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In Response to Denis Hollier's "Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation"

Janet Bergstrom

Denis Hollier begins his text with a question that functions, it seems, as a pretext or perhaps I should say as a screen, namely: should French literature be taught in translation? I should specify that he is asking whether it should be taught in translation in French Departments in the U.S., since in the Cinema Studies Department where I sometimes teach French or German literature in connection with film, this question would never arise.

From then on Professor Hollier's essay deals with literary language and its irreducibility through a discussion of two essays written by Blanchot, in 1932 and 1947. "Literary language," or "poetic language," was that object of study that fascinated the Russian Formalists (a number of whom worked in the cinema as well) and was subsequently, if I am not mistaken, imported into France in translation and even by foreigners. Mainly, Professor Hollier poses questions that arise from the first of Blanchot's essays in which we learn (if we are not Blanchot scholars, and I am not) that Blanchot rejected Curtius's history of French literature in an essay whose title already more or less announced his rejection: "French Culture Viewed by a German." In 1932, then, Blanchot rejects Curtius's claim that he could understand the specificity of French literature, that he could understand its clarity, its transparency. By this, Blanchot apparently meant that Curtius—as a German who presumably valued German poetry in its alliance with philosophy over French prose—wasn't in a position to have an opinion about French literature.

I am led to wonder, at this point, to what extent we are talking about linguistic specificity and to what extent, as we follow Hollier with Blanchot, we are talking about cultural specificity. Did Blanchot believe that it was Curtius's strangeness to the French language that made him an unlikely candidate for comprehending the opacity hiding behind, or screened by, the seeming clarity of Racine's or La Fontaine's writings or was it the fact that, as a German, he could never understand this literature from the cul-

tural perspective of a French person? I would like, then, to raise a few questions about the relationship between linguistic and cultural specificity: are they separable or not? And I would like to do so by drawing your attention to several moments in Professor Hollier's essay in which he makes reference to the cinema.

First, Professor Hollier says that "an often used comparison" (which I was not aware of) has been made between teaching French in translation (let's say in English) and the practice of dubbing in film. Let me comment on this remark by reading a letter that Jean Renoir wrote in 1944 against the practice of dubbing films. Renoir was writing from Hollywood, where he had been living since 1940, to the actor Pierre Blanchar, President of the Comité de libération du cinéma just after Blanchar returned to Paris from a trip he had made to Los Angeles to discuss the future of French cinema in view of the general French/American trade agreement in the making, the Blum-Byrnes Accord. The letter is rather long, but I cite it *in extenso* because it speaks vividly and eloquently to the issues at hand.

31 décembre 1944

Cher Pierre Blanchar,

René Clair, Julien Duvivier et moi-même devons nous réunir pour mettre au point le rapport que vous avez demandé sur la question du doublage des films français à destination du marché américain. A côté de cet exposé, auquel nous tâcherons de garder un caractère d'objectivité, je n'ai pu résister au désir de vous faire part de mes sentiments personnels sans me préoccuper d'aucun souci de pondération.

Je crois que le succès des films français en Amérique tient au fait que ces films sont parlés *en français*. Autrement dit la principale "star" des films français, celle qui attire le public qui aime nos produits, ça n'est pas X ou Y, ça n'est pas Raimu ou Danielle Darrieux, Boyer, Gabin ou vous-même; c'est la langue française. J'ai eu des entretiens sur cette question avec des Américains de toute classe et de toute ordre. Ces conversations m'ont amené à la conclusion que la seule façon de conserver au film français en Amérique sa place de choix, c'est d'éviter à tout prix de le faire parler en anglais. Si nous commettons cette erreur nous le descendrons du piédestal sur lequel l'admiration amicale d'un certain public l'a placé. Ces gens qui nous aiment cesseront d'aller voir nos films. Nous perdrons leur clientèle pour

probablement ne pas gagner la grande masse qui préférera toujours les produits locaux.

Il y a dans le cas des Américains qui suivent nos productions quelque chose de plus grave que le désir d'une simple distraction. Je prétends qu'il y entre un peu de véritable amour. Et l'amour, c'est quelque chose d'à la fois très fort et très fragile. Une brune qui se teint en roux pour attirer un plus grand nombre d'admirateurs risque de perdre l'homme sincère qui était prêt à lui consacrer sa vie.

