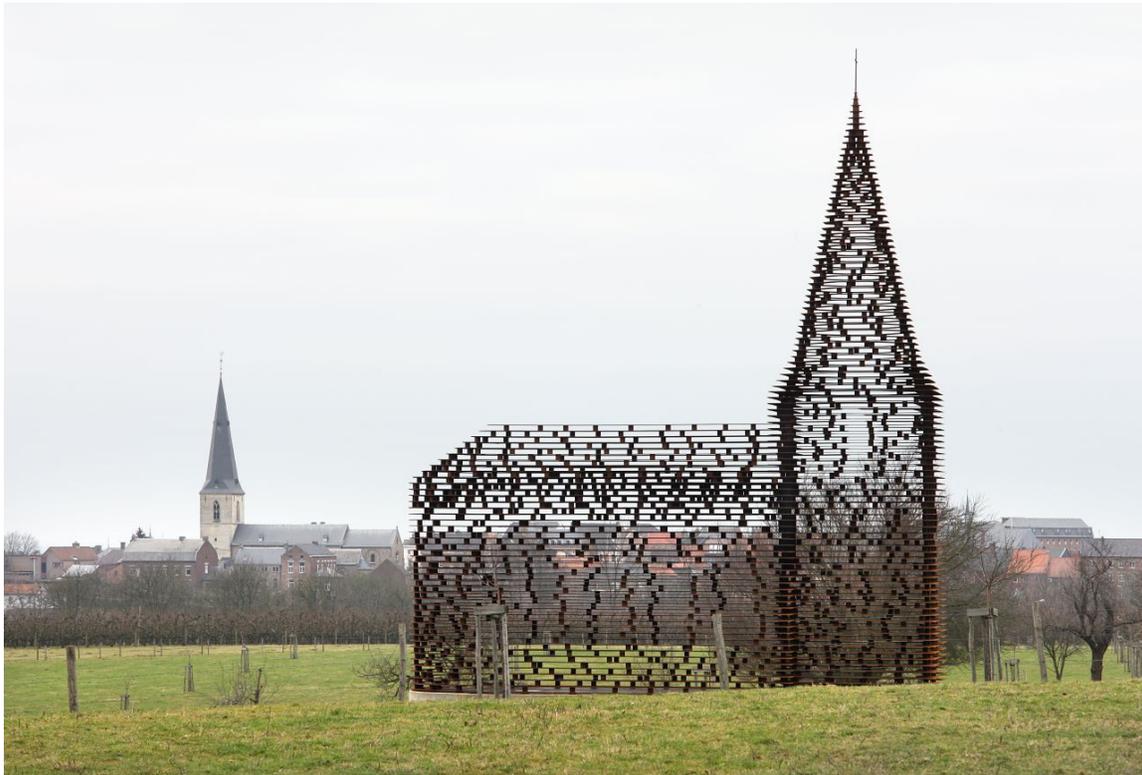


Comparative Literature 9699A: Fall 2016
Professor James Miller

Reading between the Lines: Hermeneutics and Historicism

Fall Term 2016
Tuesdays, 9:30am-12:20pm
Weldon Library 107

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1. Course Description

If the design for this course could be mapped onto a visible object, it would be the Belgian installation "Reading between the Lines" (see above) designed by architects Pieterjan Gijs and Arnout Van Vaerenbergh for a rural site along a cycle route outside the town of Borgloon in Limburg. Constructed out of steel and concrete in 2011, this weighty structure looks paradoxically light and airy — as if it were a line drawing of the solidly constructed Church of Saint Denis in Gotem pointing skyward behind it. Visible through the permeable walls of the installation is its immediate environment: the solid brick buildings on the outskirts of town, the parallel church with its anagogic steeple, the trees and fences and fields of the surrounding countryside.

