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From picture to hologram: Nicole Brossard’s grammar of utopia

*l'espoir en hologramme* (Picture Theory, 168)

**ULYSSES**, HUGH KENNER WRITES, 'IS THE FIRST BOOK TO BE A KIND OF HOLOGRAM OF LANGUAGE, CREATING A THREE-DIMENSIONAL ILLUSION OUT OF THE CONTROLLED INTERFERENCE BETWEEN OUR EXPERIENCE OF LANGUAGE AND ITS ARRANGEMENTS OF LANGUAGE.'¹ For Nicole Brossard, however, it is Joyce's last epic, *Finnegans Wake*, which is more deserving of Kenner's ascription and her novel *Picture Theory* (1982)² a utopian extension—and an extension into a Brossardian utopia—of Joyce's polyvalent system. Not only Joyce's multilingual pun structures, themselves linguistic enactments of the hologram's three-way integration, but his relentless challenging of the norms of 'single vision'³ are central to Brossard's concerns in this work. The same could be said of her use of Ludwig Wittgenstein although the great philosopher's concern in both the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* is with the intercalated relationship of language, picture, and language games.

To Wittgenstein and Joyce, Brossard owes the basic structure of *Picture Theory* but the intertextual cast (including Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes and Monique Wittig) is no more confined to them than is the writing restricted to allusion 'accurate' in the traditional sense. Transformation and allusion work hand in hand, echoing and playing upon the classic language games of international Modernist writing and causing them to experience a kind of mitosis. As cells rupture and divide, recombining into new cellular systems governed by codes imprinted on them, so in *Picture Theory* the elements of the hologram toward which the novel moves combine and recombine, working toward the ultimate transformation of 'pictures' within the text into the

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²Nicole Brossard, *Picture Theory* (Montréal: Nouvelle Optique, 1982). Subsequent references to this edition will be presented within parentheses in the essay. Throughout this paper, 'Brossard' refers to *Picture Theory* as a text bearing a particular authorial ascription. Not a source/influence study as traditionally defined but an exploration of intertextualities in *Picture Theory*, this essay is not concerned with questions of intentionality.

holographic image toward which its utopian force tends.

Before we consider Picture Theory's conclusion in detail, however, it may be useful to explore some of the turns which the writing takes during its course. Brossard hangs a rudimentary plot upon a complex intertextual system which fugues its way to her concluding statement of women's place in a re-imagined world. That plot itself is, like similar aspects of Finnegans Wake, at first difficult to see and one undertakes the same risk of trivializing the writing by ferreting out characters and incidents and seeming thereby to dispose of the complex language games of the text. But let us take the risk for several pages in order to watch some of Brossard's cellular mutations in action.

Picture Theory opens with a prefatory section entitled 'L'Ordinaire' which introduces a cast of characters including the narrator (Michèle Vallée), Florence and Claire Dérive and assorted minor figures as well as such members of the intertextual cast as Joyce, Barnes, Stein and Wittgenstein. The first chapter, 'La Perspective,' focuses on the erotic relationship of Claire Dérive and the narrator, extending the fragmentary 'scènes blanches' (20) of the first few pages into a series of paragraphs in which syntax and punctuation are opened out (as they will be repeatedly throughout the novel) in an effort to devise a language to express Brossard's utopia.

'L'Emotion,' the second chapter, is concerned on one level with the Cape Cod vacation of five women but, on another, it is the chapter of night, Brossard's homage to the pivotal chapter of Djuna Barnes' novel, Nightwood. 'Watchman, What of the night?' is Barnes' heroine's question to an ageing transvestite, by name Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor, to which his baroque response is a long monologue on dark nights of soul and city, a Modernist consolatio. Brossard's chapter celebrates just the opposite: not the abandonment in love suffered by Barnes' Nora Flood but the fulfillment of Brossard's utopian vision enacted in terms of the sexual union of two women and of the articulation of a philosophy of history which inscribes women on the field of light. Thus a new picture theory transfixing the old, whether of Descartes or Wittgenstein. So we are told that the five women spend the long night 'explorant [. . .] le dictionnaire' (99), tracing the 'condensation' of language in the city of words. To reclaim the city through language, to reclaim language through the body, is—for Brossard—to transform the world utterly.

