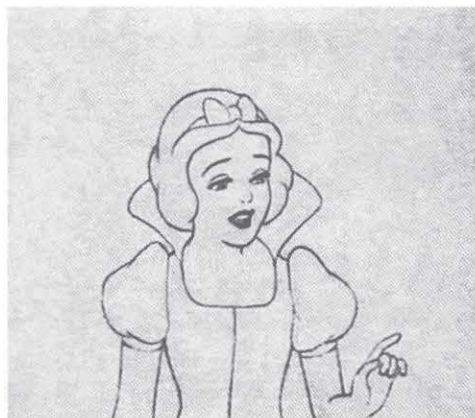




“Pierre Huyghe’s Ellipses.” *Parkett* 66 (Fall 2003): 156-161.

Pierre Huyghe's *Ellipses*

ROBERT HOBBS



Walt Disney's *Snow White* /
Schneewittchen.

dompte-regard,²⁾ a term Lacan used to refer to tamed visions as opposed to undomesticated and therefore unknown ones.

Huyghe's posters represent a crisscrossing of commercial and fine art realms as well as public and contemplative domains. To create each of these posters, Huyghe first needed to find a billboard in a locale that would serve as an adequate stage for his work. Then he photographed views of this vicinity together with actual pedestrians or actors. After that he commissioned one of his snapshots to be blown up to billboard size before having it affixed to the display panel that had originally caught his atten-

Writings on Pierre Huyghe's art have generally overlooked his posters of the mid-1990s in favor of his better known films even though the artist himself finds many similarities between these two bodies of work.¹⁾ Because they are condensed into static form, such posters as *GÉANT CASINO* (1995), *LITTLE STORY* (1995), and *CAMPUS MONTPELLIER* (1995), represent an opportunity to focus on central aspects of Huyghe's art that pertain to Jacques Lacan's thought, particularly the inassimilable real that necessarily eludes art's confinements. Huyghe's accomplishments in this area include: (1) breaking up the unity of the art object so that it dramatizes multiple perspectives and ongoing dialectics; (2) reworking the thematic of the Lacanian gaze, specifically its reliance on desire activating the *objet a*, so that it approximates the complexity of shared and overlapping imaginaries; and (3) countering the

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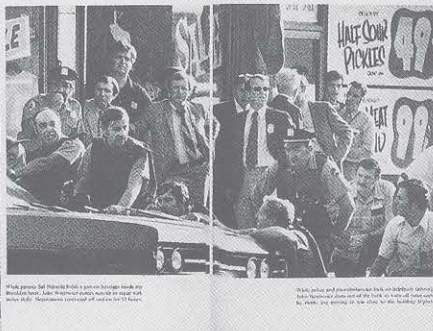
PIERRE HUYGHE, *BLANCHE NEIGE, LUCIE* / *SNOW WHITE, LUCIE*, 1997, stills from S-16/35mm film: "I have come for the casting of Snow White's voice,... It's the most enchanting doubling I've ever done." / *SCHNEEWITTCHEN, LUCIE*, Stillaufnahmen: «Ich bin wegen der Besetzung für Schneewittchens Stimme gekommen,... Es ist die schönste Synchronisierung, die ich je gemacht habe.» (COPYRIGHT: MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, PARIS & NEW YORK)

A fouled-up holdup moves step by step from threats to force to violence

The Boys in the Bank

[illegible][illegible]

The phone rings on Bushnell's desk, and the room manager, Miss Under Decker, calls out the line. Another potential client, Charles Minichowski's Christmas headquarters, is requesting the transfer of a letter to another branch. Bushnell instructs Minichowski to rephrase the letter. Instead, he suppresses the name of a letter which he has been told four months ago was an impostor of faith.



