

Behind the Scenes: Foreword

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Foreword

This issue of the journal is devoted to the topic “Behind the Scenes” which guided the proceedings of the SEPC’s New Literatures Workshop at the 47th SAES Congress held in Avignon in May 2007. The idiom “behind the scenes” most obviously brings to mind what is hidden from the view of the audience. Though invisible, the backstage is an objective correlative of the multi-faceted reality and the orchestrated energy that go into the making of what is shown at the front and centre of the stage. The subversive counter discourse offered by what is behind the scenes allows the receptor to articulate the proper critical distance between what is said and shown and what is not. Inspired by the venue, famous notably for the Avignon summer festival, and deriving to performing arts, the conference offered space for rich and varied interpretations. Surprisingly, however, all the papers presented and published herein preferred to examine novels rather than plays.

Studies of strategies of avoidance such as textual ambiguities, subterfuges and irony deployed to skirt censorship (whether political or Freudian) held centre stage, so to say. Cécile Birks’s appraisal of “Secrecy and Allegory in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*” resorts to theories in clinical psychopathology and psychoanalysis not so much to bring to light the whole impenetrable truth with which post-apartheid South Africa is preoccupied in its attempt to bring about national reconciliation as to explain why certain things had to be left unsaid or denied. Allegory is an important tool in Coetzee’s writing of secrecy, she claims, as a means of calling this very secrecy into question. The Nobel laureate has often come under attack for his lack of moral commitment. Yet his predicament stems largely from the reality of South Africa where the dark forbidden chamber of torture provides the basis for novelistic fantasy. Twenty years divide the publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* from that of *Disgrace*. However, Cécile Birks maintains that the allegorical representation of handicap in the former and physical molestation in the latter allows Coetzee to reflect on the nature and position of South African subjects in relation to their country’s complex history and society. She shows that Coetzee’s portrayal of abject human bodies in a paradoxical process of becoming-animal is counter-balanced in the two novels by the depiction of dreams, visions and near-hallucinations that dramatize human imagination in a self-reflexive manner. She suggests that we look at the tension between the impossibility of discovering the truth and the necessity for conjuring up the worst as a key to understanding Coetzee.

The focus on South Africa increases in Richard Samin’s “Revelation and Veridiction: Modes of Disclosure in Alex La Guma’s *In the Fog of the Season’s End* and Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples*”, which successfully

dismantle the mechanisms of duplicity and falsehood prevalent in the country during apartheid. Lies, manipulation, fallacies, illusions, horrors and moral bankruptcy masqueraded as normality, order, respectability and social harmony, and ensured the self-righteousness, racial superiority and political hegemony of the apartheid regime. The two novels under discussion are set in Cape Town and its vicinity, but at different historical moments. They reveal the hidden evils of apartheid by exposing the reader to scenes of torture or sexual perversion, evoking Coetzee. What narrative strategy could be at play when the smell of apples does not partake in the sweet scent of fruit but connotes the sour odour of sex? Samin puts forward the concept of veridiction which refers to the way in which a relation between a subject and an object is interpreted in a “state utterance”. Two correlated levels of perception determine this interpretation, i.e, the level of appearance which transcribes the judgments of a narrative instance with regard to something and the level of being which refers to the knowledge actually shared by the reader and the narrator. The different modalities of veridiction such as truth, mendacity, deception and secrecy result from a permutation and combination of this binary. While La Guma’s novel adopts a strategy based on analepses, Samin posits, Behr’s introduces a proleptic perspective. Their revelation of horror is at once both event and affect in the Deleuzian sense of the terms, he gathers, as readers simultaneously perceive “what is intolerable and the possibility of something else” and view the literary work as an artistic representation that stands on its own by transcending its purely referential status.