The metaphoric title of the installation establishes an obvious parallel between the architectural ground of postmodern historicism and the textual domain of hermeneutics. The vertically stacked steel bars of the fantastic object correspond to the lines of an imaginary allegorical text with a see-through literal level revealing a host of referents beyond it. The prospects glimpsed through the ecclesiastical simulacrum provide the otherwise enigmatic "architext" with a readable historical context, a certain preexisting solid reality, to which its structural outlines evidently refer and within which its cultural meaning may be determined. Of course the expansive meanings of this postmodern artwork (who looks for one meaning for anything anymore?) are not easy to pin down. As an empty deconstructed form of a church, without any ecclesiastical functions or furnishings, the insubstantial art-object strangely draws attention to itself *against* the historic backdrop of Borgloon. It seems to stand outside the social and spiritual life of the town. The relation of its concrete foundations to concrete reality proves as enigmatic as the relation of its steel tracery to the imaginary traces of ideal form on matter. It is set up to provoke metaphysical breakdown and epistemological bewilderment. If it is an allegory of reading, or of semantic reference, the interpreter of the work is faced with a dilemma: if its design is accepted as a sacred space, then it loses its postmodern openness and closes in on itself as a cenotaph to the anagogic mysticism rejected by modernity; conversely, if its design is read ironically as a risible commemoration of the invisible domain towards which church steeples historically pointed, then its very visibility in the landscape loses its point, its moral gravitas, its artistic *éclat*.

"Reading between the Lines" is an interpretive practice (familiar enough to students of Comparative Literature) which deserves critical attention precisely because what it obviously means, or seems to mean, often goes without saying. As the Belgian installation eloquently suggests, text makes no sense without context. But a thoughtful reading of it as an historical and environmental intervention also suggests the reverse: context makes no sense without text.

In this course, we shall examine the historical origins and interpretive consequences of this circularity. Just as Gijs Van Vaerenbergh (as the designers of the see-through "church" call their company) draw serious attention — with devious levity — to the Gestalt interaction between figure and ground, so we shall foreground the traditional allegorical function of the text, with its parallel lines and figures of speech, against a conceptually postmodern semantic environment with an expansive range of prepositionally prefixed referents in addition to context: e.g. subtext, pretext, intertext, surtext, urtext, hypertext, paratext, metatext, transtext, and architext.

When and why did these semiotic particles arise at the metaphysical event horizons of the textual universe? If such extratextual referents are what a reader must see (in order to read) "between the lines," then a course about them will necessarily become an inquiry into the close relation between hermeneutics and historicism. Our line of inquiry will follow a chronological sequence of interpretive problems relevant to the old practice of what the New Critics called "close reading." The problems to be addressed are three: (1) the unruly expansiveness of figurative signification; (2) the perplexing circularity of hermeneutics; and (3) the haunting persistence of anagogy. Readings for the course will be drawn from a wide range of authors who have provided intellectual direction to the horizons of meaning behind and beyond the see-through church: Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Mazzoni, Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Gadamer, de Man, Auerbach, Frye, Jameson. Participants will be encouraged to apply their theoretical understandings of the hermeneutic circle to the practice of close

reading: first, through the cumulative interpretation of a single set text read in multiple contexts by everyone in the group; and second, through critical glossing of optional texts (from any era) relevant to each student's emergent field of research or prospective thesis topic.

2. Assignments / Grade Breakdown

1. Critical Essay (20-25 pages).....60%
2. Oral Presentation in class (30 minutes).....30%
To be scheduled in weeks 4-13
3. Respondent's Remarks (10 minutes).....10%
To be scheduled in weeks 4-13

3. Schedule of Readings

WEEK ONE: September: The Proliferation of Extra-textual Referents
Readings: *Inferno* 10 [handout]

Problem #1: The Unruly Expansiveness of Figurative Signification

WEEK TWO: September: The Literalist / Allegorist Debate
Readings: Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*

WEEK THREE: September: Hierarchies of Meaning
Readings: Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [Quaestio 1, 9-10]

WEEK FOUR: October: Allegoresis as Poesis
Readings: Dante, *Convivio* II, *Epistola* X

WEEK FIVE: October: Icastic and Phantastic Imitation
Readings: Mazzoni, *Della difesa della Comedia*

Part #2: The Perplexing Circularity of Hermeneutics

WEEK SIX: October: Defining the Hermeneutic Circle

Readings: Scheiermacher, *Outline of the 1819 Lectures [Hermeneutics]*

WEEK SEVEN: October:

Reading Week

WEEK EIGHT: October: Transcending the Hermeneutic Circle

Readings: Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

WEEK NINE: November: Expanding the Hermeneutic Circle

Readings: Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

WEEK TEN: November: Breaking the Hermeneutic Circle

Readings: de Man, "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism"

Part #3: The Haunting Persistence of Anagogy

WEEK ELEVEN: November: Metatextuality

Readings: Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

WEEK TWELVE: November: Intertextuality

Readings: Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*

WEEK THIRTEEN: December: Transtextuality

Readings: Gérard Genette, *The Architext: an Introduction.*