

Electronic Book Review

"The Two Ulmers in e-Media Studies: Vehicle and Driver," Craig Saper

There's an irreducible gap between replicator and vehicle, between genotype and phenotype, between software instructions and hardware implementation: in short, between the ideality of a repeating informational pattern, and the contingency of any particular material embodiment. (Shaviro, 2003)

Lesson one

In the penultimate chapter of *Applied Grammatology* (1985), Gregory Ulmer describes the common reading of Sergei Eisenstein's biography in terms of an opposition between the early and later works. In the earlier works, Eisenstein experimented with intellectual montage, picto-ideographic presentation, and the use of formal matching strategies to elicit specific ideological responses among his ideal audience. In the later works, and under the explicit threat from Stalinist censors and thugs, his work has a realist cast and resembles Hollywood movies in both form and content. Counter to the prevailing sentiment in film studies, Ulmer reads the later work in terms of the earlier work to both confound the apparent opposition and to suggest a model for applied grammatology.



Ulmer's reading resembles Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1974), a re-reading of a Realist story to recover a visual and semantic montage of the fragments with which the story emerges. Ulmer re-reads Eisenstein's last completed film as a picto-ideographic (visual semantic) montage.

Lesson two: modeling

My own work, in *Artificial Mythologies* (1997), used a similar strategy to read Roland Barthes' earliest work on semiology and cultural mythologies as if it were written after his last work, *Camera Lucida* (1981) that focused on the absolutely particular that resists culture. Of course, most critics had agreed that the later works, after *S/Z*, moved Barthes's concerns away from the grand meta-narrative explanations of cultural meanings' machinations and toward an apparently phenomenological impressionism. Ulmer's contribution to the myth of the two Barthes was 'Fetishism in Roland Barthes's Nietzschean Phase.' My interpretation of the earlier sober demythologies, as if performed by the later fetishistic hedonist, suggests that theorists perform themselves the first time as tenor (deeply embedded meaning in the lineage of teacher, shaman, analyst), the second as vehicle (style, presentation, picto-ideographic, and performance). It stages the relationship among the various moments of authorship as a series of signifiers. As Jacques Derrida writes, 'There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language' (Derrida, 1976, 7).

Lesson three: Performance

Recent computer-assisted scholarship on Shakespeare's plays demonstrated that his later plays borrowed vocabulary, syntax, and style from the early plays. As he was writing the later plays, he was an actor in his earlier plays. One could make a similar claim about Ulmer's work in relation to his own performances. His videos, like *Reading Reading TV on TV* (1987), in which a Professor character claims that a sinkhole in Gainesville, Florida (Devil's Millhopper) is Shakespeare's Hamlet, performed himself as a character talking about the function of the unconscious (the ghost). Shakespeare is the model of writing by recovery and performance, Ulmer the model for reading (recognizing the metaphoric character of language in its vehicle and tenor) as abreaction and tele-performance:

This giant sinkhole (500 feet wide, 120 feet deep) was formed when the roof of an underground limestone cavern collapsed. The cool environment allows growth of unique lush vegetation... (MobilTravelGuide.com)



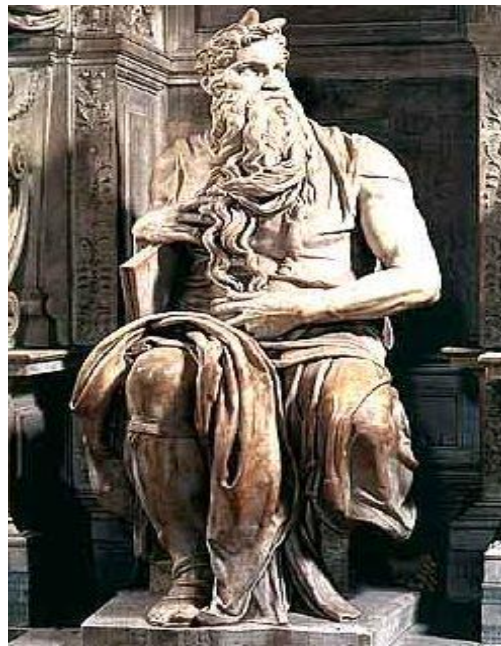
How does one analyze the essential character and meaning of an important and influential thinker and theorist? How does one analyze Greg Ulmer? In this analysis, how can one use figures, picto-ideographic objects and sounds, and intellectual montage?



