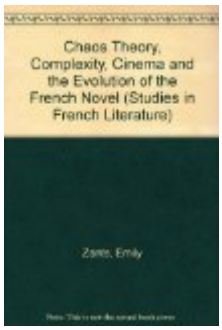
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emily Zants. *Chaos Theory, Complexity, Cinema, and the Evolution of the French Novel.* Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996. ii + 391 pp. $109.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7734-8789-5.



Reviewed by Gaetano DeLeonibus

Published on H-Film (April, 1997)

Emily Zants's thesis is that, since the eighteenth century, the modern French novel--in its attempt to undermine the social hierarchical power structure ("first simply to destroy it, later suggesting other forms of order by the very form of the critique itself" [p. 6])--has been evolving toward the cinematic by developing "techniques and structures that attempt to juxtapose images and words to escape the linearity of language" (p. ii). Zants explains that the cinematic, which in film she defines as "the tendency to use techniques that engender a sense of spatial and temporal simultaneity, whether via montage and fragmentation, doublings and parallel editing, flashbacks and metaphors or spatio-temporal enlargement" (p. 5), implies, in the modern novel, an active participation on the part of the reader. Forced to assume the role of a "voyeur," s/he becomes engaged in "a present experience," and must learn to compensate for the fragmentary narrative quality of the novel by developing the ability to "juxtapose causally unrelated images" (p. 5).

Unlike the traditional novel or the "cinema of quality" (cinema primarily concerned with entertainment during the 1930s and 1940s) which, in the telling of a story, inevitably predicts the outcome of events by reifying in the reader's or viewer's mind generally accepted ideas, the modern French novel since Diderot, Zants argues, has aimed to suspend the reader's usual frame of reference prescribed "by that very hierarchically-oriented society on which language itself is dependent for its meaning" (p. 2). The modern novel thus is a precursor of the cinematic film (exemplified by Bresson's work) in that it seeks to redirect the attention of the reader away from the subject matter to "how" it is treated.

Modern artists came to the realization that in order to change the power structure one had to change "'the way' people think" (p. 4). The "how" versus the "what" approach felicitously echoes, for Zants, the thought process behind current chaos and complexity theories which are similarly interested in the "way things or people relate" (p. 4), and provides her with the theoretical inspiration and framework for her reassessment of the cinematic potential of eight major French novels: Diderot's ***The Nun***, Choderlos de Laclos's ***Danger-***

ous Liaisons, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Zola's *Nana*, Proust's *Swann's Way*, Bernanos's *Mouchette*, and Duras's *The Lover*.

For her theoretical inspiration and framework, Zants relies essentially upon James Gleick's *Chaos* (1987) and Stuart Kauffman's *The Origins of Order: Self-Organization and Selection in Evolution* (1993). Chaos and complexity or non-linear dynamic systems theories--the new models of analysis in the biological sciences--she believes, have been convincingly used since the sixties to explore varied domains of thought, and thus there exists an established precedent that warrants her review of French literary history in light of these theories. According to this field of thought, chaos should not be conceived as proceeding according to chance, but rather as processes, the behavior of which can be determined by precise laws. Finally, chaos and complexity theories have revolutionized Darwin's concept of evolution, based on linear selection determined by the fittest, with two ideas which have had an impact on aesthetic evolution: self-organization, the tendency to resist "mutation of certain forms," and feedback, which, frustrating linear development, brings "to bear a whole surrounding landscape of elements that may prevent optimization or even change" (p. 2). What this impact has been, Zants's analysis fails to establish in a clear and precise way.

