

Writing/Images

Lesley Stern

She moos toward the wooded hills behind her, and the sound comes back. She moos in a high falsetto that does not descend. It is a very small sound to come from such a large, dark animal.

So writes Lydia Davis—poet, short story writer and translator in her chapbook *The Cows*. In it she describes the three cows that she sees and hears every day as she sits at her desk. How they look and move and sound.¹

Let us assume, to begin with, that films themselves engage in the art of description. Just as poets describe the world, so do film makers – with all the technological possibilities available to them. Film critics, theorists too, are dedicated to explicating, unravelling, films or cinematic systems, though their medium is words. It is in the clashing or intersection or tension of different media that the ekphrastic impulse becomes rhetorically interesting. But perhaps the critical art of description—or call it the indexical compulsion—is already outmoded, rendered redundant by the possibilities opened up by new media and modes of access, by the emergence of the video essay for instance.

Putting aside for the moment the question of redundancy, let's ask: what is the critic hoping to achieve through thick description? Why continue to do it? To be accurate (or true) for sure, but to what: the movement of the camera, the length of shots, or to the look of things, the feeling of being there? Or to clinch an argument? We continue, I would say, because of an infatuation with words as much as with movies. In psychoanalytic terms we might say that there is a drive—to capture in words the (always already lost) moving image, to nail it. Logophilia. An impossible desire. Nevertheless we continue to aim for exactitude in order to experience those rare moments when words seem to match the movie, when you can feel language clicking into place, when the film is there for a flash on the page. Mark Doty says, "In that instant when language seems to match experience, some rift is healed, some rupture momentarily

salved in what Hart Crane called ‘the silken skilled transmemberment of song.’”²

To be in love with words and with movies: this is a guarantee that you will live forever in the eighth circle of hell where love is unrequited, over and over again. But it is also the circle that abuts both the world and paradise.

Much attention has been given to the cinephiliac dimension of film criticism. Perhaps we have not considered enough the logophiliac dimension. Or rather – that place where these two perversions meet and mingle. I don’t mean that we should start analysing film critics and their language. Rather I am suggesting a pedagogic intervention in film studies, where writing itself is given more attention as a medium. Of course this happens (you can see it in Victor Perkins’ students, for instance). But too frequently it is the legacy of those of us who came to film studies in the excitement of the theoretical turn that shapes academic training, at the expense of attention to the arts of description and argument and how they intersect.

Elena and Karl have asked if there might be an adequate theory of cinematic description.³ Although energized by thinking theoretically about cinematic description I am sceptical about the pairing of “adequate” and “theory.” I do however think we may talk without embarrassment of description as being adequate to its object – the object of critical discourse, the thing about which and to which we wish to speak, and in the process to speak to other viewers and readers. In using this old fashioned phrase – “adequate to its object” – I mean to imply a certain humility before the thing, a willingness to allow it to enter the discursive space in all its thingness. You might object and say “but a film might be above all discursive, and not particularly thingy.” Certainly some films are more discursive than others. And others may become more discursive than their thinginess would ever have suggested. But let’s take this word “humility.” What I mean to invoke is a breathing space, a critical capaciousness that allows the film or filmic moment to take up space, so that it can be imagined.

Description, of course, is never merely description. It is always rhetorical. But it can often be turgid and it can kill its object of scrutiny. Equally, description is only one aspect of film criticism. Films live in the world and almost inevitably open out onto other films, worlds, histories, political landscapes. Criticism is always more interesting if it not only describes, but if it probes, evidences curiosity, is attuned to resonance.

Before the cows, Lydia Davis is as humble as she is before Proust and Flaubert. In each case she embarks on an act of description and an act of translation. Though her attitude is humble, her writing is not. Madame Bovary and the cows enter, through her writing, into a new mode of existence.

To end, I’d like to point to two recent examples of film criticism: The collective essay on Leo Carax’s *Holy Motors* made up of a number of individual contributions by the editorial collective of *Lola*, and the essay by Steve Shaviro

on *Melancholia* in the on-line journal *Sequence*. They are both examples of ekphrastic criticism at its best, but in markedly different ways. The *Lola* essays are undoubtedly conceived of in a cinephiliac and celebratory mode, but the device of assembling short responses (in itself not new) generates rhymes and contradictions, repetitions and variations that make for a very rich text, allowing many access points for the audience. Shaviro's essay is by no means celebratory but it is a fine example of cinematic criticism in its detailed attentiveness to the film and the way in which philosophical discourses are woven into and through the film in a "skilled transmemberment." What I find stimulating, though, is not just the provocative excellence of the essays but their participation in the forging of a new public sphere. Adrian Martin and Girish Shambu, the editors of *Lola* are lively, nay ubiquitous, in both their internet and international presence and Catherine Grant, one of the editors of *Sequence*, also has the marvellous blog/resource *Film Studies for Free* and is one of the people forging the video essay as a new form of criticism. The future possibilities for criticism are invitingly tentacled and expansive.

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¹ Lydia Davis, *The Cows* (Louisville, Kentucky: Saraband Books, 2011): 20.

² Mark Doty, *The Art of Description: World into Word* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2010): 10.

³ This paper was presented for an SCMS panel at the 2013 conference. The panel, Surface Tension: The Fates and Stakes of Close Analysis, was conceived by Elena Gorfinkel and Karl Schoonover.