PIERRE HUYGHE, *THE THIRD MEMORY*,
1999, beta digital projection and book,
coproduction of Centre Pompidou, Musée
National d'Art Moderne, The Renaissance
Society at the University of Chicago, and
The Bohen Foundation: "The Boys in the
Bank," *Life Magazine*, 22 September 1972 /
Digibeta-Videoprojektion und Buch:
Zeitungsartikel.
Page /Seite 159: *Daily News*, 23 August
1972 / Zeitungsartikel.

tion. Once his own billboard image was in place, he photographed it in situ and made an offset, poster-sized print of it. Although the ensuing images matched formal means with subject matter in an ostensibly modernist manner, each poster's carefully composed unity begins to break down when viewers become aware of its ongoing tensions between the real, symbolic, and imaginary registers.

We can readily discern the path making up these different zones in CAMPUS MONTPELLIER. Located in a parking lot at the center of this image is a portable billboard picturing students comfortably seated on the ground. This displayed image closely resembles the park and low building behind it. However, as one examines the overall poster, one perceives differences between the grainy display and its environs that depend mostly on contrasts between blowing up a snapshot to billboard scale and making a photograph poster size. While the billboard looks etiolated, the colors of its surroundings are heightened, thus rendering problematic the mirroring of these two images by creating a gap between them. Relying on Lacan's thought, we might refer to the irreconcilable and competing inducements attracting viewers to these two scenes as rivaling vectors predicated on differentiated desires, in other words, distinct types of "object a" that activate these competing photographic schemes. Although the billboard might appear to be an advertisement for the vicinity in which it is located—a situation that would legitimize its sun-bleached appearance and tame the disparity between the nested images making up this work of art—it contains neither a logo nor a message. According to Huyghe, "the work advertises itself, yet its public nature is well assured."³) Featuring an ad without the verbal text hyping Montpellier, say, as the town of "gray matter"—a favored slogan since it is home to three universities, five schools of engineering, 60,000 students, and many research institutes—has the net effect of underscoring its status as a psychological rather than a commercial lure. According to Lacan, this kind of enticement functions as both a supplement and a lack by serving as a marker for the reality that a given dream excludes or represses.

Although the bleached billboard might represent the primary lure in CAMPUS MONTPELLIER, it operates as one element in a dialectic that includes the portion of

the picture permeated with saturated color. These opposing images of the real can be regarded as homeomorphisms, which can be typologically compared for similarities and differences—a project indirectly implied by the map pins Huyghe customarily uses to attach these posters inside their frames. Each of the two images making up CAMPUS MONTPELLIER has its own inducement to trap readers into accepting its credentials as authentic; however, both elide the Lacanian real since their pictorial schemes ultimately are only able to manifest their inability to come to terms with it. We might think of these two distinct and inadequate depictions of reality as bookends marking a nonrepresentational gap or a jump cut in a film bridging a rift between two scenes. The resulting lacuna is a key factor in Huyghe's ongoing project to underscore art's limits. Apropos this goal, Huyghe has pointed to the need to keep reality's inherent wilderness untamed:

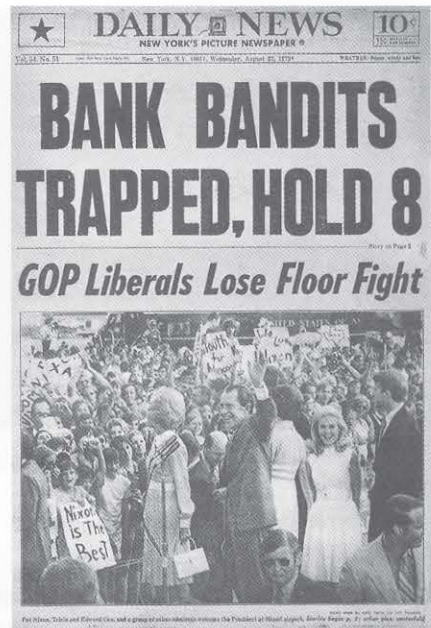
When you ground yourself in one form of knowledge, you domesticate it, you polish it. I like it when knowledge is rough, wild... To remain that way it has to feed on dialogue... Ways of thinking that don't get formatted interest me... By saying wild, I mean something for which you can't make an image. Knowledge gets smoothed out because it has to be transmitted.⁴⁾

Of course, the term "knowledge" in this statement is oxymoronic since information, once categorized as such, already belongs to either imaginary or symbolic registers and therefore already has been subdued. Huyghe's reference to the unmediated disorder and chaos of the unbearable and ultimately unknowable character of reality refers both to Lacan's ideas and their elaboration in Clément Rosset's *Le Réel et son double* and *Joyful Cruelty: Toward a Philosophy of the Real*.

