

THEORY ON TV

GADGET GOES TO FLORIDA



Left: Gregory Ulmer
Right: Laurence A. Rickels
Photo: William S. ...

LAURENCE A. RICKELS TALKS WITH GREGORY ULMER

Gregory Ulmer was one of the first in his generation of theorists to focus on the technological moment in Derrida's rereadings, at the same time noting the compatibility between his own rereading and what Freud called "the underworld of psychoanalysis." Professor of English and media studies at the University of Florida, Gainesville, and the author of *Applied Grammatology*, 1985, and most recently *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention*, 1994, Ulmer kept his reception tuned to Derrida's intervention at a time when decon entered university contexts and contests. But despite Ulmer's overseas connection, the perspective that allowed for his specially trained focus is relentlessly homegrown; his populist faith in the democratizing agenda of teaching is thoroughly grounded in a grassroots tradition both progressivist and emancipatory in its origins. His marriage of deconstruction, technology, and the esthetic practices of the historical avant-garde manages to reroute this populism into cyberspace. In doing so, Ulmer's applications of high theory to and through technology and within the transferential settings of teaching are always at the same time personalizations of a terminal case, gadget love. This case, about which I interviewed Ulmer in Santa Barbara, California, last Halloween weekend, opens up a joint account with what Ulmer has given us license to personalize as, neither history nor herstory, but, simply, "mystory."

—LR

LAURENCE RICKELS: *In conversation with Friedrich Kittler and in various asides, Derrida has indicated that deconstruction has all along been about the computer. Now you seem to be putting through the connection, with all the practical and critical applications and implications that follow from this statement, which Derrida has, in a sense, kept on the very inside of his entire project.*

GREGORY ULMER: Several people who have been working on the practical side of designing computer applications in the humanities have called the computer the

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laboratory of poststructuralism and the place where poststructuralism, and Derrida's work in particular, finds its practical point of application. In the context of literacy, in which deconstruction called into question all the institutions of literacy, such as the status of the author, the linearity of the logic of argumentation, and so on, the theory always seemed completely bizarre. As it turns out, the multimedia technology that was emerging at the same time as poststructuralism required a different way of thinking about how information is linked up. Marx said that the very thing we need at the time we have ideas about it turns out to be already there, and maybe that's why we're thinking it. We have the computer at the time we need the theory and we have the theory at the time we need the computer; the two have arisen separately and are now converging.

What exactly about Derrida's work makes it so suited to the new computer environment, the Internet, hypertext, the World Wide Web, and so on? It is that, for those of us who have been trained in literacy, poststructuralism comes across as so counterintuitive, but throughout the history of invention, counterintuitive thinking has been necessary to force us to overcome our habits of thought. The logic associated with literacy is a step-by-step method, which suits the page as it developed in the context of specific literary practices, but now we have equipment that doesn't need a step-by-step procedure, we have equipment that makes jumps. We have the link—the hyperlink. You can push a button no matter where you're located in relation to information stored at vastly distant locations and simply jump from one spot to the other.

A major question facing the humanities right now is, How do you guide this jump, the logic of the link? The

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whole purpose of logic has always been to find a way to link information, to make it useful for people. So I've been working on designing the logic of the jump.

LR: *In your project, you also look at esthetic practices involving combination.*

GU: Exactly. A major resource for me has been the historical avant-garde, which has provided all kinds of examples of how to link information. What we're now trying to imagine is a grade-school pedagogy that adds esthetic practices—what used to be thought of as the leisure activities of collage and finger painting, for example—to a general education in grammar, syntax, spelling, and vocabulary. In other words, we're working on a pedagogy where students take these esthetic practices, link them with the new grammar, the new logic of poststructuralism, and apply the outcome to projects in computing. We'll have elementary school kids using the ideas of Derrida and the collage techniques of, say, Kurt

Schwitters in the same way they now use the ideas of Aristotle and the geometry of Euclid as part of their normal schooling. And that way we will begin to produce a population that is truly ready to use the equipment that is so rapidly being put into our homes and into our schools.