Though it deals with Australia, Xavier Pons’s contribution “‘I have to work right through this white way of thinking’ – the Deconstruction of Discourses of Whiteness in Kim Scott’s *Benang*” shares similarities with the two previous articles. Scott’s fictional alter ego Harvey turns to autobiographical writing as a means of reclaiming his Aboriginal heritage and resisting his white grandfather’s attempts to erase it. As a subaltern learning to speak, Scott is obliged to invent a different signifying system, first to come to grips with the uncertainties of his life story which western realism proves inadequate to express, then to give voice, strength and substance to Aboriginality. He deconstructs whiteness by associating it with death and nothingness, the customary signifieds for black colour in the West. According to Pons, the most spectacular allegorical element in *Benang* is the narrator Harvey’s propensity for elevation. His hermeneutic meandering narrative is an emblem of the ontological difficulties undergone by Aborigines. Harvey does not manage to assert that he is Aboriginal, but is content with making the firm denial that “he is no white man” as if his body’s white skin might undermine his black mindset in the gaze of others. Pons remarks that “Scott’s novel is not basically different from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*” and wraps up his article by saying that “behind the scenes of white racist practices, Aboriginality is alive, if not well” in Australia.

Another angle through which to investigate the issue was to identify bold and enigmatic narratives akin to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that relate the coming out of queer identities and decode the power game that was played out in the interstices of gender, race and class. It is this challenging task that Chantal Zabus sets out to achieve in her article "Behind the Seine and Other Scenery: African and European Male Intimacies in Western Cities". The pun in her title embeds her study simultaneously in Anglophone and Francophone postcoloniality. Though her focus is on West Africa, Zabus demonstrates how this theme allowed Africans to write back to the clichéd representation of Africa as the Dark Continent. In the three novels featuring African students' homosexual experiences in European cities in the 1960s and 70s, she scrutinizes what the protagonists glimpse behind the glitter and glamour of the Western metropolis: a 'dark continent' of 'perversities'. Nevertheless, the prevalent view that the young African male is initiated by a European priest in Africa is belied by the ambiguities which tell a different story. There is indeed a "black scene", Zabus contends, founded in ancestral relational nexuses that accommodate same-sex desire whose existence is denied by the picture of the "white scene" foregrounded in these novels. The homosexual trajectories of the dissolute troika in Sierra Leonean Yulisa Amadu Maddy's *No Past, No Present, No Future* arise from different causes. In Guinean Saïdou Bokoum's *Chaîne*, homosexuality is a test in self-deprecation and degeneracy that an African youth has to undergo in order to be initiated into true love, which is synonymous with heterosexuality. Nigerian Dillebe Onyeama's autobiographical narrative *Nigger at Eton* endorses homonsexuality as a Western aberration, while African homosociality is perceived as queer in England. The more widely accepted consensual homosexual relations in the 90s enable African writers to be 'out in Africa' rather than roam in Paris, London or Rome in quest of sexual liberation.

The way satire and autobiographical fiction evoke the process of economic liberalization and globalization that is profoundly altering societies is of particular interest to our issue. Françoise Kral has aptly chosen Vassanji's *The In-between World of Vikram Lall*, a novel that spans almost fifty years of history and a vast expanse of geography (India, Kenya, Canada with England always present as a palimpsest) and intertwines the lives of three families. When the tacit hierarchy of the colonial system is destroyed, social change in Kenya is violent. Vassanji, like Achebe, dares to depict the leader, Jomo Kenyatta and the rampant corruption in his government which instrumentalizes Indians as infamous intermediaries. Kral argues that the point of view adopted by the autodiegetic narrator, recalling his childhood in Kenya from his position as an adult and a migrant in Canada, relies on the strategy of partial unveiling. The heart of darkness of political misdeeds will therefore remain forever opaque to the reader. The behind the scenes picture

of official history, however partial, allows us to grasp the twice subaltern status of Vikram Lall who, after having seen to the halting debut of his Kenyan friend's son in Canada, returns to Kenya only to become annihilated in the all-consuming fire of the greed for power sustained by ill-gotten wealth. Kral's reading of the intradiegetic photographs and the alternative fantasies that narrator weaves around them as competing representations of Kenyan reality underscores the potential for hybridity in postcolonial Kenya.

