

Introduction

SHEPHERD STEINER

Irony, trauma, race, and happiness: these are a few of the “runaway subjects” of general issue 52.1.¹ Before introducing this issue I would like to officially welcome Karalyn Dokurno as our new managing editor. Dokurno’s work focuses on representations of women’s travel in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British literature, highlighting the deep ambiguities posed by women’s extra-domestic mobility in both canonical and non-canonical texts. Second, *Mosaic* is excited to announce a number of new developments with regard to social media. Among these is our new blog that can be found on our website at www.umanitoba.ca/mosaic. Finally, it is with regret I announce the sudden passing of John Richardson (1956-2018), a present and past contributor of *Mosaic*. In his essay “Sentimental Witnesses: Modern War Representation and the Eighteenth Century,” which appeared in issue 51.2 (June 2018), Richardson focused on the centrality of a fictional spectator’s response to events, in particular, their feelings toward things seen or heard as a means of conveying an emotional affect to the reader. With many repercussions for interpreting conflict photography and the contemporary image today, Richardson traces the figure of the witness back to the novel of sentiment from which he unfolds a manipulative thicket of ethical and rhetorical issues.

In the present issue, Richardson provides a unique approach to understanding the age-old concept of irony. Using popular song, YouTube, and standup comedy as

his starting point, the author offers a perspective on irony from the vantage point offered by our collective drift. His aim in “A Theory of Irony as Event” is to seek the meaning of ironic texts and to inquire into the motivation behind them through the differential relations existing between situational and articulated irony. Irony, of course, is no mean term to write about. As philosophers and theorists have long reminded us, it is not a concept, nor can it be easily reduced to a theory. With special emphasis on embodiment, speech acts, and the telescopic condensation of time—problems that echo through Richardson’s work on “the sentimental witness”—the author reminds us that the most urgent questions of theory begin where advanced theory stops. If I am not mistaken, irony, for Richardson, is an intentional issue that takes effect only when the contingencies of history gain an edge. In this regard, it teeters both on the brink of an expected hermeneutic horizon and its misfire as well as part of a dialectic between the self and a former self found to be wanting. Providing an instantaneous bracket for this projective future and retrospective past is the event, and this ironic event, as Baudelaire reminds us, is the simultaneous occurrence of two things. Seeking the meaning of ironic texts or inquiring into the motivation behind irony may seem a curious tack to take in the context of this highly truncated notion of time, but is perhaps not so curious if we consider that one of the recurrent tropes of Richardson’s work focuses on, in his own description of his research, “the way in which texts shape the collective imagination.” Presumably, being cast in the role of a critical reader of a text about irony is as risky as getting the irony implicit to Richardson’s string of examples, which include Alanis Morissette’s song “Ironic” and Ed Byrne’s jokes about Morissette’s song. We always want to come out on top when it comes to irony, for the only way to stop it from spinning out of control and consuming everything in its path is to understand it. In this sense, irony is the paradigmatic runaway subject.

In the case of this issue, the trope of the runaway supplies a real enough surplus that it infects our dealings with other texts. But the runaway takes many other forms in this issue. In Stephen Dougherty’s “The Life in Death of Psychoanalysis,” we are introduced to the key terms of Catherine Malabou’s work. The author suggests that Malabou’s engagement with neuroscience not only offers a new beginning for psychoanalysis, but a beginning that comes at the cost of the “total doctrinal destruction” of the latter (70). In the face of trauma rather than neurosis as the universal condition, Dougherty focuses in on what Malabou calls “destructive plasticity,” which he variously isolates as an attempt to sexualize neuroscience, a positive articulation of Freud’s death drive, the stirrings of a neuronal liberation movement, and the constant re-wiring of the biological by the historical formation of neoliberalism. This is a shat-

tering survey of Malabou's work that showcases contemporary capital at a stage of technical development where the metaphor of the rat race has been supplanted and replaced by a rogue system that turns us all not only into subjects for animal testing, but subjects for animal perfecting. We should all be worried by these cognitive updates. Over time they amount to ideological creep on the neuronal level.

In Simon Marijsse's "Agamben's Happy Life: Toward an Ethics of Impotence and Mere Communicability," we are introduced to the Aristotelian edge and modal categories that underwrite Giorgio Agamben's notion of happiness. This is as good and quick a primer to the philosopher's theory of potentiality as one will come across. Labile as I am, now I want most to live out the un-lived within me. Finally, Melanie R. Anderson looks at the tropes of the American Gothic that inhabit *Peyton Place*, the runaway bestseller from 1956. Anderson traces the novel's scandalous portrayal of New England life to a regionalist mash-up of South and North and a larger and more troubling story of national repression. At the heart of the novel we are directed to the ghostly presence of Samuel Peyton, an escapee from a southern plantation who is the namesake of both Peyton Place and the castle he built. Here the "runaway subject" finds its most ignominious form, and a form notably instanced in Glenn Ligon's *Runaways* (1993): never free of the past, nor divorced from the future, but a concrete fact in the present. Let's hope "*escape happens*," as Stephen Wright puts it (23).

On the cover of this issue we feature the work of Dutch artist Esther Hovers. Her *False Positive* series employs the aesthetic logic of smart cameras, which are used the world-over for policing in the public realm in real-time. Hovers isolated a range of "deviant" and suspicious patterns of behaviour that surveillance systems use to flag threats to security. In *Overview E, Timeframe: 6 min. 02* (2018), we easily isolate the red flags using our own intelligence surveillance system, both by virtue of leverage gained by the other isolated and stationary citizens and, of course, not without a little help from our own racially and generationally motivated anxieties. The richness of Hovers's work stems from these little dramas that unfold over time, which, in the case of *Overview E*, she has presumably compressed into a single image. But there is more theatre than this. In occupying the high perspective and downward directed sight lines of the surveillance footage, one cannot help but feel an activist edge to the work. The tradition of Agitprop—Rodchenko's photographs, Brecht's theatre—feels very near at hand. Indeed, the "false positive" of Hovers's title refers to the processes of misinterpretation to which all algorithmic systems are susceptible. Which brings me to "Fragment 102" of *Minima Moralia*, a point at which Theodor Adorno's "*reflections from damaged life*" would appear to ground the logic of the smart camera in question. Apparently the good old days of the sentimental witness are here too. Adorno writes,

“Running in the street conveys an impression of terror.” As an affront to the bourgeois right to stroll and “the heritage of the feudal promenade,” for Adorno running in the street is additionally a mash-up of the “archaic violence” of “breathless flight” in being hunted and the nineteenth-century fear of traffic. To supplement and contemporize Adorno’s thinking in this regard: “Traffic regulations [and indeed algorithmic policing of the public sphere] no longer need allow for wild animals, but they have not pacified running” (162).

NOTE

1/ I borrow the phrase “runaway subjects” from Huey Copeland.

WORKS CITED

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