "reproduce" an artist like Anderson or a pre-existing or even simultaneous performance, but is a new creation, that incorporates fragments of the live performance to bring into being a copy whose "original" exists only by an imaginative act on the part of the viewer. As a character in *House of No More* observes in a typical line which is simultaneously clichéd and profound: "I'm just a copy of a copy of a copy, it's all been seen before."

The "Real-Time Film" trilogy allowed Big Art Group to establish and develop ways of utilizing the interplay of words, bodies, other objects, sounds, cultural detritus, and technology to create more and more complex meditations on not only specific social and cultural issues, but the most basic concerns of ontology and epistemology. This exploration continued, in even more complex ways, in their next major project, *Dead Set*, which began at the Hebbel Theater in Berlin,

and in Paris as part of the Festival d'Automne in 2006 as *Dead Set #2*, continued as *Dead Set #3* at the Donau Festival in Austria and in New York in 2007, and is an ongoing series of performance experiments.

At the Donau Festival, Manson and Nelson issued a statement concerning how this ongoing project fit into the evolution and objectives of the Group:

Our interest in technology has not ended: it's not possible to create art or indeed meaning without technology, since technology is integrated into our society and increasingly into our own bodies. It's not just a matter of light instruments and video projections: our perceptions and self-conceptions are blended with the information we receive through the channels of our own choosing. What kind of monsters are we that we can speak from so many faces, and get fucked in such a multitude of ports? But we would like to own our monstrosity, we believe we can re-engineer the cyborg, to give it a new purpose: what if we built our own Sacred Band as a first wave task force for the new desire? We are un-soldiers, always yielding, we will struggle only to be closer, to be united, to become soft machines.¹¹

Some of the specific creative strategies utilized in *Dead Set #3* are summarized in a leaflet provided by the company. According to this, the movement both on stage and on screen is created from a collage of "cut, spliced, and copied footage from mass media television programs, newscasts, and documentary footage." In fact the sources are even more varied, including YouTube postings, internet chats, and a wide variety of cultural detritus—images (such as the notorious prison photos from Abu Ghraib), sounds (especially of explosions and gunfire) and projected sentences and words (from newspapers but also from emails and internet chats). There are also projections of purely abstract visual material generated by computers but given meaning and tonality by context or accompanying sound, such as gunfire. Significantly, Big Art describes this project not as a performance but as a "collection of footage," each part consisting of "an assemblage of modular concepts that are rearranged for the duration of the spectacle." Future developments of the project look to evolving entirely out of a theatre or theatre/dance context into "non-theatrical performances, straight-to-video, and commerce."¹²

Although *Dead Set #3*, performed at the Dance Theatre Workshop in New York in January of 2007, utilizes the three contiguous screens familiar from the previous Real-Time Film trilogy, and these screens continue to serve as the site where fragmented elements filmed elsewhere on the stage are combined into more complex but also more coherent signs, this process does not dominate the audience's perception of the performance as it did in the previous work. It is only one type

of imagery in a far more varied and layered experiential field offered to audience members. When the audience entered the theatre, no actors were visible, only the three screens and a cluttered array of film and video equipment—microphones, stands, cameras on tripods, lighting and sound booms. In the opening sequence this equipment seemed to be attempting to communicate directly to the audience utilizing its own technology, with no help from human bodies, live or virtual. The screens glowed with pulsating and alternating colors and elaborate shifting patterns reminiscent of abstract computer screen savers, accompanied by high and low pitched tones.

When the actors finally appeared, they were not dressed or made up, as they had been throughout the *Real-Time* trilogy, to resemble the conventionalized but basically realistic heroes, heroines, and villains of mass culture films and television, but more abstract figures, androgynous and all dressed alike in loose black coveralls, their faces covered with dark sequined veils. One might read them as the sort of human beings the machines themselves might imagine or as humanoid attendants or even worshippers of the machines out of some low-budget, B-grade science fiction film. With them, however, they brought one of the distinguishing marks of humanity, language, even though it was corrupted bits and fragments, seemingly culled from news broadcasts and online chat groups. Individual phrases and words drawn from this material began to pop up on the video screens, and began to be interspersed with images as well. In contrast to the physical stage arrangement, essentially the same throughout the previous trilogy, the actors remained largely in front of rather than behind the video screens, so that live action was both literally and figuratively foregrounded as it had not been in the previous productions.

Manson has characterized *Dead Set #2* and *Dead Set #3* as “organized around the image of trauma,” which focuses on “serial narratives, corrupt systems, and perverted worldviews that ignore the degradation, collapse, and destruction of present society.”¹³ Not surprisingly, a significant number of the projected images and film footage included images of suffering and violence, particularly of the victims of war. The actors removed their enveloping cloaks but remained visually abstract and non-gendered, all eight dressed in identical tight, black leotards, high-heeled black shoes, and black cowls with only their eyes and mouths showing (perhaps to emphasize the prominence of visual and aural codes) (see fig. 3).