By focusing on the ideas of self-organization and feedback in the evolutionary processes expressed in the novel and in its cinematic adaptation(s), Zants hopes to apply these biological notions of emergent forms to the study of both the development of French literary tradition and the relationship of an emergent art form, film, to an older form of expression, the novel. The juxtaposition of these two genres is justified, according to the author, because (unlike other genres bound by formal rules) the novel and cinema are less bound to fixed forms of expression:

They follow a pattern similar to what biologists know as the Cambrian explosion, a period when multicellular organisms multiplied profusely. During this geological time there was a sudden burgeoning of complex forms following eon upon eon of sameness. Similarly, the novel came into its prime only after the French Revolution, after centuries of monarchical rule, falling into a vacant ecology, a space where no rules for self-definition had yet developed to replace the social values that collapsed with the Monarchy (pp. 16-7).

Zants proposes to schematize the "universal laws" governing the cinematic in both the modern French novel and its filmic renditions.

Zants supports her theoretical premise about the modern French novel with an analysis of two scenes whose language exemplifies what she holds to be, on the one hand, the undermining of the language of power structure on the part of the modern artist, and on the other, the cinematic quality of the novel. Taken from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the first scene, at the Agricultural Fair, juxtaposes two causally unrelated discourses of seduction--Rodolphe's amorous phrases to Emma are intertwined with the councilor's flattery of the farmers--in a way which should leave little doubt in the reader's mind as to the true nature of the bourgeois language of power.

The second scene is taken from Proust's *Swann's Way* and features a conversation between a park-keeper and the restroom maid, known as the "marquise," overheard by the narrator while waiting for his grandmother to come out of the restroom. The "marquise" appellation as well as the snobbery of the maid, an attitude which she assumes due to her intimate knowledge of her clientele (the regular restroom visitors), demand that the reader juxtapose in his/her mind this chitchat with that occurring in aristocratic salons reported earlier by the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past*. Both of these dialogues criticize the power structure by pointing to the cliched or frozen form of its language, as well

as by putting into question the hierarchical cultural system that supports it and with which the reader is familiar.

Zants claims that all cinematic renderings (Minelli's and Chabrol's *Madame Bovary* and Schlondorff's *Swann in Love* in particular) of these two scenes and novels have failed because they tend to neglect the cinematic quality of the novels, either by focusing on a unique subject/linear plot (Emma's story), or by leaving out the novels' inherent and complex critique of the power structure.

After listing the various principles constituting the evolution of an emergent order (e.g., building blocks, levels of complexity, coevolution, exploitation vs. exploration, unpredictability, iterations and patterns, strange attractors, the fractal or self-similar, avalanches and phase transitions, critical limits and frozen forms, adaptive walks), as well as the similarities (e.g., fragmentation and montage, doublings and parallel editing, and spatio-temporal enlargement) and differences (e.g., limitations of verbal and visual images, narrative, continuity vs. discontinuity, signifier vs. signified, character, and time in the novel vs. present in film) between the two media in her exhaustive introduction, Zants systematically applies these principles to both the modern novels she has selected and their film adaptation(s).

In a case-study fashion, she opens each of eight chapters with a brief pondering on the "Reasons for Adaptation(s)," and quickly moves on to an analysis of the "Characteristics of the Author's World," the particular author's "Techniques," and "The Cinematic Nature of the Novel." Next, she focuses on the particular director's "Adaptation of the Novel," followed by a "Comparison of Structures Between the Film and the Novel," an assessment of the "Success and Failure" of the adaptation(s), and finally an appraisal of the "Cinematic Potential" of the particular novel, that is its contribution to the tradition of the cinematic she perceives in the modern French novel.

Zants's impetus for this study derives directly from her teaching experience: "This study began as an exploration of the tendency by younger generations to replace the reading of a novel by the viewing of its film adaptation. How do you explain to a visual world the literary experience as opposed to the cinematic? What do you seek and find in one that you don't in the other?" (p. i). Indeed, the author's analysis raises interesting and insightful questions and explores ways of seeing that should broaden the reader's perspective, making this a valuable book for both the teacher and the advanced student of French literature and/or film. Both teacher and student can learn about the evolution of the modern French novel, its social and cultural impact as a genre, its contribution to the new emergent art form of the twentieth century, cinema, and the intimate, but complex, relationship between the modern French novel and cinema, with particular regard to the active role assumed for the reader/viewer.