À côté de cette raison "américaine" qui me pousse à redouter le doublage de nos films, il y a aussi une raison "française." Le doublage de films français en anglais entraînera fatalement le doublage de films américains en français. Or rien n'est dangereux pour une nation en convalescence comme de se laisser aller à s'habituer à ce sous-produit qu'est le film doublé. Des pays comme l'Italie acceptaient facilement cette monstruosité qu'est la transformation de la personnalité de l'acteur par la substitution d'une autre voix (au Moyen Age, on aurait brûlé en place publique les criminels qui eussent tenté l'essai sacrilège de greffer deux âmes sur un seul corps); cela permettait aux maisons étrangères françaises, américaines ou allemandes d'inonder le marché italien et par cela même d'étouffer le cinéma italien. Je prends l'exemple de l'Italie parce que c'est là où le public avait le plus perdu sa dignité de public et était devenu le moins conscient de la débâcle de sa propre industrie. Il est facile d'habituer un pays désemparé au doublage. Les premiers temps il sent que ça sonne faux, mais peu à peu il se fait à cette discordance et un beau jour vous avez toute une nation sans défense contre les produits de l'étranger. Dans le cas présent il n'y a que demi-mal, les produits américains étant purs et de bon aloi, mais que la face du monde change une fois de plus et ce ne seront peut-être pas de braves films de Hollywood que notre public aura à consommer, mais peut-être des productions moins innocentes venues d'autres pays.

Je crois que le devoir des dirigeants actuels du cinéma français est de déshabituer notre public du doublage. La soumission aux films doublés est le fait d'un pays vaincu économiquement, d'un pays faible moralement. Je suis sûr que le public américain repoussera les produits étrangers ainsi maquillés. La jeunesse, la robuste santé de ce peuple sauront l'arrêter au bord de cette erreur (je devrais dire de ce péché).

Ce qui me semblerait juste serait la liberté complète d'importer et d'exporter des films pour toutes les nations à la condition que ces films soient honnêtement présentés sous une étiquette qui ne masque pas la marchandise. Il faut que les films

français soient montrés en français aux Américains, et que les films américains soient montrés en anglais aux Français, et cela en toute liberté, sans réglementations limitant ces échanges. Cela fera de la propagande pour la langue anglaise et la culture américaine en France. Ce sera aussi un bon moyen de diffusion pour la langue française et la culture française en Amérique. Mais pour l'amour de Dieu, en un moment où ce monde est perdu s'il retourne aux mensonges commerciaux d'avant-guerre, ne nous laissons pas aveugler par les apparents avantages pécuniaires d'une combinaison parfaitement dégoûtante tant du point de vue humain que du point de vue artistique.

La France vient de subir des pertes effroyables. Nous avons moins d'hommes, moins d'usines, moins de puits de pétrole, moins d'avions que nos puissants amis. Montrons-leur qu'il y a au moins un trésor que nos ennemis n'ont pas pu nous enlever, c'est notre intégrité artistique.

Bien amicalement,¹

Renoir, of course, is advocating the use of subtitles instead of dubbing. I believe Renoir's objections to dubbing film are medium-specific, or, in other words, that they are not the same as those one might make against translating literary texts.

The second reference Professor Hollier makes to cinema comes in the section of his essay "classicism and obscurity" where he writes: "the sublime is defined as the result of an eclipse of the figure, the result of a *defiguration* of poetic language (what Bazin calls, in his book on Renoir, a 'cache-cache' or hide and seek): the sublime is an invisible figure, an eclipse of transparency." I think that Professor Hollier must have been tempted to reflect a bit longer here on Renoir and classicism, especially on the relationship between classicism and transparency which he brought to our attention in his reading of Blanchot. Indeed, I believe that such an investigation could yield a great deal. For instance, although Renoir today is considered to be the most classic of the French directors of the 1930s and perhaps of all time and also, not coincidentally in my opinion, the most profoundly marked by his experience of French literature and painting, it is a fact that at the time his films were released—until as late as *La grande Illusion* (1937)—the public and most critics found them confusing to the point of being incomprehensible. I have in mind films that are now commonly referred to as lucid portraits of their day as well as cinematic treasures such as *Le Crime de M. Lange* and *Toni*, not to

mention *Boudu sauvé des eaux*. And we know how incomprehension turned to hostility when Renoir released *La Règle du jeu* on the eve of war in 1939 and how this unexpected reaction motivated his departure from France. What today appears to be an amazing clarity—Renoir's classicism—was then seen as obscurity to the point of meaninglessness. This paradox stands out all the more when we look at the reevaluation of Renoir's 1930s career in the post-war French critical environment when, as we can read in a letter Renoir received from Paris in May 1946 about the re-release of *La Règle du jeu*: "Les gens ont soudain compris ce qui n'était pas expliqué" (qtd. in Renoir 209).² In the large literature on Jean Renoir's films, classicism is taken for granted; it is hardly ever considered seriously as a question.