Lesson four: Structuring Absence

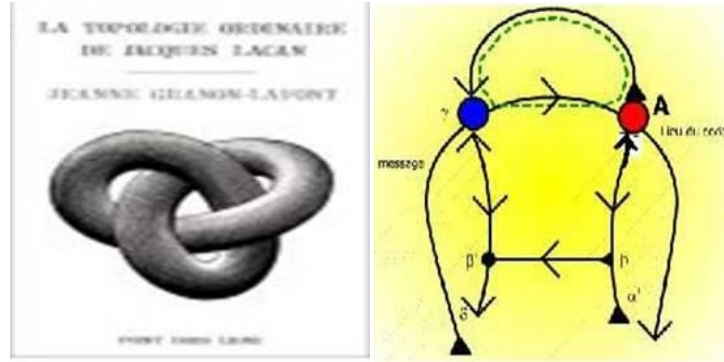
Using intellectual montage's production strategies, Ulmer can function as a trope - a picto-ideo-graphic figure. In fact, Ulmer offers a guide and demonstration of this strategy in his early work on Jacques Lacan's seminar space. Like the essay in this volume by Jon McKenzie, my story begins with a lunch meeting with Professor Ulmer. We had organized an independent study around lunch - philosophy over lunch - borrowing a Continental way of knowing (but walking to the local sub shop). It was our version of Lacan's seminars.

Applied grammatology uses psychoanalytic practices, including the notion of a structuring absence or unconscious, to challenge the metaphysics of presence and the self-conscious subject (the tenor). Ulmer suggests that one could retain the structure of Lacan's presentational strategies 'while abandoning its reference' or tenor (Ulmer 1985: 189). This strategy depends on what Ulmer calls double inscription that draws on both conscious and unconscious machinations, scientific and poetic approaches, in one operation. Now, though, the tenor does not dominate and force the poetic into effacement. One of the key works on the application of psychoanalysis to culture is Freud's study of Michelangelo's Moses. Freud carefully articulates the possible meanings of the figure's posture especially in reference to how the fingers grasp the beard. From the beard, Freud draws conclusions about the structuring absence of the meaning of the figure - that is, what Moses is looking at is not portrayed. We have only the turned head and the grasp of the beard to guide us about what Moses' gaze sees (and how what he sees forms his attitude, character, and, ultimately, his identity).



Lesson five: Very Hungry Caterpillar (Metamorphosis Over Lunch)

Lacan's use of knots to explain psychoanalysis and identity formation resembles how young children learn about culture through word play, allegory, and figurative play. Ulmer references Lacan's discussion of these literal and figurative knots to discuss the performative aspects of applied grammatology.



Eric Carle's book about Walter the Baker uses the knots of the pretzel to create an allegory about culture, creativity born under the sign of the negative (the cat's spilt milk), and the relation between naming and identity. Ulmer, especially in his earlier works from the 1980s like his essay on Theory as a hobby, draws explicitly on children's workbooks (including visual images) and the knots used to describe the formation of identity. The identity of Ulmer may also depend on applying the knot logic to his more recent works that he employs in his early work on applied grammatology. Here is the description of an important text in early literacy education:

From Publishers Weekly

From the author of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* comes the story of a baker who invents the pretzel. Carle's whimsical, frenetic collages seem fresh from the oven, even though they were first published 25 years ago. Ages 4-8.

Book Description

Walter the Baker is famous for his breads, rolls, cookies, tarts, and pies. The Duke and Duchess especially love his warm sweet rolls, delivered fresh to their castle every morning. But, one day the cat spills the milk, and Walter is forced to serve the Duke and Duchess rolls made with water. After one bite the Duke throws down his roll in disgust and summons Walter to the castle. He threatens to banish the baker unless he can take the same dough and make a good-tasting roll that the rising sun can shine through three times. Will Walter succeed in his task, or will he have to leave his town forever?

