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'Images riddled with language':
An Interview with Tom Conley
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When we first started designing the research project "False Movement – Studies on Writing and Film", and thinking of possible collaborators and consultants, the name of Tom Conley came up from different quarters: Tom Conley, the author of *Film Hieroglyphs*, a work in every aspect fundamental to the interrogation of the different levels in which writing and film interact; Tom Conley and his work on maps and cartography, and on the figural and topographical dimensions of space in Film; but also Tom Conley and his readings of early print culture, so close to our own concerns with materiality and visuality in film writing. We have since had the privilege of discussing with him all these threads in the context of our project, for which he has been a consultant from the very beginning. The purpose of this interview is to bring these dimensions of Conley's work together, inviting him to redraw for us the diagonal lines that his thinking seems to activate.

Tom Conley is Abbott Lawrence Lowell Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. His books include *Film Hieroglyphs* (1991, new edition 2006), *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern Writing* (1992), *The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France* (1996, new edition 2010),

L'Inconscient graphique: Essai sur la lettre à la Renaissance (2000), *Cartographic Cinema* (2007), and *An Errant Eye: Topography and Poetry in Early Modern France* (2010). Among his articles and book-chapters are contributions to *The History of Cartography 3: The European Renaissance*, *Cinema and Modernity*, *Michael Haneke*, *The Epic Film*, *Film Analysis*, *Opening André Bazin*, *Burning Darkness: A Half-Century of Spanish Cinema*, *Film, Theory and Philosophy*, *European Film Theory*, *Aftereffects: Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, etc. In 2014 *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Cinema of Jean-Luc Godard*, co-edited with Jeff Kline (of Boston University), will appear.

1. **From *Film Hieroglyphs*** (1991) and *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern France* (1992) to your recent books on cartography/topography, your work seems to chart the general idea of a 'rupture' inherent to the tension between words and images – both in typographic and cinematographic forms of reproduction. How would you describe the relation between your books on literature in early modern France and *Film Hieroglyphs* or *Cartographic Cinema* (2007) – or, more generally, is there a relation between poetry and film developed transversally throughout your work?

Yes, the line is transversal or "diagonal" (say, in thinking vaguely of the opening sentences of Deleuze's *Foucault*): the one is drawn across the other. What we grasp in the stunning and startling development of the early modern printed book—here the focus is on print culture in France from the incunabulum to manuals of typography, and emblem-books to treatises of architecture—no doubt owes to the condition of language and image in our collective experience of cinema and visual media of our time, and vice-versa. More and more I believe that the images we see are—literally—*riddled* with language: given as we are to make sense of things we unconsciously script or even incise words into visual field, and at the same time these invisible shards and pieces of words may happen to come forward to us; in some miraculous moment, to congeal and evanesce in rebuses, the very language of the unconscious, that unwinds before our eyes when we read and when we watch cinema. Typographer Geofroy Tory (1529) put it well when he defined the rebus as "that which someone has sweat over [resüé, which is a pun on having dreamt [resvé] or caused others to sweat [and/or—note the diagonal] dream [resver/resüer]. That the definition ends with a very graphic praise of 'folly' is to the typographer's credit (Fig. 1):
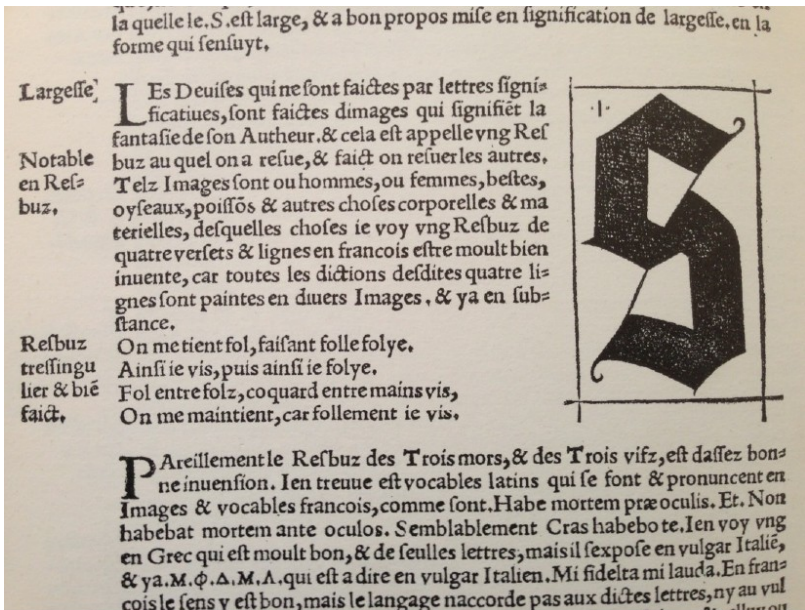
Figure 1.