Several other remarks, however, are in order at this point on the validity of the extent of Zants's scientific approach, on the participation of her study in the critical conversation regarding film adaptation of classic novels, and finally on the context in French intellectual history of moments of attraction and repulsion between scientific theory and literary criticism.

Zants's theory of analysis appears to have metaphorical dimensions in her own writing. Her book reads too much like a science textbook (and we know how often textbooks tend to be revised), using too much scientific terminology, and offering too many definitions of terminology--which tend to be categorical in nature--that may turn out to be cumbersome for the majority of her potential readers. Even though she might have been inspired to reach her interpretations of these texts by her familiarity with chaos and complexity theories, her analysis is strong enough to stand on its own and the scientific inspiration behind it did not need to be explicitly laid out in textbook fash-

ion. Instead, Zants could have offered her reader a two- to three-page prologue that presented in general terms the source of her inspiration, pointing interested readers toward further discussions of chaos and complexity theory.

Objections could also be raised to Zants's strict reliance on patterns and her search for universal laws. This *parti pris* leads her, despite extensive analysis, to discover only one successful film adaptation of a novel, Bresson's adaptation of Bernanos's *Mouchette*. It seems to this reader that the illustration of universals should include more than one example of a film that successfully follows universal patterns and laws. While, as I have stated earlier, her analysis is strong and offers much food for thought, it does not seem to argue convincingly for a notion of the universal.

Nor does her study acknowledge either the existence of other studies that have discussed the issue of film adaptation of French literature, whether in France or in America, or how her particular analysis contributes to or differs from those studies. For instance, one that comes to mind is Andre Cornand's 1987 article "A propos de l'adaptation" (in *Image et son: la revue du cinema* [3: 1987]). According to Cornand, the main issue debated when discussing the cinematic rendition of a great literary classic in France is whether a film should offer a "reproduction" (the faithful adaptation of a novel or play, the aim of which is to provide the viewer with the familiar grounds of the literary patrimony), a "translation" (the adaptation which, through cinematic equivalencies and literal transposition, attempts to recapture the particular literary style of an author in a more contemporary setting), or a "creation" (the revolutionary adaptation which opts for the "auteur"'s personal interpretation by restructuring the original text). This book would have been stronger had it taken a more active role in inserting its discourse within contemporary critical conversations about film and literature.

Finally, while Zants does provide an historical context for using chaos and complexity theories outside the domain of biological inquiry, she does not ask herself how a scientific approach to literary criticism might fit into the greater context of French intellectual history. Since the French Revolution, science (which for centuries had suffered under the yoke of the Church) has assumed a more dictatorial role in modern and postmodern thought. In fact, it is fair to say that the tables have been completely turned and that science or scientific theory has shamelessly mimicked its former oppressor in dealing with other domains of thought in modern times. Numerous are the historical instances when scientific theory has been called upon to rationalize literature--an evershifting "organism" of signs--or literary history (Sainte-Beuve, Taine, Renan, Brunetiere, fin-de-siecle racist and nationalist literary critics). Zants does not make reference to this tradition. Her study would have been enriched by a recognition not only of its place in this tradition, but also of an interesting paradox: Zants uses biological theory to elect Proust as the author who best incorporates Henri Poincare's "formulas for the mathematical study of non-linear dynamic systems"--formulas which led to the formulating of chaos and complexity theories in the 1960s--yet it is Proust who in "Contre Sainte-Beuve" repudiated Sainte-Beuve's "histoire naturelle des esprits," a biographical genre of literary criticism, modelled on early nineteenth-century biological theories.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-film

Citation: Gaetano DeLeonibus. Review of Zants, Emily. *Chaos Theory, Complexity, Cinema, and the Evolution of the French Novel.* H-Film, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=970