Huyghe's statement suggests an understanding of a key source for Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, which analogizes vision in structuralist terms as a nonmaterial flesh that represents lines of force between exterior and interior realms.⁵⁾ The reciprocal force field between the two creates a situation in which the art object interpolates seers, i.e., it calls them into being so that we can conjecture, as did Merleau-Ponty, that it sees them. Such a dialectic is mirrored by Huyghe's art, which in turn entangles and enriches it by interpolating viewers through two competing types of "object a," as we have seen. The essential triangulation between viewers confronted with rival imaginaries helps us to understand Huyghe's assertion:

I do not direct the real in order to show it. I make an actor replay it... it is a question of creating distance, a gap between the scene which may arise and the image... Even if we are not the protagonist, we are part of the story.⁶⁾

Moving from CAMPUS MONTPELLIER, we can see how Huyghe has characterized his video projections in terms of the gap created by Lacan's symbolic and imaginary registers. L'ELLIPSE (1998) is particularly apposite since its French title literally means "jump cut" and, according to the artist, refers to the breaks in a narration that suture viewers to a film when their imaginations colonize these ellipses.⁷⁾ Using a scene from Wim Wenders' *The American Friend*, as an example, Huyghe interweaves a chiasmus between fictive and so-called real segments in the life of actor Bruno Ganz.⁸⁾ Playing the

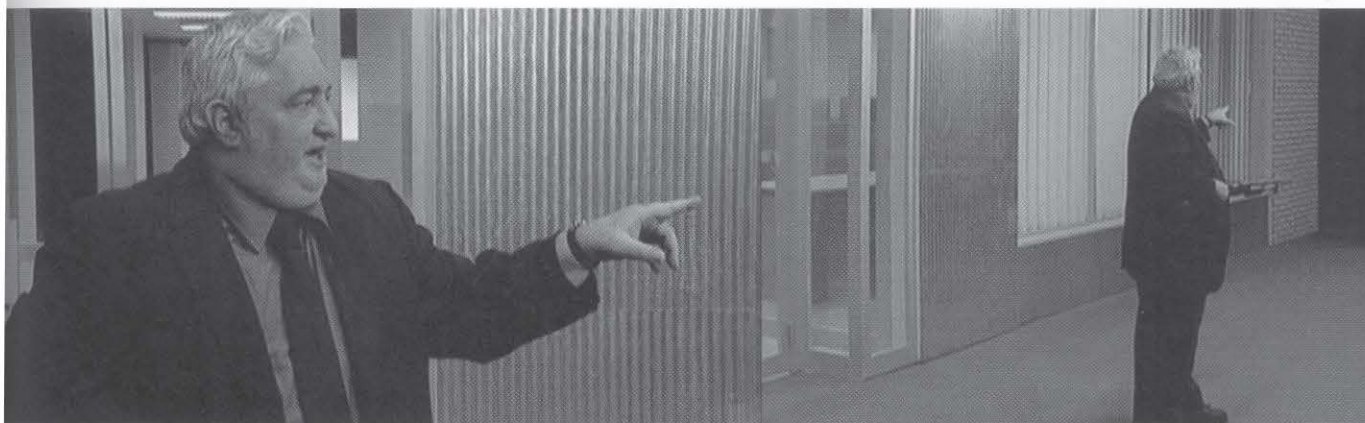




PIERRE HUYGHE, *THE THIRD MEMORY*, 1999, beta digital double projection of 9 mins. 46 secs.; coproduction of Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and The Bohen Foundation / Digibeta-Video, Zweifachprojektion, 9 Min. 46 Sek.