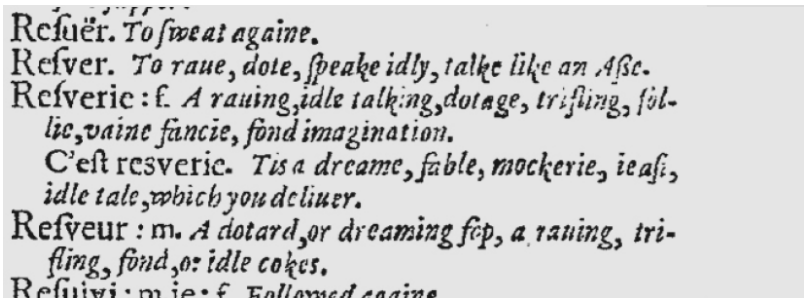Cotgrave can help us (Fig. 2):

Figure 2.

If ruptures there are, they might be *ruptures de* contact, ruptures of the contact of things legible and things visible. I would say that they are sites that can be sensed in the perceptual field as "events" and that they become plot points of interpretive and even creative itineraries that emerge from an extended relation with whatever is before our eyes.

2. **In the 'Introduction'** to *An Errant Eye. Poetry and Topography in Early Modern France* (2010) you take the image of *the snail's eye*, in Francesco Colonna's *Songe de Poliphile*, as a model for your critical work. In a moving homage to Marie-Claire Ropars, published in *Rouge*, you describe her analysis as a reading made with "surgeon's care". What is the

importance of detailed analysis, and of a material/tactile experience of reading, to the development of your work on writing, and what role does description/ekphrasis play in your work on words and images?

Your reading of what you have cited dazzles this reader! The surgeon (and I've been quite familiar with two of them over the past year) is the person we imagine meticulously cutting into flesh and bone that he or she studies beforehand as might an engineer a topography or an orography, while the snail could well be the surgeon's apprentice: for the gastropod we behold in Corrozet's well-titled *Hécatomgraphie* (emblem #20) becomes an eye that touches, even moistens, the landscape on which it travels. From Alois Riegl to Laura Marks good work has been made of the haptic eye. The eye that touches or caresses is the optical organ we all would wish to have. Much has been said about the clinical gaze, about the eye that draws a line of divide between itself and what it sees, that harbors castration, and so forth: perhaps we counter that conception of vision and visuality with what is of a broader and greater degree of sentience, where sight and touch are one, and perhaps where extra- and intra-missive vision are of a similar order.

3. ***An Errant Eye*** is presented as forming a diptych with *The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France* (1996); in the preface to the second edition of *Film Hieroglyphs* (2006), you refer to *Cartographic Cinema* as a companion and a sequel, whose visible point of departure are the three sets of Baroque maps presented in an establishing shot of the library in Renoir's *Boudu sauvé des eaux*. How would you describe the relations between the notions of hieroglyph, used to read film as writing in the 1991 book, and of a cartographic cinema? Does the deleuzian notion of a legibility of the landscape, or of a stratigraphic landscape, which you see as much as part of classical cinema as of modern cinema, relate in any sense to the idea of writing as a cartographic process and to your proposal of a cartographic cinema?

Your words cut through this person's dearest fantasies! The notion of a stratigraphy might be seen when one book is put on top of the other. The point of the preface to the new edition of *Film Hieroglyphs*, which I believe you are the very first to note astutely, is that when I was first working on this sequence in *Boudu* I was utterly oblivious, yes, blind as a bat, to the maps that I was "scotomizing" and that on this very rare occasion some pedantic erudition, I daresay erudition of the worst sort, came right to the rescue. While working on the sequence in *Cartographic Cinema*, I felt I needed to show the world (especially those who treat films thematically and not visually) that in passing over the shots without accounting for the map in the field of the image they might be those *qui ne savent distinguer une taupinière d'une montagne,* that is, in the strict terms of the history of cartography when it uses copperplate engraving, a "mountain from a molehill": in other words, Guillaume Blaeu's map in the *Atlas Major,* seen behind the window of Lestingois's "autograph" shop, becomes extraordinarily and even seriously

funny, and very compelling, too. With the delight taken in identifying the map came the unlikely bonus of getting a sense of its role in defining the play of spaces, *les jeux d'espace*, indeed, the mental and physical topographies of the film.

Thus the hieroglyph has become involved with maps and mapping, especially because, when we "live with" it, a map can share intense visual force and be very much related to the language inhering in its form, be it in the field itself where toponyms are scripted, be it in the gazetteer or listing of toponyms whose lexical traits can be of no less visual and aural virtue.

