Comment on the Papers by Christopher Chiasson, Miguel Arango Calle, and Andrei Molotiu

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Christopher Chiasson is Assistant Professor of Practice at Southern Illinois University. He holds degrees from Indiana University, Bloomington and the University of Chicago. He has several interesting-sounding essays that I am about to pronounce badly: "Much Ado about Nothing? The Absence of Events in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*," "The Economy of Sacrifice in the Grimms' *Der treue Johannes*," and "Mabuse's Magical Media and the Disenchantment of the Spectacle." And he is working on a monograph entitled *Stories from Stone: The Narrative Functions of Statues in the Age of Goethe*.

Miguel Arango Calle is a doctoral student in musicology at IU Bloomington; he expects to finish his dissertation, "Opera for the Eyes: Viennese Magical Operas at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," within the next year. He has a forthcoming essay, "Sets, Staging, and Spectacle in Early Performances of *Die Zauberflöte*," and a piece entitled, "A Mozart Violin Concerto as an Entr'acte in Frankfurt," which should appear shortly as part of the online project *Mozart: New Documents*. In 2023 he was awarded the Virginia and George Bozarth Endowment for Research in Austria.

Andrei Molotiu is a senior lecturer in the Department of Art History at IU Bloomington; his degrees are from NYU and Harvard. Among his most recent books, he is co-editor of *Raw, Weirdo, and Beyond: American Alternative Comics, 1980-2020* (2022) and editor of *Abstract Comics: The Anthology* (2009). He also has numerous essays on comics and graphic art, and has given recent curatorial talks on "Saul Steinberg in the Art World," and "Curating an Exhibition of Alternative Comics" (that one he also gave at Comic-Con, and I'm jealous).

So we have before us three very interesting essays. The first two papers open by thinking about the many elements—personal, authorial, performative, directorial, scenic, musical—that can make a stage presentation succeed or fail. These inquiries are attentive to the audience and the ways their imaginations might be engaged, or distracted. The third paper amplifies this examination, as it is a wandering interrogation of dramatic visuals that resist iconography, for the scherzi have no clear meaning, except a theme, vaguely, of fancy, a "game of the imagination," Molotiu argues, or perhaps a collection of favorite extras and flourishes from the artist's oeuvre.

All of these essays, in interesting ways, take critical flights of fancy seriously as interpretive tools. And I realize I've just called them "interesting" twice, which probably sounds passive-aggressive, but I swear I'm not. Sianne Ngai describes the aesthetic category of the interesting as a "feelings-based" evaluation of worth that can intersect with but does not depend on the actual informativeness of the object. Ngai largely attaches the origins of the interesting to the German Romantics but sees this aesthetic as, well, of significant interest to the eighteenth century as well.

Our three essays all champion modes of inquiry that concede from the start that some matters may be unproveable, but nonetheless generate questions worth asking. In "Wizard Fight," Chris, aware that "fence-sitting is quite frowned upon when it comes to Goethe vs. Kleist," nonetheless looks for a middle way, putting the pair in active and productive dialogue with each other by treating with seriousness Brüggemann's provocative and frequently outlandish claims about their interactions. In the end, the enemies Goethe and Kleist are most united in both being failed alchemists, unable quite to complete the transformation that would

turn their tragedies to a philosopher's stone. Chris has promised to clarify and expand on the alchemical material in his opening remarks, to which I look forward. For the moment I'll just ask whether the problem might be the dialectic relationship of Goethe and Kleist; Brüggemann notes that the philosopher's stone is often also referred to as a foundling or orphan, suggesting that the alchemical quest will not be successfully undertaken as a function of artistic community.

In "Illusion, Stagecraft, and Music in the Final Transformations of Viennese Magical Operas," Miguel reminds us that there has probably never been a point in history anywhere in the world wherein contemporary theatre was not denounced as decaying, usually for reasons linked to audience taste and desire to, you know, be entertained. But I particularly enjoyed the critic who complained that due to all exciting plots, bold acting choices, and special effects on stage, "it is impossible to evaluate the merits of a piece." Friend: plot, acting, and stagecraft—that is the piece. Miguel, though, is especially interested in how music intersects with both audience priorities and the immense human labor required to enact magical on-stage scene changes. What matters is less slavish verisimilitude than the technologies—among them sounds and music—that add up to well-executed stagecraft: "The zone of contact between technologies and their representations—that is to say, the interface'—is where most of the audience's attention remains." Here I kept thinking of Anna Kornbluh's recent *Immediacy*, which describes a modern late-stage capitalistic atmosphere in which there are "consistent pressures against mediation" (5), pressures that on the whole she disapproves of pretty strongly. For Kornbluh, and perhaps the magical operatic stage, mediation is the thing.

