



Review: [untitled]

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Reviewed work(s): Prefaces to the Diaphora: Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity by Peter Carravetta

Source: *SubStance*, Vol. 22, No. 2/3, Issue 71/72: Special Issue: Epistémocritique, (1993), pp. 345-347

Published by: University of Wisconsin Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3685296>

Accessed: 16/08/2008 03:29

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**Carravetta, Peter.** *Prefaces to the Diaphora: Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity.* West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991. Pp. xx + 345.

"Diaphora," as author Carravetta explains in the Preface to his *Prefaces*, is a concept of interpretive difference that encompasses the related notions of movement and exchange, and is manifested in figures of speech, broadly conceived. Diaphoristics, as the theory of interpretation deriving from the concept of diaphora, thus entails the transfer and exchange of admissible significances between conventionally unrelated types of discourse.

For Carravetta, poetics and philosophy epitomize conventionally distinct yet potentially exchangeable discursive fields. Such exchanges would take place under the aegis of rhetoric, and thus it is that Carravetta chooses to focus his attention on the rhetorical dimension of discourse. This focus is set out in the chapter entitled, "About the Ancient Diaphora," which serves as the book's methodological center of gravity. Here, Carravetta outlines his consideration of hermeneutics as a "project of understanding" comprised of translation and expression as well as explanation.

Carravetta has a particular type of understanding in mind—understanding as it is embodied in, and therefore constituted by, language. In fact, in an important footnote to the chapter cited above, Carravetta holds that interpretation is primarily written. This is a statement that, in the context of the book as a whole, should be interpreted not as an unequivocal assertion, or worse, as an imperious laying down of the law, but rather as a charting of a territory, or marking out of a field. Clearly, though, the book's focus is on fields given their characteristic profiles (and to some extent, their content as well) by virtue of distinguishing methods of language manipulation. Thus the focus of Carravetta's hermeneutic, as explicitly developed in this book, can be summed up in the quote that closes "About the Ancient Diaphora": "where words break off, no thing may be."

Carravetta is careful to undergird his notion of rhetorically based discursive exchange with a consideration of the conditions under which rhetoric can function. These conditions, for Carravetta, inhere in language's status as an historically constituted body of figures and meanings. It follows that the object of hermeneutic scrutiny is a tradition in which meanings are accumulated, passed down, and reconfigured. Interpreted (and interpretable) material is thus doubly contextual, as it participates in the past, through accumulated meaning, and in the present, as the creative instantiation of that accumulated meaning. When viewed as grounded in tradition, hermeneutics becomes a proleptic enterprise: not only are the interpretive problems of the present framed in terms handed down from the past, but these in turn are projected into a future for which the present acts as a determining past.

In calling attention to language's status as a relatively open-ended tradition, Carravetta emphasizes language's determination by convention. The structuring function performed by language conventions thus can be conceived as the manifestation of historical accumulation, and as the design by which tradition makes itself felt. I would like to mention here that Carravetta emphasizes the enabling aspect of tradition; like Italy's "weak thinkers"—most notably Vattimo, with whose work Carravetta's resonates, and for whom Carravetta has served as one of America's leading interpreters—Carravetta is not averse to calling attention to the creative potential inherent in tradition.

Although Carravetta's direct interest is in those interpretive practices embodied in and directed toward language practices, this interest does suggest an opening out to other interpretive fields. For interpretation-about-interpretation, which is the type of metaphilosophy that Carravetta practices, eventually will take us to the ethos and conventions of the communal practices of the language communities in question. Indeed, when Carravetta states that hermeneutics is unintelligible except against a backdrop of being with and for others, he is making a case for the importance of the communal determinations in relation to which discourse can arise and make itself understood.

For this reason, I believe it would be wrong to reduce diaphoristics to a method of interpretation applicable only to language. Carravetta does, for instance, acknowledge the kind of understanding that Heidegger labeled "foreknowing" (*Vorgriff*), and for this reason, I believe he would not discount the application of diaphoristics to an existential hermeneutic *per se*. For the so-called hermeneutic circle, if it is to become the object of a higher-order investigation, must eventually lead the investigator back to the tacit, adaptive competences of the communal ethos. (By this latter I mean the type of prior understanding or functional knowledge demonstrated in those behavioral dispositions embodying a successful integration into an intelligible environment). It is the ethos, after all, that provides the ultimate condition of possibility for the formation and intelligible operation of language conventions.

Any attempt to articulate the conditions in relation to which a particular discursive formation takes its peculiar shape—any attempt, in other words, to educe and set in order those codes of conduct promulgated in now-conscious, now-unconscious methods of procedure—is bound to presuppose those very conditions. Thus the metaphilosophical project is like the mythical, endless serpent that has swallowed its own tail, and in disgorging it, attempts to retrace the process by which it had been able to swallow the tail in the first place. The beginning can never be reached, though the method can be brought to bear in greater awareness.

Carravetta himself makes no claim for the book other than as an introduction to a set of problems, and here we should take him at his word. *Prefaces to the Diaphora* is indeed intended as a preface, as a foreword to a project that sets itself the task of digging until it unearths the roots of its own possibility.

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**Conley, Tom.** *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. Pp. 350.

It seems clear by this point that the “grammatological” side of deconstruction as outlined in Gregory Ulmer’s *Applied Grammatology* and instantiated in Derrida’s own practice in such books as *Glas* and *Signsponge* has been submerged in favor of the more genteel variety espoused by the so-called “Yale school” (if it ever existed). Powerful institutional constraints on interpretation being what they are, this situation, especially in view of the much-heralded “waning” of deconstruction, is not likely to change. Nevertheless, certain guerilla warriors like Tom Conley have continued to fight the good fight from the margins of the critical margins, and in *Film Hieroglyphs*, a brilliantly challenging, if frequently exasperating book, he gives us a clear example of what an unbridled grammatology (with dollops of Lyotard for good measure) might look like.

In readings of two of Renoir’s films (*Boudu sauvé des eaux*, *La bête humaine*), Rossellini’s *Paisan*, some *films noirs* and a few other Hollywood movies like Walsh’s *Manpower* and *Objective Burma!*, Conley stretches to a considerable and exhilarating degree the conventional boundaries of the “permissible” in interpretation. His readings are often breathtaking in their synoptic boldness, and his refreshing assumption of the permeability of a film’s borders allows him, for example, to use an actor’s role in one movie as legitimate hermeneutic “evidence” in approaching another.

Though he tends in theory—following Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, the French film theoretician—to privilege the graphic (in other words, writing in the conventional sense) when it appears in the filmic text, say, in the form of titles, credits, letters, signs, and so on, his actual practice puts into play the writing (in the deconstructive sense) that inheres in any visual image. His notion of the filmic icon (drawn, apparently, partly from Derrida’s concept of the object that resists conceptualization and partly from Lyotard’s notion of the rebus) is also interesting and potentially fruitful, especially in the way it can be used to neutralize and circumvent the binary polarities that texts (or critics) always seem to present to us. In theory, then, his approach does respect the incredibly overdetermined richness of the visual image, which, unlike the etymology of written words, is something that is demonstrably, empirically