Yes, Deleuze's description of the stratigraphic landscape is heuristic, and all the more in the way the term modulates throughout the *oeuvre*. On first glance, at least in *Cinéma 2,* it can have a very geological inflection while, seen again, via *Foucault*, it can be related to what he calls a diagram. In *Cinéma 2* stratigraphy refers to landscape and its embedded histories, that is, the mix of "thick" and "thin" layers of affective time the camera registers as it moves across its milieus. They can be traumatizing, as in the color footage of *Nuit et brouillard* that mottle the terrible documentary footage in black and white, and they can be disturbingly perplexing, as in the opening shots of *Ride Lonesome*, where a lunar landscape seems to refuse any human intervention. In *Foucault* we see layers or "strates" flake off from "-tigraphies" such that the word moves in the direction of *strategy* and the world of logistics, where strategists—*stratèges*, who are at once engineers, artists, filmmakers, logisticians—map, plot, design, craft various operations that will determine the shape of things to come. Hence, if we recall the diagonal, it is this vector that draws its way through the landscape. We can recall how the diagram is indeed a series of maps, superimposed upon one another, that attest to a cartography of "becoming", of what Deleuze puts in the shape of an infinitive noun: *le devenir*. I would opt for a general cartography of film from which the mode and manner of a political aesthetic can be fashioned.

4. **In the preface** to the 2006 edition of *Film Hieroglyphs*, you engage in a retrospective approach of Deleuze's Cinema, as if sensing in the deleuzian taxonomy some possible objections. How do you relate the idea of writing and its effect of *rupture* to the categories of readability and visibility as they split up into the components of the image (visual image and sonorous image), in the silent era, in the talkies and in modern cinema?

This marvelously unsettling question has no simple answer. First, it seems productive to remember that the heuristic character of Deleuze's taxonomy invites readings that bring "mean and deviation" into the picture, perhaps what Rancière calls, in a simple and simply untranslatable title, *les écarts du cinema*. When Deleuze distinguishes the time-image from the movement-image, history, what Deleuze asserted (in the first sentence of the first volume) that his project would not engage, suddenly intervenes (and is described in meticulous detail) at what a psycho-geographer would call the site of perspectival identification, possibly also, if we recall the tepid John

Wayne movie of the 1950s *(The High and the Mighty)*, a "point of no return". Thus we might say that as of Lumière's "Déjeuner de bébé" or "L'Arrivée d'un train…" the movement-image and the time-image are within and about each other. It might be said that "rupture" is thus an indelicate term. Somehow fantasy causes this person to relate it to *routine* in its relation to a broken itinerary, a *via rupta*: it is lovely, enlightening too, to gloss *rotine* through early modern dictionaries (Estienne, Nicot, Cotgrave) in view of the emergence of the word in writers—my favorites—of the grist of Rabelais and Montaigne: see what Cotgrave does with *rotine, route, router, routier, routine, routure*. The inflections amaze! They help to explain why we work with the "tracks" or *ruts* of sound and image, say *ornières*, that a film cuts in the field of our perception and leaves in our memory. Quite often silent films are very talky (Walsh, *What Price Glory*, 1926) and sound films no less mute (anyone's choice!). We do well nonetheless to recall that at the outset of *Cinéma 1* Deleuze states what he repeats to no end in the long and last chapter of *Cinéma 2* on the "components" of film: "…l'image ne se donne pas seulement à voir. Elle est lisible autant que visible" (24) […the image isn't merely given to be seen. It is both legible and visible], implying that legibility can be both aural and visual, and that visibility can be manifest through sound and writing.

5. **Although in** *Cartographic Cinema* you do include more recent films, such as *Gladiator* or *Thelma and Louise*, and although you use Ropars' work on Godard as an example for your hieroglyphic reading of film, your focus seems to be almost exclusively on classical cinema. Is there any particular reason for this?

Not really. Without independent and experimental cinema we would be less enabled to work through the intricacies of industrial cinema and its ideology. Not that the one precludes the other; rather, our precious independents, critics and essayists all, turn cinema into a critical object of the first and greatest magnitude. Classical cinema happens to be a easier point of reference for a general public than, say, masterworkers such as Frampton, Schneeman, Brakhage, Benning and others, including students who work with the camera for the first time. Yet it must be recalled that the economy of classical cinema, that of nitrate acetate and celluloid, requires carefully rehearsal of audio-visual strategies in both shooting and editing; that those who shaped it never went to film school but were steeped in literature, art and science; that a political aesthetics can emerge from what we choose to "work on" in the times and places where a critical practice is possible, which might be situated in imaginary spaces between cinémathèques, archives, libraries, classrooms, and the street itself.

6. **You also mention** Rancière, and his concept of film fable, saying that in a new version of *Film Hieroglyphs*, you would have to reconsider your work in the light of his readings. The idea of a constitutive contrariety of the film fable is certainly close to that of writing as

a way of interfering and disturbing the narrative design and meaning of classical film. Could you develop further upon how you do envision the relation between the concepts of film fable and film hieroglyph, and the interest of bringing them together?