In the third chapter, 'La Pensée,' retrospective monologue shifts to third person narrative and to a series of virtuoso inventions of Joycean themes and elaborations on the major topoi of the novel. Joyce's 'Mother dying come home father' becomes 'MOTHER SICK - STAYING IN NEW YORK - WILL WRITE - LOVE - CLAIRE' (105), and the last sentence of Joyce's 'The Dead' ('His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead') is condensed into 'Déhors il neige sur toute l'étendue de la langue' (117). The image of the spiral, used throughout the novel to denote both the entry into the vagina and the passage of light in the hologram, here mutates into the chambered nautilus and its Joycean epigram, 'un sexe de femme c'est mathématique' (118), otherwise rendered in Ulysses as 'Musemathematics' and in Finnegans Wake, 'eternal geometer.' In the most brilliant of the 'thoughts' comprising 'La Pensée,' the birth of a modern and Modernist Babel echoes through the punning deconstruction of chapters (chapitres) into cats and clowns (chats, pitres) as words, endlessly disappearing, moving away from the speaker into a wintry world, reveal as they pass the presence of flesh within
thought (lap, la pensée) and of starvation within woman’s very name (la femme/l’affame):

Cosmos osmose cosmos annule, avive, a-vide,
gravite, l’affame la mère la femme la femme:
(human mind) ————————————— lap/ensée.
[..] Poings serrés: naissance babel babillle.
[..] Les mots fonctionnent indéfiniment
(l’évanouissement de la personne) à perte de
vue en tout sens: chats pitres. Tristement. (115)

In the next fragment, both wounds and bliss (jouissance with all of its
associations with Roland Barthes’ Le Plaisir du texte) define the narrator’s
affirmation (116).

‘Screen Skin’ is concerned with the meeting of ink and voice (129), first in
terms of the urgency of finding a way to inscribe woman’s experience on the
screen of public writing, the official text of a culture which enshrines Dedalus
(whether Ovid’s or Joyce’s) rather than what Brossard, borrowing from
Monique Wittig’s Les Guérillères, calls the ‘O politique’ (129). But the militaristic
connotations of the O as female symbol in Wittig’s fiction are absent in
Brossard, violence being the hallmark here of ‘l’homme-flèche’ (127). In the
second section of ‘Screen Skin,’ the resolution of the seeming antithesis is given,
again in terms not simply of the erotic but of the opening of the body to history
along what Brossard calls ‘L’indispensable trajectoire’ (143) of the skin which, in
translating the idiom of patriarchy, creates the possibility of space within
history (143).

‘Screen Skin Too’ culminates in the union of the two lovers, the emergence
through them of the symbols of the new world, and of what Brossard calls the
‘corps générique’ which ‘s’apprête à souffler mots’ (160). But, first, snow falls on
the city and becomes ‘Sky-writing’ (150). In sharp contrast to the snow which
descends over all Ireland in frigid association with Joyce’s Gabriel Conroy at
the end of ‘The Dead,’ however, snow in Brossard is white light, agent of
transformation, symbol of the hologram. Echoing Mary Daly’s rejuvenation of
‘spinster,’ a woman who spins,8 Brossard’s snow is a ‘Spinster Spirale’ (190),
spinning creative webs in the service of the union of thought and writing.

Like ‘Screen Skin Too,’ ‘Screen Skin Utopia’ rises to a climactic moment in
which the meeting of minds as well as bodies produces in the lovers not only an
experience of total familiarization with the universe (170), a ‘making home’ as
opposed to the Russian Formalist ‘making strange,’ but what Brossard calls in
English ‘opening the mind’ (170) through absolute intersubjectivity between the
two women. The resulting ‘Tranche anatomique de l’imaginaire’ (170) prepares
us at last for the hologram, the final chapter of the novel.