LR: *How does theory intervene in places like the classroom, where, according to your argument, it has already been at home for some time? How does it manifest itself?*

GU: Well, I don't think it can do so directly. Theory in the texts of, say, Derrida or Deleuze is part of a specialized discipline, like calculus in mathematics or string theory in physics; they don't intervene directly in the home or in the classroom. There's a place for the theoretical text and all the complicated linear argumentative practices of literacy that produce the complexities of theory. But the relationship of theory to practice in the humanities should be no different from the relationship you find, say, in medical schools or agriculture schools or any school with both a specialized knowledge and a responsibility to the practical institutions. People who read deconstructive and poststructuralist theory have a responsibility to design the practices that apply to the computer screen, to layout, and to communication in general, in the same way that theorists of earlier ages applied their practices in the invention of page layout, the invention of the paragraph, and the institution of school teaching we now have. All the practices of literacy we now take for granted had to be designed and invented by people in relation to what was then a new technology and in the close context of theories about how language worked. In this context, I think the extreme practicality of the work of Derrida and others, as well as their implications, is what's really misunderstood.

As an example of this practical side of theory, consider the case of Derrida's participation in the Parc de la Villette architectural project, a "park for the 21st century" in Paris. At the invitation of architect Peter Eisenman, Derrida performed a rereading of Plato's *Timaeus* in which he selected and made a drawing of a particular image Plato had given for a metaphysical concept of place or space, *chora*, in which being and becoming could come together. It's an interesting image because it's the image of theory and practice coming together as well. The Greeks had two kinds of space: *topos* is the universal, abstract space;

chora is the sacred, local, particular space. They had always gone together; but what happened in the Western tradition after Aristotle, in the development of analytical logic, is that our schooling practices and our theories picked up on *topos* as the one and only concept set aside for storing information. And what's happening now in electronic culture is the return of *chora*. It's one of the paradoxes, I think, Derrida theorizes for us: How do you put the local back into thinking about the general? The move, the jump, in logic is no longer the movement from the particular to the general but a different sort of movement. As Deleuze has said, No more generals. We will develop a kind of reasoning that's different from what we've had in the past, one that will move from one local place to another, without passing through the general. What Deleuze called the movement into the heavens—the various "ductions," abductions, deductions, and inductions, which is movement into the abstract—is a logic that developed out of the history of literacy. But what's happening now in electronic space, if we can imagine it as a picture, is the ability to move directly from thing to thing, from particular directly to particular, without abduction and deduction. What would this thinking be? That would be the jump, where you move from local condition to local condition. Just as the page had to be designed as a particular kind of space, a *topos*, so electronic space, whether it's a screen or some kind of virtual-reality mechanism, has to be designed—not by a logic tied to *topos*, but one in terms of *chora*.

The electronic apparatus supports something quite different, something the page couldn't support, that is, the very peculiar emotional qualities of thinking—that is, the unique dimensions of an individual's particular cognitive style—that always accompany abstract logic. The apparatus of literacy wouldn't support that kind of thinking. Now we're theorizing practices that allow us in fact to give much larger play to, and which support and augment and provide a prosthesis for, the emotional dimension of thinking. These practices don't do away with *topos*, they don't throw away the logical and analytical parts. Instead, they restore the emotional part of thinking. So the promise of the new equipment is actually to rejoin or provide a holistic thinking supporting the body of thought as well as the mind of thought.

The practical side to all this is the design experiment. How do we design the screen environment to

support the local thinking of a particular body? And the design problem is to make the screen absolutely customizable: the page is the same for everybody but the screen will be unique for everyone. Each person will design a thinking place to support his or her particular cognitive style. We can look at all the work that's being done on differences of cognition, differences of style. Is there a women's writing? Is there a queer thinking? In other words, all the theorizing of the other as constituting a style different from that of the patriarchal objectivity of science happens to serve, in the context of the evolution of writing, exactly what we need right now, namely, theories that teach us how to customize the space.

LR: You've called your forthcoming local/global project "The Case of Florida."

