

## **I Want a Flat-Screen Colour TV: Derek Beaulieu's *Flatland* and *Local Colour***

Reviewed by Chris Ewart

Within the constraint of using a single source text to create a new text, Derek Beaulieu's *Flatland: a romance of many dimensions* and *Local Colour* show how definitions and practices around text, authorship and reading invite continual artistic innovation and response. While the creation of such works may seek to efface traditional ideas of the author, perhaps his or her job description is simply changing.

My own early literary studies reinforced a death of the author Barthes-style – burn Shakespeare t-shirts, smash Milton ashtrays, etc. Current discussions in literary theory and practice return to an (in part) archive-sustained importance of author, arguably motivated to connect threads of influence and community rather than posit individual authors solely as unitary behemoths of idealized originality, totality and achievement. Foucault writes,

. . . literary discourses came to be accepted only when endowed with author function. We now ask of each poetic or fictional text: From where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design? The meaning ascribed to it and the status or value accorded it depend on the manner in which we answer these questions. (109)

One thing is clear – the jury still favours an identity to hang an author's hat on. If we can agree that nothing is wholly original, then Barthes's "Death of the Author" destruction (or deconstruction) of "every voice and point of origin" (142) makes sense in part because originary points may well be anonymous ones. Or, perhaps non-traditional modes of text production force discussion of author-function and authorship into a new court – a place where authorial actions and definitions change.

According to Beaulieu, "writing is taking [him] further and further from 'writing'" and "writing has become for [him] a record of reading" ("Interview"). These statements are both ambiguous and promising, especially in relation to the use of source texts as material (or as contained starting points) for other texts. Here, author function occurs through reading, and the resultant texts offer different possibilities and representations of reading. In addition to typing on a keyboard or scribbling in a notebook, Beaulieu's *writing* allows reconsiderations of narrative, authorship, and artistic practice. Reading then becomes a means to plot, store, play back (with emphasis on play) and re-present selected textual elements in various ways.

Beaulieu's *Flatland: a romance of many dimensions* borrows title and text from E. A. Abbott's 1884 science-fictional, two-dimensional universe inhabited by polygons. With tracing paper, a light table, ruler, pen and ink Beaulieu creates a "page-by-page response" to Abbott's book by "trac[ing] each letter's occurrence across every page of text [to] graphical[ly] represen[t] how language covers a page" ("Interview"). In effect, Beaulieu pegs and strings the vertical happenings of letters, attuning their seemingly innocuous repetition into tightly ruled lines and

communicative clusters – like a game of pick-up-sticks, except flattened and fixed. Relative to the boldly linear, EKG resultant treatment of Abbott’s geometrical world of *Flatland*, *Local Colour* also offers a text that perpetuates elemental motivations within the source text. Beaulieu leaves behind an interpretation of Paul Auster’s novella *Ghosts* as a record of reading the colours within it – colours that define characters and places in the book.

Turning a fixed text into another fixed text by using aspects of the originary text as a starting point and/or constraint aligns writer as reader. Such a process simultaneously creates a model for writers to push the conventions of written sign-based language – as signification beyond traditional narrative reading. Beaulieu’s *Flatland* and *Local Colour*, in his words

look at authorship as readership [as] idiosyncratic text-driven ways of reading [and] they are both documents which leave the evidence of a reading act . . . as demanded by the precepts of the narrative itself. (“Interview”)

Beaulieu’s *act* takes compositional elements of prose narratives (letters, colours, their frequency and place on the page in the original source texts) and foregrounds them as new narratives while erasing and re-tracing the text (and context) of old. His authorial/readerly act also brings up notions of Mark Rose’s comment upon centuries’ old text construction “as an action rather than as a thing” (203). What is different with text-as-action here is that a *text without text*<sup>1</sup> defies traditional understandings of reading, and/or invites new ones. As Marjorie Perloff warns at the end of the ironically titled “Afterword” in *Flatland* – while also invoking Wordsworth – “*Caveat lector!* Making sense of this book, you have nothing to lose but those ‘known habits of association,’ those ‘eyes that see not’” (qtd. 109). Beaulieu turns one text into another by leaving a concrete record of his readerly act – and nothing more. The evidence of this reductive act not only forces us to *read* differently, but also to conceive stories differently.

Auster’s *Ghosts* follows Blue, a private detective hired by White to keep track of Black, who lives on Orange Street. Blue’s discoveries foreground the relationship of Black and White – invoking a relationship between ink and page – and perhaps most importantly from Beaulieu’s conceptual perspective – some of the colours/characters in-between, including Grey, Green, Gold, Red and Violet. Beaulieu explains his process: “With *Local Colour*, I removed the entirety of Auster’s text, leaving only chromatic words—proper nouns or not—spread across the page as dollops of paint on a palette” (“Interview”). Isolating colours out of Auster’s text turns “traditional narrative into a more pointillist construction” (*Local Colour* back cover), and also turns narrative into visual art – representing a reader’s thirst for colour. Such a spread-across-the-page approach brings both Abbott’s and Auster’s source texts into a different cultural context.<sup>2</sup> The work and ideas borrowed become the work and ideas to borrow. But again, it is the author who shifts, lifts, traces and colours in what was read, inviting readers to reconsider text, narrative and visual art differently, while inviting aesthetic considerations as well. From frustration to fascination, Beaulieu dismisses the “problem of romantic authorship and the perception of a lack of emotion or humanity in avant-garde work [and poetics as],

<sup>1</sup> I have heard Beaulieu mention this several times. The phrase allows for a reinterpretation of text beyond writing including text as image.

<sup>2</sup> *Local Colour* recently appeared as part of the “Less is More: The Poetics of Erasure” exhibition at SFU Gallery. Discussing approaches to text such as Beaulieu’s, Kelly and Jefferies astutely suggest “Erasure is not to be taken lightly, but it usually brings lightness to the seriousness of cultural production” (8). Further, the process of various forms of erasure certainly generate more discussion than many of the pre-altered works might while reaffirming author-function.

bullshit – the author asserts him/herself at every opportunity – even the act of self-effacement, re-asserts the author’s presence [as] a fun paradox. [T]heft, plagiarism, or alternative readings all efface plot and romantic notions of the ‘novel’ (as Christian [Bök] said ‘to write a novel is anything but’). The absence of the novelistic in these novels [is] an absence that reifies presence, and perhaps the same thing with the effacement of the author.

Beaulieu was kind enough to allow use of future material for the archives – it seems the author of *Ghosts* has a similar fascination and confusion as some readers might – in terms of how, exactly, to *read* the newly constituted text:

Dear Derek,

I am writing on behalf of Paul Auster, who received your book *Local Colour*. He wanted to tell you how impressed, befuddled, amazed and, finally, deeply moved he was by your work. He sends you all the best thoughts and wishes you good luck and more exciting projects in the future.

Thank you, Jen

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Jen Dougherty

Assistant to Paul Auster

In an interview about his own process of authorial actualization when writing a book or having his name appear on one, Auster suggests that

the author of a novel can never be sure where any of it comes from. The self that exists in the world – the self whose name appears on the covers of books is finally not the same self who writes the book. (qtd. in McCaffery 15)

So where does that slippery author reside and why is it important? One of the certainties of so-called derivative texts such as Beaulieu’s *Local Colour* and *Flatland* is that the occasional blank some authors might draw in terms of where the *stuff* of their books comes from becomes absolutely known, but also irrelevant. When acts of borrowing and inventing are so explicit, perhaps motivation arrives through concept – the fixity of letters ruled into lines or words that bring colour – and less from an uncertain authorial self.

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