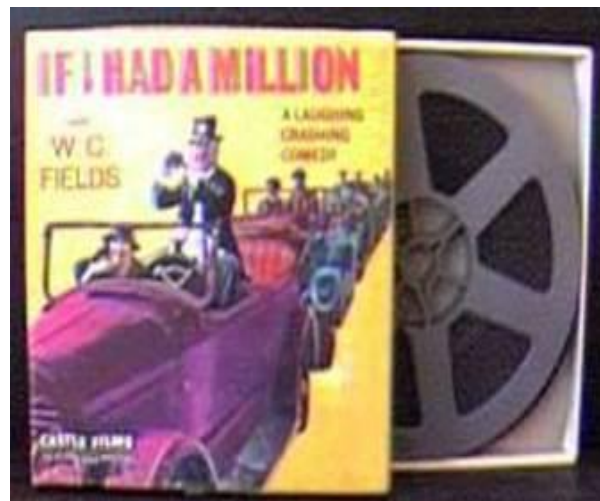
This Pretzel logic is born from the literal name of the father. Ulmer in a number of his works from the late 1980s, especially in the video *Reading Reading on TV on TV*, discusses the importance of his father's name, Walter, and its connection to Walter Benjamin. He also talks about the need to leave his Montana town even as he takes his driving of his father's International Harvester with him (figuratively as he studies Comparative Literature). Eric Carle's tale about the invention of the pretzel includes a glossary and more information about how the invention depended on a type of object-word play. The parallel story, drawn from folk tales, of its name and shape helps highlight its importance to the Ulmer figure. The shape, according to one tale, was produced by a monk in the sixth century. The monks gave out the pretzels as a reward for children; the shape is based on the arms crossed in the chiasmic shape during a type of prayer in which one crosses the arms and grabs the opposite shoulder (chiasma is the term for metaphoric figuration as well as the crossed keys symbol for Heaven). To get a sense of how that type of prayer looks like the figure of a pretzel, one should cross the arms in this fashion. The three holes stand for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Lacan translates these figures, in his knots, into the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, and Ulmer takes Lacan's pretzel reading and applies it to the reader's context (Walter, Ulmer leaving home, and the trace or gram). The name itself started as a little reward (Italian: *prestiola*). That little reward, or morsel or figuratively the gram, takes the name *Brezel*, derived from Latin *bracchiātus*, "having branches," itself from *bracchium*, "branch, arm." Another tale recounts how a King accused a baker of larceny and demanded that the baker produce a pastry through which the sun could shine through three times. The Baker ingeniously made three holes in the pretzel to avoid the punishment. Of course, the tale of a little reward also connects to the allegory of the Hungry Ghost found in many religions. For example, in Ancient Rome, the hungry ghosts of a family's ancestors figured in the festival of Lemuria (a name that Ulmer makes use of in many of his works since *lemur* is an acronym for *ulmer*); it was the duty of the *pater familias* to appease the *larvæ* of his ancestors with an offering of beans. In the Carle book, the name pretzel comes from the phrase, 'Pray tell us,' which the King asks the baker, 'Pray tell us, what do you call this thing?' And the baker, thinking quickly about what to say, makes a homophone from the phrase and answers: pretzel. The motivation for the invention of the pretzel was the cat (who drank the milk), and likewise Ulmer has a similar motivation. Ulmer's later works focus much on the acronym CATt, as a mnemonic device to describe an *inventio*: Comparison, Analogy, Theory, and tale. It becomes in condensed and figurative form the explanation of his entire method. The *inventio* of the pretzel wisdom leads to the production of a staging of the Mago.



mago, -a m, f (hechicero) wizard, magician
el mago de Oz, the Wizard of Oz
los Reyes Magos, the Wise Men

Lesson six: Vehicles (and identity)

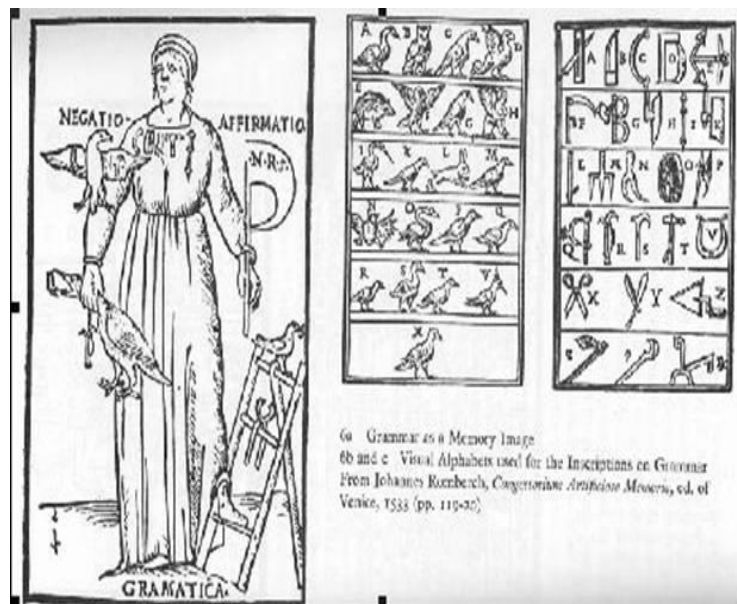
In the star-studded movie, *If I Had A Million* (1932), W. C. Fields as Rollo La Rue and Alison Skipworth as Emily, a pair of old-time second-rate actors, inherit one million dollars from a wealthy man who wants to give away his money to unlikely losers. Rollo buys a fleet of second-hand cars, and has the entire fleet driven behind him as he drives around town smashing into one bad driver after another. Then, with his vehicle a wreck, he gets into the next car and soon finds someone else smashing into the latest car.



