



Paraguay : An Introduction

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Paraguay : An Introduction

by S. R. Hamilton

Paraguay: An Exercise in the Psychopathology of Fascism is Bay Area artist Bob Yarber's first experiment with video. Not only is it a unique experiment encompassing a wide range of intellectual concerns, it also provides us with the opportunity to observe the translation of the pictorial techniques developed by the artist into an entirely different art-form. Although *Paraguay* adopts many of the thematic and figurative elements elaborated by the artist in his painting, we can see how these elements are continually deflected, transformed and reinscribed at other levels. This is due to the constraints placed upon the artist by video and, more importantly, because of the new representational strategies opened up for the artist by the video medium. *Paraguay* thus becomes an incisively self-reflexive pedagogical exercise that lays bare some of the mechanisms by means of which a representational space is created.

Perhaps the most convenient approach to the video is through the comparison of elements that are common to both *Paraguay* and a painting belonging to the early series of Mao paintings, *Chow-mein Mao*. A direct continuity at the iconic level is self-evident and needs no real elaboration. *Paraguay* replicates almost in its entirety the spatial configuration depicted in *Chow-mein Mao*: the foreshortening created by the abrupt intersection of table and backdrop; the spatial fragmentation evoked by the emergence of Mao's head from beneath the table; and, most importantly, the representation of the spectator's look within the painting. In addition, *Chow-mein Mao* manifests a concern for narrative that will later be incorporated in *Paraguay*. The ironic vignettes borrowed from Chinese poster-art function in a manner similar to those narrative configurations in paintings attempting to introduce temporality within spatial representation; in conjunction with the written text included in the painting, the inserts create a tension between word and image so as to distribute the force of the reading.



Chow-Mein Mao, 1973-75

These thematic and technical concerns are carried over into *Paraguay* despite the differences between the two media. The surreal collage effected by the artist in *Chow-mein Mao* must be translated into the “naturalism” fostered by a “mechanical reproduction of reality.” The ironic commentary provided by the vignettes in the Mao painting are transformed into a theatrical form of auto-critique which simultaneously subverts both the simple imagistic rendering that underlies the video and the exceedingly complex spoken text accompanying the image-track. Unlike the vignettes in the Mao painting which create an illusion of depth beyond the pictorial surface, the propagandistic set-pieces in *Paraguay* rupture the representational space by intermittently introducing a distinct spatial plane that calls into question the “unmediated” realism of the video image.

Similarly, the centralized figure of Mao suggests another parallel between the two works: just as Mao situates the spectator’s gaze, so too in *Paraguay* do the theatrical pieces tend to determine the point-of-view structure established in the video. The head becomes the focal point around which the viewer’s look is structured and thus creates a stable position that anchors an otherwise confusing visual matrix. Although the video opens with a frontal image of a man eating chow-mein and follows it with a point-of-view shot suggesting a possible secondary identification with the character, the video systematically subverts this structure by staging these theatrical presentations from a limited series of mutually exclusive vantage points, i.e.: frontally, from the point of view of the spectator, a point of view that is ultimately recuperated by its possible attribution to the portrait of General Stroessenger; from the diegeticized viewpoint of the character; or both, images wherein the spectator is excluded from the scene, but where the theatrical presentation is directed toward the character/spectator within the fiction. The similarity between these different vantage points is reinforced by the constant distance from the camera which situates the viewer in a position identical to that of the character; consequently, there is no real distinction between the act of looking on the part of the character and the thing seen by the viewer. Moreover, the fact that the head either faces the spectator or faces away from him/her in an almost arbitrary fashion divides the represented space in two and serves to incorporate the spectator’s look into the scene.

