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Agnieszka Matysiak, *The Backstage as the Diegetic Space in the (Neo)Gothic Dramas*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2010. 128 pages.

Małgorzata Miciuła, *(W)holes in the Eyes/I's: William Gaddis's The Recognitions from the Neo-Baroque Perspective*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2010. 124 pages.

These are two first volumes in the Studies in Literature and Culture, a new series published by the Catholic University in Lublin. The two are works by relatively young scholars, devoted to difficult and/or less known texts and characterized by a skillful and innovative use of theoretical devices that, quoting from one of the books, might be described as "neo-solutions."

The first volume in the series, *The Backstage as the Diegetic Space in the (Neo)Gothic Dramas* by Agnieszka Matysiak, is a semiotic study of the theatrical space, both the physical space and the space of meaning. The choice of texts is quite unusual; there is a chapter on Joanna Baillie's drama, and another on Sam Shepard's neo-Gothic plays, but the selection shows the latent possibilities of the Gothic space in seemingly quite remote areas of culture. Such distant affinities are always intriguing and seem to be typical of studies based on "neo-solutions." The theoretical background of Agnieszka Matysiak's book has been derived from structuralist studies of the theatre, most importantly books and articles by representatives of the Prague School, Yuri Lotman and other representatives of the Tartu School, as well as several more specific studies, including Roland Barthes's book on Racine. Such a return to structuralism could be frowned upon as a whim, but the author uses stringent structural vocabulary only as spring board for her own, innovative approach to semiosis, in which she is proposing a close correspondence between physical and semantic (cultural) phenomena. Indeed, such inspired writing is rarely seen nowadays:

Therefore, I propose to acknowledge the concept of the sign as the entity mirroring a graphic representation of the nucleus of an atom, together with the electron cloud, where the co-existence and cooperation of its three components compose this basic unit of matter. The signified and the signifier may be equivalent to protons and neutrons—the signified being a proton, whereas the signified epitomizing a neutron. Protons represent those nucleons, which are endowed with an electric charge of +1 elementary charge and, thus, they are capable of interactions with other particles. Therefore, the hypothesis may be put forward that since the signified constitutes the conceptual unit of the sign and expresses a particular idea, some energy is also bestowed upon it for an individual concept is never neutral. Furthermore, having the energy, the signified exerts an impact on character of the concretely perceptible signifier as it is an idea that shapes the appearance of its visualized conveyor (whether it is a sound, a written mark like a letter, or a sequence of letters composing a word). (15-16)

Referents transmit energy (like electron orbitals, by absorbing and emitting it), bind or repel other signs, creating semantic fields and, ultimately, the semiosphere, a concept of the Tartu school; given such similarity between physical and semiotic phenomena, the author can question received opinions on both matter and mind, only to show how the similarity, and the questioning, works in texts.

Semiosphere, where referents transmit the energy of signifieds, may be compared to the theatrical space, as it was conceived of by the Prague School and derivative theoretical discussions, most importantly the studies by William Egginton and Michael Issacharoff. Gothic space in the theatre corresponds to a rift between nature and the mind, the rift that occurred in the eighteenth century (Foucault, Kristeva). It is gender-based and structured similarly to the tripartite sign: the male signifier is a sign vehicle (the mind, the electrons), the female aspect belongs to the signified (nature, protons). The female signified corresponds, according to the author, to physical beauty and/or the impact of the theatrical space; the most important repository of signifieds is invisible, in the off-stage, the numinous (Rudolph Otto) theatrical zone behind the significant “content” of a play. The wealth of philosophical and theoretical references is necessary, it seems, for this hidden zone to gain its voice, for it to become expressive in a critic’s discussion. Textual evidence comes from a detailed chapter on Joanna Baillie and a somewhat shorter discussion of Sam Shepard’s two plays, *Buried Child* and *Fool for Love*.

In Małgorzata Miciuła’s book on Gaddis, *(W)holes in the Eyes/I’s*, the theoretical background combines the concepts of neo-Baroque, Deleuze’s folding, his minor and major strategies, Foucault’s heterotopia, Lacan’s theory of vision and perspective, and

feminist approaches to visuality, the body, and female *juissance*. All these concepts are essential to the discussion presented in the book, but they revolve around Lacan's discussion of perspective and the vanishing point. Miciuła concentrates on absence and omission (of women characters) in Gaddis's novel; women characters, like the vanishing point in perspective, organize and arrange the visible elements of the novel. The author shows the correspondences between the novel's composition and the paintings mentioned (and forged) in it. In this, the author presents an innovative reading of *The Recognitions*, going beyond the theme of forgery and beyond the development of the main (male) characters. In doing so, the author ignores longer sections with strong and well developed characterization of women, e.g. Esther in I.3, and, Maude in I.5, and, of course, the extensive characterization of Esme. The point holds, however, that it is through their disappearances in subsequent chapters that those characters become vanishing points. Similarly, *(W)holes in the Eyes/I's* has no extensive references to Clementine literature and Goethe's *Faust* as intertexts for *The Recognitions*, which is undoubtedly good for clarity and coherence, but presents a truncated image of the novel.

The rejection of intertextual explication, however, is only an apparent lack and certainly a deliberate decision on part of the author, who, concentrating on references to visual arts, presents the novel as a generator of structures rather than as a structure itself. With the multitude of references, Gaddis's book does not call for a comprehensive interpretation which could take into account all its complexities—such interpretation would probably go against the grain of the novel. The detailed description of the perspective and vanishing point in the novel, however, shows how this compositional device creates and brings out various points of view, subject positions, identities, characters, and, as well, intertextual references. Instead of explaining the novel's structure, a daunting and possibly impossible task, Miciuła uses “neo-solutions” to discuss the text as a generator of self-mirrored, recursively repeated patterns, a generator of infinite complexities. It seems that with the use of “neo-solutions” it is possible to present a discussion of a limited set of elements of the text and still arrive at a coherent global discussion; the intertexts and other omitted elements, like vanishing points, could be easily located and made visible in a more extended critical discussion.

There are two theoretical affinities between Matysiak's and Miciuła's books. First of all, they conceive of texts in visual terms; they are visual readings. This seems to be consistent with the subject matter, since Matysiak's book is about the theatrical space, and Miciuła's about paintings referred to in a novel. Meanings, of the greatest ideological and existential caliber, are not absent, as both authors are sometimes wont of carelessly saying, but hidden or invisible in the visual framework prepared in theoretical parts. In particular, the neo-Baroque, mentioned in both books (although *The Backstage* contains