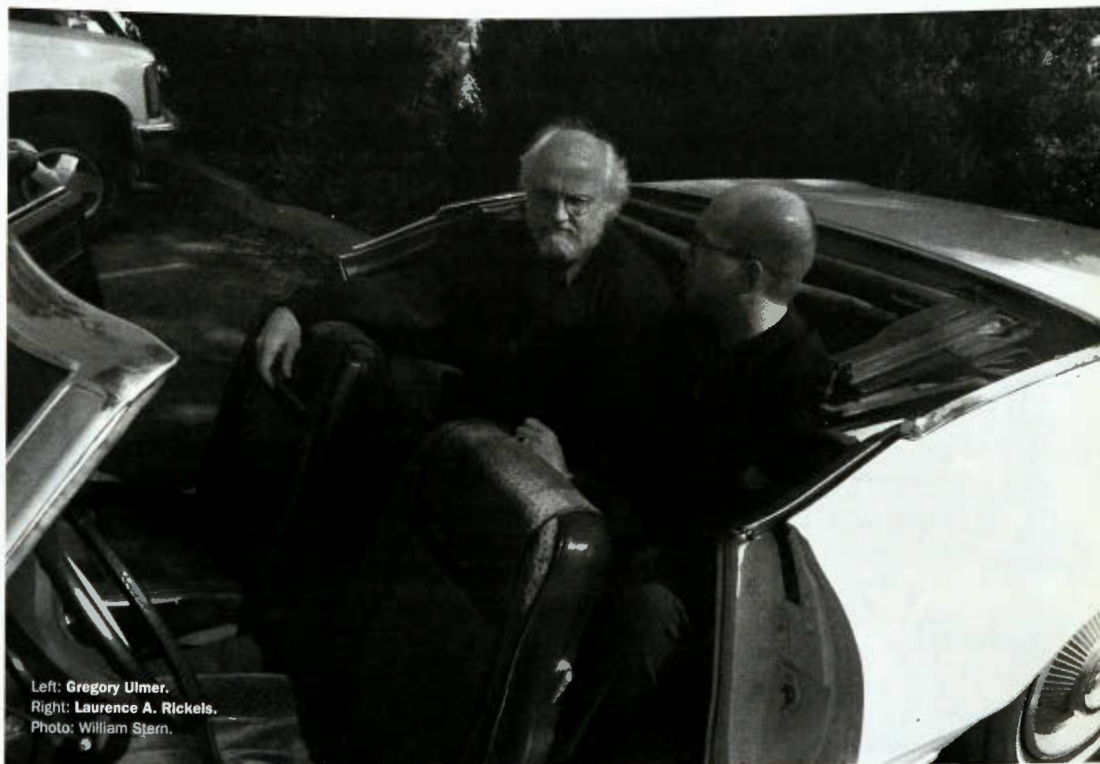
GU: I do mean for the project to resonate specifically with your book, *The Case of California*, but I also want to direct attention to a shift taking place in the axes of cultural life in America. For the first 100 years the axis stretched from Boston to Virginia, then over the next 100 years it was the New York-to-California axis that supported a new kind of intellectual curiosity. Now a third dimension is developing that is anchored in Florida through which the other two triangulate and become linked to the southern hemisphere.

At present, I see this third axis as a link between Florida and Brazil. There are obvious economic and social reasons for this new axis. The theoretical reasons include first, the association of Florida with the Bermuda Triangle, one of the sites locating the lost continent of Atlantis. Atlantis is the *chora*, the sacred link, of Florida. The second theoretical reason is in the notion of *saudade*—the emotional state of mind associated with samba. *Saudade*, a complex mode of homesickness, suggests a more interesting way to think about the emotional dimension of home in the interface metaphor of the hypertext home page. I explored the relationship of samba to the electronic apparatus in a text called "The Miranda Warnings." The title refers to a switch between Carmen Miranda and the Supreme Court decision regarding the rights of the accused.

As the new node connecting the two histories or axes and Latin America, Florida tips the other two axes off balance without replacing them, and in doing so it fundamentally alters the character of our culture. Florida is a kind of place of interface. What difference does it make to the character of these axes

that Florida has a particular kind of nature, a particular *chora*? How, in other words, does Florida function as a node, not simply as a trading center where other axes of influence come to exchange information but as a place, like *chora*, that organizes the elements? The reason I find Florida to be a particularly compelling *choral* kind of place is its relation to Xanadu. I only recently discovered that I was living in Xanadu. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* contains not just a single place but a very complex composite space, really four different exotic places Coleridge had

transition from a literate to a "computerate" world. **LR:** I still wonder about the optimism you hold for this future, specifically your resistance to the idea of ideological captivation. I'm reminded of a wager Marshall McLuhan made that if TV had been around in the '30s the Nazis would never have taken over Germany. But in fact he would have lost the bet. There was live coverage of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and regular videophone service had been established between Berlin and Leipzig by the '30s. Yet you seem to maintain an incredible faith in the medium



Left: Gregory Ulmer.
Right: Laurence A. Rickels.
Photo: William Stern.

read about—China, Kashmir, Ethiopia, and the county I live in—Alachua County, in Florida. When I found that I was living in one of those exotic places it made me realize that my own local place, like every local place, was special, that it had its own spirit or *chora*. I linked that to the fact that Ted Nelson, who invented the concept of hypertext some decades ago, had named his own vision of the World Wide Web of the coming computer age the "Xanadu project." So I took heart that, in living in Gainesville, Florida, I was not really excluded from anything but was at one of the most creative nodes in the

over the message.