The newsreel violence on the screens was replicated among these live bodies both symbolically, as they fought over possession of a hand-held video camera, and literally, as in certain sequences their bodies echoed the specific movements of the struggling figures on the video screens behind them. Both techniques have been utilized by other major experimental groups. American followers of the experimental theatre scene will immediately recognize the live duplication of simultaneously projected action sequences as a technique often used by the Wooster Group, perhaps most notably in their 1998 *House/Lights*. The struggle over the



Fig. 3. (left to right) Ebony Hatchett, Ned Stresen-Reuter, David Commander, *Dead Set #3* (2007), Big Art Group (photo: Caden Manson).

onstage hand-held video camera is doubtless less associated with other experimental performance in the minds of American audiences, but it arouses rich associations in audiences in Germany, where Big Art Group has often performed and where they are a much more significant part of the current experimental multi-media performance scene than they are in their home country. Leading German experimental directors, headed by Frank Castorf at the Volksbühne and René Pollesch at the Prater, have for a number of years utilized hand-held onstage video cameras as a major element in their productions, with the images thus captured being simultaneously projected in order to provide spectators with one or more alternative views of the onstage action.¹⁴ Obviously, this opening up of alternative perspectives can be utilized to make a Brechtian point about the arbitrariness, or more specifically, the constructedness of the point of view offered by the performance to the spectator, and on occasion the

German directors have taken this perspective a step further, as Big Art does in this sequence, to call attention to the power dynamics of the visual field. The struggle over who is to control the video camera, a struggle which continues at intervals throughout the performance, serves as a reminder that whoever controls the means of visual production controls the image offered to the audience.

Gradually, within the generalized images of violence a particular narrative began to emerge, growing out of elements of the words and sentences flashed on the screens. What began to appear were apparent fragments of an email conversation growing out of some electronic chat room or similar posting site. First appeared a series of messages and words from someone seeking to be killed and eaten. The messages are taken from the actual email correspondence of two German men in 2002 who consented via email and video to cannibalize and be cannibalized. Their words are projected in pink block letters, flashing up one word at a time for the audience to assemble: "I am a boy. I seek someone to massacre me." Fleeting images of and references to the Donner Party and Jeffrey Dahmer enlarge this theme, but the homoerotic circling and eventual confrontation of the two German men remain a central concern.

The final section of the performance depicts this long-prepared meeting, and here the Group makes a surprising move, shifting from the tonality of cruelty, violence, and destructive passion to a lushly romantic *Liebestod*. They return also to the technical approach hitherto less utilized in this production, but central to the Real-Time trilogy, that of foregrounding video images created live out of fragments which are individually apparent to the audience, who can thus compare them with the fused video sign. The actors stripped out of their dark body suits and foregrounded their bodies in the most obvious manner, through nudity, but still continued to hold, or perform in front of, hand-held video cameras. These were now utilized to create an effect based upon, but much more romantic and complex than, the various effects of the preceding trilogy. A back projection on the central screen showed a lush, romantic garden, itself a compilation of images produced by the onstage manipulation of images of foliage, individual branches, and shifting light patterns. A nude male actor stepped in front of this and began to pantomime an interaction with an absent partner. This combined image was videoed to the right-hand screen, where a second nude male actor performed the absent partner in front of that image. This, videoed in turn, provided on the left hand screen a total picture of the gradual approach of the two carefully choreographed figures and their embracing, extremely erotic and yet distanced by the fact that the audience could also see that the actual bodies remained far apart, in different signifying fields. Their verbal exchanges were similarly fragmented and distanced in that they were represented by either projected words or lip-synching. The result was an enormously complex multiple system of both mutually reinforcing and contradictory signs, presented along with the process of their construction,

that offered a wide range of interpretation about presence and absence, desire and imagination, physical distance and proximity, intimacy and manipulation. There was no longer any image suggestive of either violence in general or cannibalism in particular, and yet these concerns continued to operate in the technology itself, which both enabled and denied the desired physical contact between living bodies and devoured them in its all-consuming scopic frame.

The final image of the production carries this technological obliteration of human life to an even greater extreme. A large, grey, amorphous balloon begins to swell up in the middle of the stage, gradually obscuring bodies, cameras, and screens alike. It continues to expand, filling the entire stage space and pressing out toward the audience. There is no curtain call. The audience is left with the disturbing sight of this all-encompassing neutral surface, a surface seemingly denying signification and the frantic drives of desire and making of signs that has dominated the evening up to this point. This concluding effect (one could really call it simply an image because it is in fact a phenomenological usurpation of not only the audience's visual but also their spatial field) might, within the context of this particular production, be considered the evening's ultimate comment on the phenomenon of trauma, the overwhelming of our entire perceptual field by a neutralizing mass. Placed in the trajectory of Big Art Group's work up to this point, it seems to have brought the process of an ever evolving and increasingly complex study of the signification, the scopic drive, and the phenomenology of desire to a moment of crisis, and perhaps of paralysis. Faced with the shutdown of both mental and emotional processes brought on by trauma, is there any way for signification to move forward? This is surely the primary challenge that would seem to face this innovative group as they prepare the next phase of their experimentation with media and the body.

Notes

1. *Big Art Group*. 2007. <<http://www.bigartgroup.com/>>.
2. Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002) 38.
3. Jason Farman, "Surveillance Spectacles: The Big Art Group's *Flicker* and the Screened Body in Performance," Fall 2007. <http://www.jasonfarman.com/JasonFarman_Surveillance_Spectacles.pdf>, 5.
4. 4.
5. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. tr. Alan Bass. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 286.
6. 289.
7. *Big Art Group*. 2007. <<http://www.bigartgroup.com/>>.
8. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999) 32.
9. 59.
10. Stephen Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 153.
11. Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson, "Dead Set #3," Fall 2007. <<http://www.donaufestival.at/>>.
12. *Big Art Group*. 2007. <<http://www.bigartgroup.com/>>.
13. *Big Art Group*. 2007. <<http://www.bigartgroup.com/>>.

14. See Marvin Carlson, "Video and Stage Space: Some European Perspectives," *Modern Drama* 46.4 (2003): 614-28.