The pictorial dimension of "behind the scenes" can be construed as the invisible background material that goes into the making of the novelistic world. Philip Whyte's "The Treatment of Background in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*" is an attempt to throw a different light on Kazuo Ishiguro's much studied Booker Prize-winning novel, further popularized by James Ivory's film of the same name. Whyte's intention is to "rehabilitate" the setting of the novel by connecting it to the English country house, its history and its life as seen through its architectural, functional, organizational and social aspects. In this contrapuntal reading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Whyte elucidates how, more than the numerous historical references which are strewn throughout the text and which constitute its foreground, the protagonist Stevens's constant interaction with the *décor* of Darlington Hall makes him embody a certain conception of history which unostentatiously uncovers the impact of ideologies on people's lives. Such an interpretation goes against the grain of conventional readings which impute Stevens's subaltern status to his inability to read or understand history. Whyte arrives at this insight through his grasp of the codes of literary realism which Ishiguro exploits to construct his background, all the while resorting to a postmodern foregrounding of postcolonial ambiguities. Whyte posits that it is this tranquil but paradoxical narrative technique that sets Ishiguro apart from the more noisy experimental trends of Salman Rushdie.

Analogous to setting, a novel's hypotext also provides glimpses of the hidden aspects of its making and meaning. When this hypotext is eclectic and formulaic Bollywood cinema, the biggest film industry in the world, the great Indian dream factory, the de facto language of national unification and a breeding ground for its contemporary myths and politics, and the novel studied is entitled *Show Business*, we are at the crossroads of literature and film studies. The purpose of Suhasini Vincent's "Celluloid Dreams in Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business*" is to decipher the cinematic metaphors in Tharoor's novel. Following in the footsteps of Salman Rushdie and Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor wrote this satirical and parodic novel in 1992¹ inspired by the life and career of Amitabh Bacchan, a superstar adulated by the masses. Suhasini Vincent's close reading of the text identifies the techniques

¹ Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* followed suit respectively in 2004 and 2006.

borrowed from the film world and transposed to the novel, and attributes his remixing of cinematic plots and rewriting of Hindi cinema song routines to his intention to lay bare the drama of real life enacted on the other side of the camera. Her analysis unmasks the postmodernist aspect of Tharoor's narrative artifice which consists in tampering with scripts, fracturing time and configuring 'illusion' as the only reality. In so far as Hindu philosophy considers life itself as "maya" (illusion), it stands to reason that the hyperrealistic illusion created by Indian cinema is both an escape route and a driving force in contemporary India. Besides, by ending his novel in the manner of a Bollywood blockbuster, Tharoor amalgamates the art of Hindi cinema with the art of English language fiction, reasons Suhasini Vincent, as familiarity with Hindi cinema conventions is a prerequisite for a proper understanding of the novel.

The page of a literary text can become a metaphor for the stage, and the throes of a writer before a blank page can be compared to frenetic backstage activities that magically fill up the empty front stage. The drama of literary creation is on display in Alice Braun's "The Author at Work: Two Short Stories by Janet Frame". Her passionate explication of "Jan Godfrey" and "Flu and Eyetrouble" in the light of Janet Frame's autobiography is built on an almost mystic triangle – the alien outside, the alien inside and the house of fiction. Alice Braun's analysis of the themes of home and identity relies on psychiatric, feminist and postcolonial theories. It is well-known that author Janet Frame was for a time treated for schizophrenia. If Alison Hendry in "Jan Godfrey" might represent a sister figure internalized as alien self, the landlord in "Flu and Eye Trouble" is certainly a male Other threatening to intrude in the intimate space of the female writer. However, the author is willing to hand the reader the key to the house of her fiction, in other words, her mind. By pinpointing the tension between the narrators' fragile hold on reality and their search for an appropriate representation of this reality, Alice Brown convinces us that the two short stories explore the limits of reality and realism. If "the real fact is often a copy of the unreal fiction" as Janet Frame held, then the image of female companions playing with mud pies over the fence of patriarchy is a plea for art, freedom, intersubjectivity and heteroglossia. Alice Braun's careful deconstruction of the author's metafictional plot is intended to prove that Janet Frame's short stories are stunningly ahead of self-conscious postmodern narratives. In fact, these hauntingly beautiful short stories have a timeless and universal resonance.

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