Hologramme marks a new beginning, a new ‘Picture Theory’ supplanting
the old. It is a lyrical celebration of the skin in which the rhythms of the
conclusion of the ‘Penelope’ chapter of Ulysses are echoed, creating an ironic
counterpart between Molly Bloom’s ‘Yes,’ her continuing assent to a
heterosexual relationship of mutual naïveté and dualist tension, and Brossard’s
narrator’s monist resolution of sexual and linguistic communion within a
lesbian relationship: ‘la langue monte’ (194). Before history can be transformed,
woman’s experience of the world and the word must be changed. Setting aside
dependence on the patriarchy for jouissance both sexual and linguistic, woman
in Brossard becomes the origin of her own naming, thus perfectly ‘lisible’ (195)
in her own terms and by others who share her transformation. Like Shem in
Finnegans Wake, her skin is inscribed with her own story, but for her this is an
experience of joyous self-author/ization. Gone are Joyce’s Romantic artist
parables of heroic ‘silence, exile, [. . .] cunning,’ and self-pity. But still, like Stephen Dedalus, Brossard’s women must learn to see their world anew.

‘A picture,’ says the Tractatus, ‘is a model of reality,’¹⁰ ‘A picture is a fact’ (Trac. 2.141). Working within the mimetic tradition and taking portraits and genre-paintings as his only examples, Wittgenstein asserts the identity of elements depicted in a picture and the same elements in ‘reality’ (Trac. 2.171). ‘A picture represents its subject from a position outside it’ (Trac. 2.173) and thus presents a ‘model’ (Trac. 2.12) of the reality of the subject. Picture, subject and reality all have the status of ‘fact’ (Trac. 2.141). Like sentences, pictures operate metonymically, signifying a part of reality/language the meaning of which is defined by the ‘facticity’ of the whole. Pictures, like sentences, are excluded from silence. So is the body.

‘If I wrote a book called The World as I Found it,’ Wittgenstein says, ‘I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could not be mentioned in that book—’ (Trac. 5.631). Or, more briefly, ‘nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye’ (Trac. 5.633). The eye, the subject, signifies (if either does in isolation from its actions) in silence. Perception is always partial and hope a product of language for in the Philosophical Investigations ‘only those who can talk’¹¹ (174). The ‘content of the experience’ of hoping, imagining, perceiving is a picture, or a description (Phil. In. 175), a ‘fact’ bounded by silence but defined not by its relation to silence but, rather, to language, to the overdetermination of images which is ‘reality,’ that of which we can speak, that which the logic of language enables us to say in a logical fashion and thus approach the base-line of semantic operations and of communication.

There are, however, what Wittgenstein calls ‘transitions’: a cry which ‘serves as a description of the inner life’ (Phil. In. 189), a ‘picture’ like the following: ‘Though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is dark. But one day man opens his seeing eye, and there is light!’ (Phil. In. 184). How this picture is to be used is ‘still obscure’ but ‘it must be explored if we want to understand the sense of what we are saying. But the picture seems to spare us this work: it already points to a particular use. This is how it takes us in’ (Phil. In. 184). Repeated inexorably, the picture seduces us into imitation, into belief, into causal connection (man opens his eye and, as a result, there is light), into imposition of power via negative displacement (light vs. darkness, man vs. woman), into ascription of power to the subject (the seeing eye which creates my world). But if, as Wittgenstein asserts, ‘in an important sense there is no subject’ (Trac. 5.631) in the operation of reporting on the body, the proliferation of records which we know as language will inevitably result in the displacement to the condition of silence of particular bodies and the particularity of individual reports. The very ‘facticity’ of Wittgenstein’s picture theory leads to mimetic reduction at the same time as it endeavors to push back against silence, to wrest particularity from abstraction for thought must be of ‘the purest crystal,’ ‘utterly simple [. . .] prior to all experience,’ appearing not as an abstraction ‘but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete, as it were the hardest thing there is’ (Phil. In. 44). Or, as Brossard puts it, ‘L’espoir selon la courbure du cristallin, d’où je tire l’actualité des mots’ (169).