This unstable point of view structure in *Paraguay* is an elaboration of a very similar strategy in *Chow-mein Mao*. The central vignette of Mao “producing home-made steel” arrests the



Chow-Mein Mao, Detail: Backyard Steel Production

spectator's look by inscribing a highly charged ideological construct intended for the benefit of the spectator. At the point where the figure in the painting should be depicted as looking straight at us, a complex mirror effect occurs wherein the central figure of Mao generates a series of facsimiles which are likely to intersect the spectator's own representation of Mao. But when this mode of caricature is superimposed on the locus of vision of the figure in the painting, we witness the conjunction of the looks situated both within and without the painting. The gaze of the figure is located at the vanishing point in the painting, but is obstructed by the vignette; the figure's vision is simultaneously determined and undermined by what the spectator sees. And as there is no real difference between the representation of Mao in the foreground and the one contained in the vignette, the look of the spectator is essentially inscribed within the painting and returned to him through the gaze of Mao. Vision is unable to extricate itself from the mediation of representation. The centralized figure of Mao as well as the theatrical presentations in Paraguay thus localize and regulate the look of the spectator while at the same time establishing a system of dispersion that subverts the centrality of both the viewing subject and the subject of the representation.

This localization of point of view in *Paraguay* is only accomplished, however, by means of a subsequent disjunction between image and text. As is the case with the point of view, it is difficult to identify a stable enunciative position governing the relation between the image and the dialog. The very subtle system of disjunctions established by means of the dialogic structure is continually deflected within the play of image and sound and, in the end, is effectively reduced to a seemingly unlocalizable, undifferentiated message. It is extremely significant that all instances of dialog between A and B occur from within a point of view structure determined by the look of the character; this would seem to enable one to situate the dialog within the diegetic world of the video, ie., as attributable to the character. However, this relatively simple scheme is complicated by the uneasy dialectic between image and text. In the shot from the front of the table, for example, where A says that “Paraguay will be a mind quietly floating over a racked body. You will be that body. You will be the battery that will empower the mind, or the sign of the mind, to become a flag,” this text accompanies an image of a brain and a flag. It thus becomes difficult to determine whether to privilege image or text in this reciprocal subversion of two distinct sign-systems. On the one hand, the image-tract domesticates the spoken text by alleviating it of its density, by reducing it to an isolated signifier that subjugates the rest of the text; but on the other hand, the complexity of the spoken text robs the image of its primacy by incorporating its linguistic equivalent into a highly overdetermined discursive chain.

Another instance of this confusion occurs at the level of the dialog itself. If we assume that the various personae emerging from beneath the table are indeed B, the voice speaking in the interrogative (“Will there be a catharsis?”), it is then difficult to account for the fact that A speaks the following lines: “Since I have met you I have acquired a taste for cruelty. As she spat blood, I recognized at once that this woman was Loretta, a woman I had married some years before.” Because Loretta is referred to in the third-person, it is no longer possible to posit a strict equivalence between B and the person in the image. The position of the second person is displaced outward and creates a hollow that will ultimately be filled by the spectator.

We can thus see the institution of a generalized and systematized paranoia that reproduces the uncanny nature of Yarber’s paintings. But whereas his paintings induce this uncanny effect through the representation of apraxia and disembodied

gesture, *Paraguay* creates it by means of the ironic subversion of the codes upon which the video is grounded. Seduced by the appearance of structure, the spectator is soon entrapped and, subsequently, is implicated in this perverse system whose very nature it is to collapse those differences guaranteeing its systematicity. The head beneath the table provides a focal point and, thus, promises a stable point of view; but the lack of differentiation between the vision of spectator and character, and the seemingly arbitrary decision whether the head faces the spectator or the character/spectator of the video image. Both techniques succeed in unhinging the spectator's gaze. Vision becomes disembodied as the spectator becomes an active participant in a tyrannical representation. Similarly, the dialogic structure creates a binary system that labors against the materiality of a single voice; sexual difference and the difference between oppressor and oppressed are determined by vocal inflections. As the video progresses, these differences are obliterated by the massive presence of this voice.

Apraxia is a major theme in *Paraguay*; but it is effectively incorporated into the video at the level of representation, not at the level of the thing represented. In one sense *Paraguay* becomes an apraxic gesture, "a body whose progressive abstraction appears to seek its own erasure," in the words of the artist. (interview) If laughter is a defensive posture precipitated by, and intended to ward off, the disastrous effects of a collapsed symbolic ordering, *Paraguay*, with its systematic erasure of difference, could be thought to include the spectator's laugh within its structure. The viewer is thus implicated in this spectacle and must ultimately come to terms with the ideology subtending any representation.