I also wanted to ask Miguel whether it's at all useful to look into the harlequinade, which certainly relied on stage spectacle and was aesthetically upsetting to any number of intellectuals. And I'm assuming most of the people in this room, who are all Mary Toft experts, also know this, but the centerpiece of a harlequinade was the transformation scene, where Harlequin would literally hit everything with a slapstick, launching the second portion of the entertainment and transforming the pantomime players into harlequin characters. I thought that might be provocative, the violent lampshading of stagecraft in these entertainments.

And actually, the harlequinade works as a sort of connective tissue among the three papers before us: first of all, one of the all-time most popular subjects for the pantomime in eighteenth-century England was Harlequin Faustus—and second of all, Andrei reminds us that among the *Scherzi* are "a couple of seemingly incongruous appearances by *commedia dell'arte*'s own Pulcinella, sticking out like a sore thumb among the history-painting paraphernalia of the prints."

So on to "Whim and Magic," which is less an attempt to decipher the undecipherable than to trace reactions to it: "The capriccio, on the other hand, is by design not decipherable through established iconographic protocols and thereby reinstates awareness of the interpreter's subjectivity." For Andrei, the magic that makes these artistic efforts so interesting happens when we put aside iconographic interpretation and dwell in uncertainty instead, when we embrace the artist's mediation instead of attempting to unfurl it.

Tomorrow, we're going to hear the wonderful David Brewer on Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, but the papers we read for today made me think much more immediately of Clarke's second novel, *Piranesi.* I won't go through the plot—either you know it, or you should really just read the thing—but I did want to note that one of the fascinating things about the text is that it does not really reward attempts to decode the statues or architecture of the labyrinthian house that is its main setting. "The House is valuable because it is the House," the narrator tells us. "It is enough in and of Itself. It is not the means to an end."

Now, Andrei is fascinated by the connections of the Scherzi to Brian Aldiss' *Malacia Tapestry.* In it is a moment that just screams Piranesi: "Aldiss offers his first and longest description, from memory, of the *Scherzi*, a poetic evocation that in five sentences conveys the essence of the etchings as effectively as any art historical analysis ever has." Aldiss is not being precise, and is working only from memory, but he manages to tap into an aesthetic essence nevertheless.

So here, and I promise this is my last new association, it is impossible not to think of Thomas De Quincey. Probably all the Mary Toft experts in this room know the passage I'm thinking of, but I'm going to read it anyway, in part because it's a nagging thing for me; I've written on this about half a dozen times in the last twenty-five years and have never published a word about it, because I can't quite figure out what I'm saying. Anyway, in *Opium Eater*, we get this:

> Many years ago, when I was looking over Piranesi's *Antiquities of Rome*, Mr. Coleridge, who was standing by, described to me a set of plates by that artist, called his *Dreams*, and which record the scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever, Some of them (I describe only from memory of Mr. Coleridge's account) represented vast Gothic halls: on the floor of which stood all sorts of engines and machinery, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults, &c. &c. expressive of enormous power put forth, and resistance overcome. Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further, and you perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose, at least, that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher: on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld; and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labours: and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall.

Infamously, what's interesting here is that De Quincey seems to be describing the print of "The Drawbridge" from the series of etchings usually rendered as "Imaginary Prisons," but which he renders as "Dreams." If you looked at the *Carceri* prints just now in the gallery, it's immediately obvious that the tiny figures that appear in the print are in no way recognizable as Piranesi, or as anyone; they are little dark scribbles. Many people have written about De Quincey's error here. Hillis Miller memorably dubbed as "the Piranesi effect … the power which the mind has to sink into its own infinite abyss." But I have always thought Miller reads this moment arsy-versy—the general direction is not downwards, but upwards. Piranesi's labors may be unceasing, but they are aspirational.

And I think that's a good place to start talking about these papers—unfinished, but so full of promise.