The vehicle out of control became one of Fields' most loved bits. In his hit movie, *The Bank Dick* (1940), Fields, as incompetent bank guard Egbert Souse, is taken hostage by bank robbers who force him to drive the getaway vehicle. Eventually his nervous, manic, and out of control driving drives the robbers to insanity.

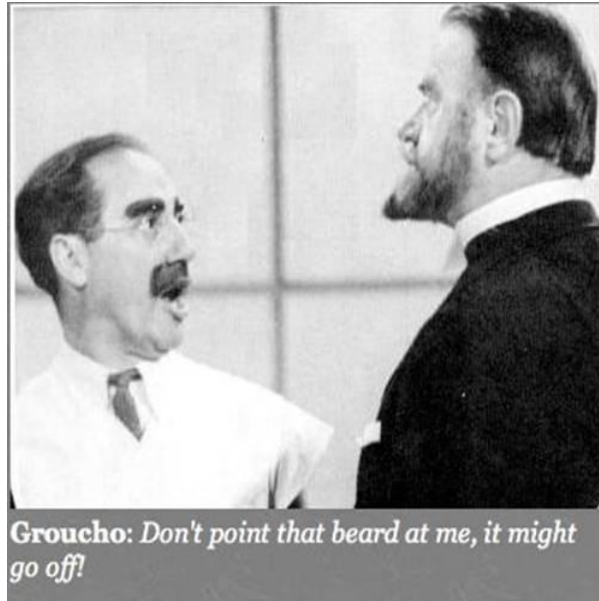
The sense of hilarious and excessive destruction and loss, in a Potlatch fashion, as a fitting corollary to wealth and accumulation, enacts Ulmer's theory of car accidents using George Bataille's theory of potlach and the accursed share. The vehicle, in the trope of identity, gets away from the driver only to find another vehicle and another in a long line of signifiers. The film enacts in picto-ideographic form, Lacan's theory of identity.

Lesson seven: Toward a Post(e)-Pedagogical Grammar



The Ulmers exist side-by-side in a grammatical structure - one he discusses at length in *Applied Grammatology*. Some of his work, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, sought to reinvent the modern essay, while much of his more recent work, especially in the late 1990s through 2005, has a Swiftian, or ancient, style of imitation. The later works use the form of the grammar or composition textbook, while the earlier works study the allegory of the explicitly knife wielding woman (Grammatica). What if these two FIGURES - each important in their own right - talked to each other as if in a dialogue: not in a pedagogical Platonic dialogue, but an Ulmerian post(e)-pedagogical demonstration? The question is not quite, what if he had published 'Handbook for a Theory Hobby' (1988) or made the video for Paper Tiger TV (1987), after the series including *EmerAgency* (1998) and *Internet Invention* (2003)? Rather, in this formulation, the earlier works performed the later works the way Shakespeare performed the earlier works while writing the later works. *Internet Invention*, in the style of Jonathan Swift's 'Battle of the Books,' functions as an example of imitation

used for other ends. Ulmer in his early works discusses a scene, cited by Roland Barthes in his Nietzschean Phase, in The Marx Brothers' A Night at the Opera (1935): Chico and Groucho eventually rip up the contract in their efforts to make the contract benefit their own ends. It is a contract for a tenor, and, in that sense, they rip up the contract between tenor and vehicle. We left the philosophy over lunch shop and walked back to campus. The vehicles whizzed by us... and we followed the Ulmers.



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