‘Une répétition sans spectacle n’a aucun sens à moins qu’elle ne soit la langue en elle-même,’ says Brossard’s first epigraph, as much Wittgenstein as her second: ‘What can be said can only be said by means of a sentence, and so
nothing that is necessary for the understanding of all sentences can be said.' But 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world' (Trac. 5.6) and, as the final words of the Tractatus have it, 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (Trac. 7). The facts of a narrative, the details of setting, of geography, serve only as a framework: 'Dans le concret de l'écriture, l'abstraction continue' (127) says Brossard; abstraction toward which the text can gesture—as it does in the motif 'FEMME SKIN TRAJECTOIRE' (127)—but which can only be realized in the reader’s manipulation of the hologram, the text’s spatio-spiral image of its own processing, its own ‘readability.’ In Brossard’s novel we encounter the additional possibility of the ‘indescribable’ (190), a world long ago sold out by, as Monique Wittig puts it, ‘the great mothers who had deformed the original language.’

Along with the O motif of Les Guérillères, Wittig’s mythic originary language of ‘letters and numbers’ is absorbed into the night of Picture Theory, the night of Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, and all three intertexts emerge again in Brossard’s assertion that in the Bibliothèque Nationale, ‘les livres ne disent rien/rien au sujet des femmes qui le sont devenues, occupées toute une vie à défendre de tout leur être les droits de l’homme’ (139). Joyce’s patriarch, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, HCE, is reduced to his essence, his H an inscribed emptiness, the potential for a feminist white writing which is dominated by the hyperbolic form of the letter itself. Opposed to the hologram is this commanding Presence of the picture which has long held us captive, inscribing woman’s body in a two-dimensional picture/book which preserves ‘les mémoires d’utopie’ (89) encountered in her speech while restricting her actual body to silence, to the status of a no-thing.

But woman’s body, turning in the spiral of history which is memory—in Brossard as in Joyce, the skin itself—opens into words. To make love in Brossard is to make words for, echoing Luce Irigaray, lips and labia enclose and release language in the spiral of erotic translation (69) which names the ‘gynocortex’ (167), the synaptic resolution of light, the hologram in corporeal form. As Joycean language disseminates meaning across a complex of semantic grids, so Brossardian language disseminates across the text of Picture Theory encoded information which in the process of reconstruction aspires to become, as a hologram actually does become, a three-dimensional optical illusion. To achieve this transformation a light source is necessary: a laser beam working a mutation of Wittgenstein’s picture which, in isolation, can present only the ‘facts,’ only a two-dimensional model of ‘reality’ from which the parallax of subject and object is eliminated. For Brossard, radical transformation of woman’s reality—the creation of utopia—requires both the retention of the subject and of the immediacy and particularity of sensory experience (the textual/erotic) and the provision of a model which distances the individual, and achieves general application. As words in Picture Theory are said to have their own point of view (115), so the hologram begins with the subject and then, displacing it into the field of light, provides a model of the utopian condition.

