MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

Cultures in Webs: Working in Hypermedia with the Documentary Image. Roderick Coover. CD-ROM. Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 2003.

The Language of Wine. Roderick Coover. DVD. 50 min. Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 2005.

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Roderick Coover's *Cultures in Webs* (2003) is an important example of contemporary innovation in anthropological inquiry. It is a work of hypermedia, with image, audio, and text organized into three distinctive constellations or "essays" entitled: (1) Theory: Metaphors, Montage, and Worldmaking; (2) Practice: The Harvest; and (3) Performance: Concealed Narratives. In his introduction, Coover explains that he wishes to go beyond the "narrowing constraints of conventional narration" in favor of opening up the interpretive possibilities yielded through a fluid interchange between different media. This commitment to formal expansiveness and technological experimentation is not, however, proposed for its own sake. It is linked to a series of questions about culture, knowledge, and difference that Coover seeks to address as an integral part of his exploration of anthropological method and form.

The first part of *Cultures in Webs,* "Theory," reveals the essential contours of Coover's project. Drawing on the work of Robert Gardner (1986), Vincent Monnikendam (1995), and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1985), he articulates a case against anthropological literalism, arguing instead for a project that encompasses metaphor, montage, and the poetic. In particular, Coover uses Nelson Goodman's notion of "worldmaking" as a framework for rethinking practices of cross-cultural representation. Coover asks how might the spontaneous and largely unconscious processes of human cognition—that is, the searching out, sorting, and melding of fragments by which we make sense of the world—serve as a model for conceptualizing communication across disjunctions of time and space? Coover explores this question through an extended text that has embedded within it links to selected sequences from the films of Gardner, Monnikendam, and Minh-ha. The techniques of hypermedia enable the reader to move easily between Coover's argument and evidence, and between text, image, and sound. In this way, they foster the kind of active engagement with disparate and fragmentary materials encompassed by the author's conception of "worldmaking."

The principle of montage is central to Coover's enterprise. In place of a Bazinian aesthetic that hinges on preserving continuities and context, he argues for an editing-based approach in the style of the Russian filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. Cross-cultural representations are assembled by means of contrast, juxtaposition, layering, and dissonances of sound and image, light, color, and so on. His intention is to move away from an anthropology wedded to the descriptive, advocating in its place a more expansive, poetic endeavor. Integral to it is a break with linearity, explanation, and closure. It is perhaps not surprising that Coover cites Gardner, Minh-ha, and Monnikendam as exemplars, because they are filmmakers preeminently identified with the production of open-ended, challenging texts that disrupt the assumptions and conventions of realist forms.

The second section of *Cultures in Webs* is called "Practice." Here, Coover's photographic essay, "The Harvest," presents different facets of the annual 12-day harvesting of grapes in the village of Bouzeron in the Côte Chalonnaise. The screen is divided horizontally into four sections. At the top, working from left to right, we can view a succession of black and white photographs. Beneath but not closely attached to these images are sections of text that provide details of the harvesting process. The third portion of the screen comprises a different sort of narrative: a series of notes and fieldwork reflections. Finally, the lower part of the screen offers additional historical and cultural information that contextualizes the particular practices documented and described by Coover. Not only is the viewer invited to explore the ethnographic detail presented through the assembly of disparate materials but also he or she is asked to reflect on the different kinds of knowledge mediated through images, texts, and their various combinations.

In "Performance," the third and final part of *Cultures in Webs,* Coover sets out to examine the intersection of politics, history, and aesthetics in contemporary Ghana. He articulates his thesis through a configuration of materials that differs from the two models used in the earlier sections of the CD-ROM. "Concealed Narratives: On Performance in Ghana" is constructed through the layering of images, sounds, and text, with a series of color photographs serving as the backdrop for Coover's extended essay that charts his research journey across Ghana. Moving from the cities to the Ghanaian countryside, Coover seeks to explore the complex intertwining of the local, the national, and the global as expressed and mediated through different cultural forms: rituals, music, dance, and so on. Hence, crucial to his unfolding narrative and embedded within it are a range of additional materials—links to maps, video clips of interviews with local subjects, extracts from particular cultural performances—that are intended to invite critical, even alternative, readings to those interpretations suggested by the author.