character Jonathan Zimmermann in Wenders' 1977 film, *Ganz in Paris* in 1998 is directed by Huyghe to act out in real time a jump cut between the two Paris locales appearing in the earlier work by simply walking from one to the other. Conceived as a mini-play in three acts, Huyghe's film projection begins on the left screen with Wenders' chronicle of Zimmermann, a Hamburg framer and restorer suffering from a rare blood disease, checking into a Japanese hotel in Paris. After receiving a telephone call in his hotel room, Zimmermann enters an elevator, and at that point Wenders cuts to the gangster's residence. In the interim between the elevator and this apartment, Huyghe creates eight minutes of footage, showing a much older Ganz crossing a bridge between the two locations in Wenders' film. This segment is projected on the center of the screen while the left and right sections are left blank. When Ganz's walk is completed, Huyghe concludes his piece by projecting the remaining portion of Wenders' jump cut on the right. Because Ganz's character dies at the end of the German film, there is no logical explanation for subsequently resuscitating him in Huyghe's piece other than as a ghost haunting the interstices constituting the real in this work.

The disparity between these two cinematic views, according to Huyghe, has a source in Roland Barthes' definition of obtuse meaning. In his essay, "The Third Meaning"⁹⁾ this critic ponders the formation of a more complex signification that emphasizes the signifier above any obvious connections that it might suggest with well-established signifieds. In this self-reflexive communiqué, described by Barthes as an impertinent mask that "calls attention to itself as false yet nonetheless refuses to abandon the 'good faith' of its referent,"¹⁰⁾ the signifier is stimulated and disturbed without being able to achieve the climax of a consensual signified. Although Barthes connects the obtuse meaning to a cinematic essence designated "filmic," which is epitomized by the film still, Huyghe emendates both Barthes' obtuse meaning and its connection with the filmic by positing the jump cut as their clearest manifestation in film. This device fulfills Barthes' criterion of being depleted and yet not emptied, becoming "the very form of an emergence, of a fold (even a crease)" that becomes "the representation [in a film] that cannot be represented."¹¹⁾



The irreconcilable levels between Wenders' fictive, yet gritty realm and Huyghe's documentary one operate in a similar manner to the nested images in *CAMPUS MONTPELLIER*. Both set up an internal dialogue—a third or obtuse meaning—at the same time that they provide viewers with compelling and competing lures for accepting one account as either a supplement for the other or a deficit of it. While both narratives champion different sets of conventions for reality, none comes close to achieving this state since all are carefully scripted scenes. Rather than a weakness, their strength as works of art resides in their inability to come to terms with reality. Both Huyghe's *CAMPUS MONTPELLIER* and his *L'ELLIPSE* configure art in terms of complex and layered cultural nets, predicated on ongoing dialogues incapable of ensnaring the real.

1) Jan Estep, "Action! An Interview with Pierre Huyghe," *New Art Examiner*, Vol. 27, no. 10 (July/August 2000), p. 32.

2) Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 105.

3) Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Pierre Huyghe are from a telephone conversation between the author and Huyghe on September 18, 2002.

4) Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Pierre Huyghe: Collaborating on Utopia," *Flash Art*, no. 225 (July–September 2002), pp. 2, 5.

5) Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 130ff, 139.

6) *Pierre Huyghe*, ex. cat. (Munich: Kunstverein München; Zurich: Kunsthalle Zürich; in co-production with Secession, Vienna, and Le Consortium, Dijon, 2000), p. 177.

7) Estep, op. cit., p. 32.

8) Originally Huyghe had wanted to use Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow Up* because it presented so elegantly and concisely the problem of photography's limits in the face of the real, but he was unable to find the right constellation of historic traces to support his use of the jump cut.

9) No doubt Barthes' characterization of the third meaning inspired Huyghe's *THE THIRD MEMORY* (2000), which dramatizes the extent to which John Wojtowicz's own recollection of his attempted bank robbery is indebted to Al Pacino's characterization of him in Sidney Lumet's film *Dog Day Afternoon*.

10) Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning" in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1985), p. 41.

11) *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 59.