‘Tranche anatomique de l’imaginaire’ (170), the city of glass and white light in which the reflective surfaces of skin and snow conjoin in the creation of the ‘corps générique’ (160), the hologram in Picture Theory is both the site of encoded information and of the reconstruction of that information in the form of what physicists refer to as the ‘virtual image.’ The record not of the image of the object or scene being photographed but rather of the reflected light waves themselves, the hologram as photographic transparency has the appearance of blurred dots and whorls, light traces inscribed by the light waves of the original
For more information on holography see John H. Caulfield, 'The Wonder of Holography', National Geographic 165, 3 (March 1984), 364-77 (my thanks to Evelyn Cobley for this reference). Emmett N. Leith and Juris Uptaniets present a more detailed view of the technology in 'Photography by Laser,' Scientific American, 212, 6 (June 1965), 24-35. See also Karl H. Pribram's comment that 'Holograms are the "catalysts of thought." Though they remain unchanged, they enter into and facilitate the thought process. [...] thought is a search through the distributed holographic memory for resolution of uncertainty, i.e., for acquisition of relevant information' (Languages of the Brain [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971] 370). The analogy is a common one in contemporary neurobiology.

Cf. Finnegans Wake, 455: 'Putting Allspace in a Nutshell.'

l'encres: the ink and the voice meet each other.

Ibid., 185-86.

Interview with Nicole Brossard on 'Picture Theory' by Louise Cotnoir, Lise Guevremont, Claude Beausoleil, and Hugues Corriveau, Canadian Fiction Magazine, 47 (1983), 131; translated by Luise von Flotow-Evans from La nouvelle barre du jour, 118/19 (November 1982), 177-201.

Geste va venir: The gesture is going to come.

object which, when illuminated by a laser, produce a three-dimensional image which appears to be behind the encoded transparency. Viewed from different stand-points, such an image creates the illusion of three-dimensionality.

For Brossard the hologram is, on one level, a trope of intertextuality encoding layers of centers as one transparency may contain multiple images superimposed in the course of successive exposures, each image capable of being resolved in turn without affecting the others. So Joyce's Dublin affords one such center and the elements from Ulysses and Finnegans Wake further layers. Bloom's day, 16 June 1904, becomes Claire's day, 16 May of an unspecified year, and the night world of Finnegans Wake with its theory (borrowed from Giambattista Vico) of language emerging through violence and fear becomes the night of Brossard's city. Because the hologram is metonymic (each part can reproduce the entire image) it represents—in a line which Brossard transforms from Finnegans Wake—'All space in a nutshell' (149), and equally resolves the metonymic shifts evident throughout the novel: body/dictionary, skin/memory, and so on—shifts spiralling within the synchronic time of the utopian quest with its center of abstraction at the core of the book. 'Depuis Finnegans Wake, le 16 Mai, le blanc de la scène. L'abstraction incite au futur comme à la réalité. Voir: infraction/réflexion ou hologramme. Chaque fois que l'espace me manque à l'horizon, la bouche s'entrouvre, la langue trouve l'ouverture' (26). The white scene, the core of 'abstraction vitale' (72), is the fulfillment of the hologram which does not produce a 'negative' (the image reconstructed from a hologram remains a 'positive' image), the fulfillment of the dream of language which in Brossard leads to both the erotic and the textual, the reconstructed images which are classified as 'abstraction.'

The inscription of woman in history requires that woman's voice pierce the screen of skin and, like the laser beam piercing through the optical encoding of the transparency, reconstruct a 'virtual image.' In Brossard that image becomes the holographic triumph over Wittgenstein's concept of picture as fact, a triumph anticipated in the philosopher's statement that 'A picture cannot, however, depict its pictorial form: it displays it' as the hologram displays its utopian transformation of 'fact' (Trac. 2.172). This is the moment when 'l'encres et la voix se rencontrent' (129) in the production of woman as hologram, represented in the text by a three-dimensional triangle (147), a pyramid with its spiral stairway winding down into the crypt, and equally the sign of Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle, the resolution of all women in the Wake. But it is the artist figure Shem whose skin is at issue in that epic for Shem 'wrote over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all marvovois moodmoulded cyclewheeling history.' In Picture Theory, however, history is the present moment repeated ad infinitum, light waves optically encoded for future reconstruction. To change the language is to change the picture: memory is skin, skin the dictionary of all words revealed at the moment when, on Claire's day, the love-making of two women opens the field of light, radically alters the picture, and opens the spiral chamber of the vagina which touches the 'gyno-cortex' (167). There words and sensations are encoded which in the world of 'facticity' are suppressed. There the ancient language of numbers and letters is stored, awaiting the beam of coherent light which will release it from darkness into utterance, into the warmth of tongue and lips caressing words. As Brossard has said of this 'internal' language, 'For Joyce it is Ireland, for me it is Woman.'