Cultures in Webs establishes the ground for an evaluation of Coover's subsequent documentary, *The Language of Wine.* Released a couple of years later, this montage-based film (prefigured in *The Harvest*) grows out of Coover's long-term fieldwork with prominent winemakers in the villages of the Côte d'Or and Côte Chalonnaise regions of

France. The interweaving of the material and imaginative dimensions of this particular area of cultural practice is one of the hallmarks of the work. It finds expression in the visual and aural style of the film, its unusual combinations of image and sound, and in its distinctive rhythms and tempo. Coover assembles his materials into 12 short chapters. Each one takes as its point of departure a specific term used in the winemaking business: for example, *cru, soutirage, millésime,* and *elevage.* These are resonant terms. Carefully chosen by the filmmaker for their descriptive and poetic qualities, they reflect specific techniques or phases in the making of wine at the same time as they serve to evoke, in their metaphoric sense, broader historical, cultural, and existential significance.

The Language of Wine, like *Cultures in Webs,* is a composite piece: that is, it is built from discrete elements in which the process of editing is foregrounded. Meaning is generated from the relationships between parts: from the contrasts, continuities, and convergences of light, movement, color, sound, and voice. Again we find here a repudiation of the textual and filmic linearity around which cross-cultural representation has been conventionally organized. In its place, Coover seeks to assemble worlds from fragments and to involve his audience in the making of meaning. Although each chapter presents a distinctive constellation of elements, a number of themes begin to emerge and coalesce as the film unfolds over the course of 50 minutes. These include history and tradition, modernity, class, skill, and technique.

Cultures in Webs and *The Language of Wine* are a synthesis of Roderick Coover's expertise in the fields of anthropology and media arts. Given his commitment to the latter, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that he takes seriously questions concerning method and representation, but as I noted at the outset, this cannot be separated from his anthropological purpose. Indeed these two pieces of work underscore the inseparability of substantive concerns and aesthetic form. In the case of Coover's project, it is the notion of a "web" that serves as the crucial link, enabling him to bring into creative alignment the object (cross-cultural representation) and medium (hypermedia) of his inquiry.

Coover's work represents a significant new departure in anthropology. In his introductory essay to *Cultures in Webs,* Lucien Taylor describes the CD-ROM as "pioneering." It breaks not just with established forms of textual scholarship but with many of the conventions of visual anthropology (notably, ethnographic filmmaking based on events or characters and structured according to a classic linear narrative). Of course, Coover's allegiance to Gardner might not win him allies amongst the skeptics. His project, moreover, is not without problems: for example, there is perhaps more linearity in the CD-ROM than is acknowledged; there is less attention paid to sound than to image (this is especially marked in the case of *The Language of Wine*); and there is a tendency by Coover (and Taylor) to invoke an old sensory hierarchy in their use of the term *image-based knowledge* to describe the break with discursive forms. Not least it has become something of a cliché to claim montage as inherently radical as an approach. There are also questions about hypermedia itself, for it could be claimed that it is nothing more than a medium of endless distraction predicated on a consumption model of the world.

Certainly Coover's work moves anthropology in a direction that could not be more different than the one currently pursued by David MacDougall (e.g., in *SchoolScapes* [2007]). But both projects are important, raising questions about technique, knowledge, and forms of representation crucial to a discipline seeking critical engagement with contemporary social and cultural realities.

REFERENCES CITED

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Minh-ha, Trinh T.
    1985 Naked Spaces, Living Is Round. Color. 135 min. Women Make Movies. United States.
Monnikendam, Vincent
    1995 Madame Dao the Turtlelike. Tinted black and white. 90 min. Zeitgeist Films. The Netherlands.