Professor Hollier refers to the cinema again in the same section of his paper:

Faced with French, Curtius forgets himself. He forgets his difference. The transfixed translator loses himself in the other's language. Like a viewer absorbed by the movie, he no longer sees the screen. This foreigner acts as though there is nothing between him and what he reads. French is so familiar to him that he has forgotten it is a foreign language. When one believes that nothing is lost in translation, it is the translation that is lost.

But to say "he no longer sees the screen..." is to create a slippery analogy because, in foregrounding the screen (which is the material support, not the signifying matter), we lose reference to cinematic specificity, the composition of shots which can lead to an awareness of *mise en scène* (about which more in a moment).

One last reference to cinema in Professor Hollier's paper might be suggested when he discusses Blanchot's 1947 essay "Translated by . . .," in particular his reference to 1947 as "the moment when, for France and for Europe, the United States was still associated with [the] Liberation and the end of WWII." In 1932, as we learned earlier, Blanchot believed that Germans were not competent readers of French (meaning, the cultural as well as the linguistic specificity of French literature *in translation*), whereas here we find that in 1947, Blanchot — who, let us interject, had moved not only from the newspaper to the book, but whose lived experience of the consequences of some of his ideas had also changed them in important ways — believed that the French were competent read-

ers of American literature, meaning the specificity of American literature translated into French. Since in this instance the translation is being done by the French, not the Germans, should we be surprised that, from Blanchot's perspective, the issue of contamination does not apply in the same way? Might we (with Blanchot) consider that American literature is, in some sense, being made French?

I think here about Boris Vian, who not only translated *série noir* novels from American into French, but who also, in a famous case, was actually the pseudonymous writer of one of these novels for which he received translation credit (*J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*). That same Vian's Americanophilia was translated into an exquisitely romantic French idiom in his inimitable novel *L'Écume des jours* and, as well, Vian translated American jazz into French jazz in his nights performing as a musician. The point of bringing up Vian and American imports and translations in the late forties is to raise the question about the relationship between linguistic and cultural specificity.

Can we make an analogy with the cinematic translation and Americanophilia of the *Nouvelle Vague*, the *Cahiers du Cinéma* branch of it anyway, where *cinéphiles* like Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, Rohmer, Chabrol and lots of others watched all the American movies they could see, as many times as possible, some of them in ordinary movie theaters (where they might be dubbed or subtitled) but most of them at the Cinémathèque Française where American films were usually shown (like Japanese or Russian or other non-French films) without any linguistic translation whatsoever. And from this immersion in a language of sound cinema largely deprived of the literal meaning of the language, i.e., where they could not understand the dialogue, the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics learned to decode that famous transparency of the Hollywood continuity style (what we now call the classical Hollywood cinema)—the supposed banality and therefore aesthetic meaninglessness of this commercial cinema in terms of a cinematic specificity they called *mise en scène*, whence one of Godard's most famous dictums which, in fact, he borrowed from another critic: "the tracking shot is a question of morality" ["les travellings sont affaire de morale"] ("Hiroshima, notre amour" 5).

NOTES

¹ Renoir 163-165.

² The complete letter may be found in the Jean Renoir Collection, Arts-Special Collections Library, UCLA.

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STATES OF IDENTITY

*Limits and Possibilities
of Writing "French"*



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Special Issue
Paroles Gelées 15.2 1997

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA
French Department Graduate Students'
Second Interdisciplinary Conference*

STATES OF IDENTITY

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

SELECTED PROCEEDINGS FROM THE UCLA FRENCH
DEPARTMENT GRADUATE STUDENTS' SECOND ANNUAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE. APRIL 25-27, 1997

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

PAROLES GELEES
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Introduction

When we began preparations for the Second French Graduate Student Conference at UCLA, we learned very quickly that the concept of "being late" is a phenomenon that haunted not only the Romantics. To follow an original event of any kind is a challenging task, but the successful outcome of our conference *States of Identity: Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French,"* documented by the high quality of the present proceedings, demonstrate that there can be original "seconds," as paradoxical as this might sound.

Our "Call for Papers" for a conference on "identity" in the context of 'French' writing generated national and international responses from students in different disciplines such as Art History, ESL, Philosophy, Theater, as well as French, German and Comparative Literature thus underlining the interdisciplinary appeal of this conference.

Denis Hollier's thought-provoking keynote address on the very timely and controversial question of teaching literature in translation inaugurated the three-day event. Hollier's talk was complemented by insightful responses from Janet Bergstrom and Andrea Loselle from the perspective of film and poetry. We want to thank all three of them for setting the stage for an intellectually challenging yet collegial discussion among students, faculty and the many guests from outside the academic community.