GU: *The Case of California* is helpful in hypothesizing the nature of century three. You suggest in *The Case of California* that, while literate subjects are organized as selves (characterized in psychoanalysis in terms of the formation of the superego), televisual subjects are not. The Internet, designed as a decentralized communications network so that it could continue to function in the event of a nuclear strike, takes this one step further—the system parallels the psychoanalytic account of the way the unconscious continues to communicate with the *continued on page 106*

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conscious mind, despite the smashing executed by repression. The dreamwork is a kind of packet switching. On the Internet, digital information is broken up into units or packets, and allowed to take whatever route is open through the rhizome of the Net. The message is re-assembled at its destination. The importance of this homology or generalized analogy between Internet technology and the discourse of the unconscious is the way it supports the poststructural theory of computing.

The ethical and political concerns expressed in your question are framed in grammatology in terms of the transformation of human identity in subject formation—a transformation that is part of any fundamental change in the apparatus of language. In “electracy,” selfhood is disappearing, the ghost-in-me experience of *psyche* is weakening. What will happen to ethics and politics in a civilization without selves? Nazis were selves with a vengeance. In any case, the theory of paradigm shift suggests that a new paradigm will not solve old problems such as fascism. It just replaces them with new problems. The limitation of McLuhanism is its tendency to state such changes as if the outcome were determined by the technology. In grammatology, however, the apparatus is an interactive matrix, including institutional practices and identity construction along with the new technology.

Not least among the reasons poststructuralism seems

so relevant to computing is that the former allows us to recognize that the latter is a prosthesis of human mentality: more exactly, the prosthesis of the unconscious. Literacy has been quite adequate as a prosthesis of conscious cognition. The electronic practices emerging now promise to supply a similar support to augment and direct unconscious thinking. The premise of “The Case of Florida” is that the practices that would allow education to tap into this interface between electronic technologies and the unconscious remain to be invented. □

Laurence A. Rickels is author of *The Case of California* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) and *Aberrations of Mourning* (Wayne State University Press, 1988). He is completing two new books, *The Vampire Lectures* and *Nazi Psychoanalysis*. His conversation with Gregory Ulmer is the second in his series, “Theory on TV.”

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The exhibition’s loose conceptual focus was further compromised by some questionable curatorial choices. The inclusion of Philip Johnson’s Ghost House, 1985—an absolutely unremarkable plant nursery enclosed in a chain-link structure with a pitched roof—makes sense only as metaironic tribute to Johnson himself. The mastermind behind nearly every MoMA architecture survey from “The International Style” in 1933 to “The Deconstructivist Architects” in 1988, Johnson seems destined to haunt the museum for years to come. And

what were visitors to make of the garish, oversized photograph of Frank Gehry’s Weisman Art Museum, 1993, in Minneapolis? A gorgeous assemblage of stainless-steel ducts overlooking the Mississippi River, Gehry’s museum seemed to bear only a superficial relationship to the show’s fundamental premise—a connection supported, one suspects, only by the distorted reflections of the surface material. Perhaps in a show that claimed to be an exploration of architectural surfaces connections can go no deeper.

At its most successful moments, the exhibition began to theorize an esthetic of visual deception widespread in architecture and other spheres of contemporary visual culture—from the buildings housed in MoMA to digitalized imagery to the scrim in *Unzipped*. But because “Light Construction” set out to cover themes that could not be, or at least were not, adequately developed in either the space of the gallery or the catalogue essay, it unwittingly succumbed to what it seemed most anxious to avoid: the taste-shaping motives that traditionally drive such survey exhibitions. An emerging architectural sensibility? Most eyes probably saw nothing besides a lot of cool buildings. □

Ernest Pascucci is senior editor of *ANY* magazine.

“Light Construction” was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 21 September through 2 January 1996.

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