'Geste va venir' (166) we are told near the end of Picture Theory, the gesture a verbal hologram which, following the trajectory of a woman's skin, is resolved in the image of the 'generic body' finally inscribed in the ecosystem, a reality transcending fact and picture but nevertheless incorporating
transformations of them. Thus Dublin the city of Joycean dream is projected through the snowy reality of Brossard’s Montreal as Picture Theory projects its own conclusion through that of Ulysses and of the ‘Anna Livia Plurabelle’ chapter of Finnegans Wake. ‘A la vitesse de l’éclair et sans traduction’ (99), as Brossard’s narrator says, come Joycean words ironically (‘ironie de l’écriture’ [99]) very much in French translation. Here they are in the ‘original’: ‘Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me, elm! Night night! Telmetale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night!’ Like the conclusion of Ulysses an invocation to the night, a tale of the end of a day, this passage from the Wake is resolved in Brossard into the image at the text’s mid-point of the cortex searching for a way to understand sentences and, in the end, the projection of its triumph.

Through the alignment of Joyce with the hologram, Brossard subverts imprisonment within pictures but not without, as we have seen, first tracing the stages of captivity and release in the quest narrative which constitutes the central structure of the novel. Thus the process of theorizing about pictures in English, in an other language, in a doubly translated and traduced Wittgenstein, is necessary to the release from the bonds of repetition of codes and rituals generated by the other, by the patriarchy. Before the hologram can be enacted, before the codes of convention can be woven anew, the city itself must also be re-envisioned and its energy tapped and then typed, rewritten as woman’s body in Brossard is rewritten after millennia of patriarchal deconstruction and de/composition, and the ordinary projected through the laser of recreated language and flesh into the holographic vision.

Joyce’s Dublin becomes, then, the city whose literal existence Claire Dérive does not believe in (86), the city of night which must be transfixed by Claire’s light, clair-obscur, rendered through the hologram as ‘l’obscur clarté’ (79). Through the utopian quest, according to the narrator, a quality of emotion conducive to woman’s insertion into history will be aroused (85). Bloom’s day is, as it were, obscured through Finnegans Wake, light filtered through darkness in rejoiced chiaroscuro.

In Wittgenstein’s terms, however, the resolution is more difficult, for the pulling of the theory of pictures through the hologram appears at first to produce a kind of vaporizing effect, seeming to return us to the conclusion of the Tractatus, rejected in the later Wittgenstein:

. . . anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [. . . ; my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (Trac. 6.54.7)

But patriarchal non/sence has been too great and silence too painfully its penalty for transcendance to be an option in Brossard. So the hologram is denied its neoplatonic inclinations and refused the option of mirroring the patriarchal world. Instead the double trajectories of woman and skin are pursued by the laser of a new philosophy in the image of Wittgenstein’s assertion that, looking ‘into ourselves as we do philosophy, we often get to see [. . .] a full-blown pictorial representation of our grammar’ (Phil. In. 100-01). In this new image will the new language be born, a language this time not of pictures which hold us captive (Phil. In. 115) but of a new reality (‘A picture is a
model of reality' (Trac. 2.12) this time imaged in terms of women for 'A picture contains the possibility of the situation that it represents' (Trac. 2.203). To feel the 'grain of the voice' in words, to touch language through skin, the 'gynocortex' through the spiralling vagina, to discover ourselves not in the mirror of opposition but in the holographic meeting of woman with woman: these are the goals of Brossard's utopia. An offering of hope in a still patriarchal world, Picture Theory is an induction into the grammar of the hologram.