Though the papers presented by the graduate students in six panels contributed much to our knowledge regarding individual aspects of "identity" in different cultures and time periods, the subsequent discussions made it clear that attempts to reach "sameness" regarding a given problem were inevitably deferred by new questions and concerns. What remained was the realization that in spite of the plurality of opinions, we had achieved "identity" in the overarching collective gesture of intellectual

exchange. It is this discovery that justifies this conference and our work in the humanities in general.

This conference and the publication of its proceedings would not have been possible without the generous financial support from our sponsors and we want to thank the Borchard Foundation, the French Consulate at Los Angeles, the UCLA Graduate Student Association, the Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies and the Campus Programs Committee of the Program Activities Board. Last but not least, we want to express our gratitude to the UCLA French Department and its faculty, whose continued support, encouragement and presence during the panels was much appreciated by the graduate students. A special thank you is due to Jean-Claude Carron for his introduction of the keynote speaker and tireless personal *engagement* in the organization of this conference.

Our last acknowledgment goes to the graduate students of the French Department who contributed in many ways to the successful outcome of this event and sacrificed much precious time to meetings and other organizational tasks. We hope that the success of the first two conferences will serve as motivation and inspiration to those who are currently working on next year's conference, which we are all eagerly anticipating.

The Editors

Diane Duffrin

Markus Müller

States of Identity

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA French Department
Graduate Students' Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference,
April 25-27, 1997*

Friday, April 25, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM OF SUNSET VILLAGE COMMONS

4:45 p.m. Introduction of Keynote Speaker

Jean-Claude Carron, UCLA

5:00 p.m. Keynote Address

Denis Hollier, Yale University

"Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation"

Respondents

Janet Bergstrom, UCLA

Andrea Loselle, UCLA

7:00 p.m. Reception

Saturday, April 26, 1997

NORTHRIDGE ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #1

Grafting Past to Present: Hybrid Identities

Moderator: Michael Stafford

1. "Norman French, Latin and Scots English: Three versions of the *Leges inter Brettos et Scottos*," *Kristen Over (UCLA, Comp. Literature Program)*
2. "Verlan: An Expression of Beur Identity or Reversal by Inverse," *Amy Wells (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*

3. "Marcel Mauss on Nationalism: An Approach to *The Gift*,"
Luke Bresky (UCLA, Dept. of English)

10:45 a.m. Panel #2

The Politics of Pedagogy: Translating Culture in the Classroom

Moderators: Natalie Muñoz, Marcella Munson

1. "Silent Words: Language as an Obstacle to Immigrant Integration and Identity in French Society," *Katharine Harrington (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*
2. "*The Guest in the Classroom: The Voice of Camus in Multicultural Academic Discourse*," *Ajanta Dutt (Rutgers University, ESL Program)*
3. "Radical Chic(k): The American Roots of Marie de France,"
Susan Purdy (University of Western Ontario, Dept. of French)

2:30 p.m. Panel #3

Bodies in Writing: Feminine Identity and the Literary Text

Moderator: Heather Howard

1. "Discordant Locations for the Me-ospheric Void: Théophile Gautier vs. *La Sylphide*," *Regina Fletcher Sadono (UCLA, Theatre Arts Dept.)*
2. "The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Le silence de la cité*," *Lorie Sauble-Otto (University of Arizona, Dept. of French and Italian)*
3. "The 'I' Which Is Not One: Dual Identity in the Case of Simone de Beauvoir's Autobiography," *Kim Carter-Cram (Idaho State University, Dept. of Foreign Languages)*

4:15 p.m. Panel #4

War and Remembrance: National Epitaphs of Self

Moderator: Stacey Meeker

1. "Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization," *John S. LaRose (Louisiana State University, Dept. of French and Italian)*
2. "The Body and the State: Fantasies of Identity in Genet's *Pompes Funèbres*," *Leslie Ann Minot (UC Berkeley, Dept. of Comp. Literature)*
3. "Ecriture et Mémoire: Identity and Collective Memory in Jorge Semprun's *L'écriture ou la vie*," *Marcus Keller (California State University Long Beach, Dept. for German, Russian and Romance Languages)*

Sunday, April 27, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #5

Lieux de Mémoire: Negotiating Boundaries of Francophone Identity

Moderator: Anne-Lancaster Badders

1. "Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé," *Melissa McKay (University of Georgia, Dept. of Romance Languages)*
2. "Personal and National Narrative in *Une vie de crabe* by Tanella Boni," *Laura K. Reeck (New York University, Dept. of French)*

10:45 a.m. Panel #6

Representation and the Reconsideration of Identity

Moderator: Diane Duffrin

1. "Classical Aesthetics, Modern Ethics: Lacan, Kierkegaard, Sophocles, Anouilh," *Joseph Jenkins (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*
2. "The Stage of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot," *Ben Kolstad (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*

Open Discussion

Closing Statement

Markus Müller, UCLA