Yes, I believe that the "fable" and the "hieroglyph" are not strange bedfellows. Rather, they get on and sleep well together. Throughout *Film Fables* we read how narrative cinema works against its own designs, in "contrariety" (in English as a "thwarted" fable, *une fable contrariée*), subverting the privilege Aristotle assigns to story (*muthos*) over visuality (*opsis*). Given how cinema is indeed the machinery of our "aesthetic age" it becomes, in his words, a hieroglyph and presence itself. May I cite the French? The writing of film "suppose que (…) toute chose du monde—objet banal, lèpre d'un mur, illustration commerciale ou autre—soit disponible pour l'art dans sa double ressource, comme hiéroglyphe chiffrant un âge du monde, une société, une histoire et, à l'inverse, comme pure présence, réalité nue parée de la splendeur nouvelle de l'insignifiant" (16) ["presupposes (…) that every thing in the world—an everyday object, paint peeling from a wall, an illustration from an advertisement—is available for art in its double resource, as a hieroglyph ciphering an age of the world, a society, a history and, inversely, as pure presence, bare reality adorned with the new splendor of insignificant things" (Film Fables 9, translation slightly modified)]. Already in the 16th century *fable* was understood to be a fiction and a joke, *une bourde*, but also often seen as a mix of an image and a text. We can think immediately of Gilles Corrozet's translations of Aesop (1547 and 1552) accompanied by splendid woodcuts which in fact interpret and even call in question the content of the poems. These books are taken up (pardon the rhetoric of 'product placement' in the interview!) in chapter 3 of my forthcoming *À fleur de page: Voir et lire le texte de la Renaissance* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014). Better, we can recall how La Fontaine wrote his extraordinary *Fables* with woodcut images both in mind and on paper. Hence, if we develop Rancière beyond his own borders, his definition of hieroglyph and fable brings cinema into the wondrous experimental works in early print-culture. And we could go further back and forward.

7 **The notion of** hieroglyph owes to Freud and his studies on the graphic traits of dreams and rebuses in their relation to the unconscious. Could you tell us about the importance of Lyotard and his notion of figural (also inspired by these studies of Freud), and the way it echoes in your work, namely when you discuss the problematic of the graphic unconscious in literature? How do you view the notions of hieroglyph and filmic icon in the light of recent studies on the cinematic figural?

Yes, Lyotard, a very dear friend, hit the nail on the head in his work on the rebus. He drew it from popular media, barroom ephemera of the nineteenth century ('Qui casse les verres les paiera', etc.), matter close to

Freud, that he affiliated—in a footnote, I think—with Méliès alongside Freud. For Jean-François the rebus had the double distinction of being an agent of control and of sublimity. It would now be productive to read those pages of *Discours, figure* next to *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Foucault's short disquisition on the figural aspect of writing.

8. *Film Hieroglyphs* was originally titled *Film Writing*. In your readings, you often move from the presence of "shards of writing" in the films under analysis to a more encompassing notion of writing as equivalent to film and, at the same time, as something that is *not* of the matter of film, and thus disruptive and resistant to (its) meaning. How would you describe today the relation between *writing in film* and *film as writing?*

The acuity of your readings is astounding: in this question you bring forward the issue that the editors at the Press had posed before the *Hieroglyphs* went into production. The initial title was *Film Writing*, which the savvy crew felt would more properly describe a book aimed at teaching readers how to write a screenplay. Whoa! We had to hold onto our horses! And so, like manna, no doubt because I was working with Marie-Claire Ropars and because Jacques Rancière was about to read the *Graphic Unconscious* in view of a French translation at Paris-VIII, "hieroglyph" fell from the sky. It dropped at just about the same time that Miriam Hansen launched her work on the hieroglyphics of Griffith's *Intolerance*. And when Derrida's concept of the trace, his logic of the mark, dissemination, and *différance* were catching on. I would note that in classical cinema writing in film belongs to the order of writing as film. Today, where digital editing is so accomplished, what we see in the industry is very controlled, very hermetic, and very obvious. I think of Alexander Payne's *Nebraska*, a "mid-western" of our moment whose story seems woven around the names of the cars and brands of beer we see on the image-track or hear in the laconic banter. It happens now, if only for the sake of a political aesthetic—which may or may not lead us away from films of our moment—the force and conviction our interpretive agency as viewers requires us to hold to the relation you set forward in the question: taking account of writing in/as film allows us to turn objects against themselves, make something other from what the producers of a work might, in its ideology (including its strategies of distribution, its special effects its editing, in its design to prompt polarized dialogue on facebooks and the like), wish it to be.