

The First Sail: J. Hillis Miller

"Deconstruction attempts to resist the totalizing and totalitarian tendencies of criticism. It attempts to resist its own tendencies to come to rest in some sense of mastery over the work. It resists these in the name of an uneasy joy of interpretation, beyond nihilism, always in movement, a going beyond which remains in place, as the parasite is outside the door but also always already within, uncanniest of guests."

- J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host"



An interview with Dragan Kujundzic, Professor of Film and Media Studies, and Jewish Studies, at the University of Florida, about his forthcoming film, *The First Sail*^{*}, dedicated to the prominent American literary scholar and theorist, J. Hillis Miller.

^{*} The first screening of *The First Sail: J. Hillis Miller* will take place on October 25, 2011, at the University of Florida, in the Harn Museum, at 6pm.

Questions

- 1) What was Hillis' initial reaction to your proposal for this project? Did he set any guidelines or stipulations? How long has the project been in the works? Describe its trajectory: throughout the process, were there any major changes in method, focus, structure, etc.? If so, did they arise organically or were they the result of any challenges or ideas you had?

J. Hillis Miller is a person of tremendous generosity. Without him giving his time this would not have been possible. His initial reaction? In an email: "You will have to make a purse silk out of a sow's ear." As with everything he does, Hillis downplayed his importance. His genuine and profound modesty was something I had to take into account starting this project. There were no limitations to what I ask, and no questions were sent beforehand.

The project is an extension of my involvement with Hillis' work, most recently by organizing a conference in his honor, which was called "J." That was seven years ago. The proceedings of this conference were published in two academic venues, by *Critical Inquiry* (The University of Chicago Press) and by Fordham University Press. Jacques Derrida served as a plenary speaker at this conference and wrote an invaluable essay called "Justices" assessing Hillis' work. This project also stems from my desire to find new ways to talk to Hillis at length. It started as a work in progress called "Flights of Fancy: J. Hillis Miller and Friends." I wanted from the start to film Hillis sailing (he is an avid sailor on boats powered by sails), and to include Hillis' friends around the world. Everything else stemmed from that first flight of fancy. His friends sent me questions for this project, and their enthusiasm kept me going and convinced me that this is a worthwhile project. Hillis has friends from China to England and all around the world. These questions were part of interviews that took

place during the ten or twelve filmed interview sessions at the University of Florida in March 2010 and on Deer Isle, Maine, in June 2010. I also added of course many more of my own, pertaining to Hillis' work.

This film belongs to the genre of fan cinema. Another (it has been so far) secret, title, of this project, but I reveal it here, is *J'aime JHM*. Which pronounced in French gives a repetition and may be heard as *J'aime, j'aime*. Kind of love without borders, *sin frontera*, in two languages, *en deux langues*. With this project I want to show how much I love J. Hillis Miller.

- 2) In *The Medium is the Maker*, Hillis contrasts "communicating with the dead" with "receiving telepathic communications from those who are still alive though at a distance," rooting them both in the occult and observing that "death is never far away either in telepathic experiences or in spiritualism" (16). Your interview footage with him ultimately will be defined as both, and Hillis notes that he is aware of this.

How do you suppose he would respond upon viewing himself in video? Do you think that the 'video' as a medium for Hillis has a different sort of influence than it does for Derrida?

You are producing both a book and a film from this project: how will these respective mediums differ in their treatment of Hillis? What do you make of the irony of filming a man who describes television, in the words of Derrida, as a "sham, a simulacrum," that which "was there, at some distance here and now, reaches us, in another here and now on the screen, through elaborate delays, relays, and message-shaping filters" (13) ? Did your consciousness of such alter the way you developed the project?

Deconstruction has taught us that every sign is testamentary. Hillis is of course aware that his filmed interview deposits a memory onto the substrate of film (digital tape) and allows for a spectral recurrence and returns. There is an inscription of death and finitude in any giving of interview. Including this one I am involved in right now. As I tell my students in the course called Vampire Cinema, playing on the title of *Interview With a Vampire*, every inter-view is also an intra-vein. It draws blood. In the *Medium is the Maker* quoted, Hillis has a yet again innovative analysis pertaining to the question of finitude in Heidegger and Derrida. For Heidegger, the finitude of being (*da-sein*) partakes in the movement of general Being, it “holds,” Hillis says, “all the horizons of time with one mobile unit... Heidegger’s time is grounded in *Sein*, Being with a capital B. Derrida’s time is created out of performative media, the media as makers... On each occasion a given medium is used that use creates its own ground and its own difference.” What this means is that each time we use a technical apparatus, flip a cell phone, type on the computer, make a film, watch a TV, we are opening a new temporal ground in which our finitude is both confirmed and traversed and overcome. By using technical apparatuses, we partake in our own survival. And that happens every time we speak, teach or touch someone. But it is most discernible in the usage of the technical apparatuses like recording live or life.

However, the chance of any inscription, anything deposited to memory is also that it partakes in the possibility of survival. It allows that which is recorded to have an afterlife. Like something Walter Benjamin saw in translation, a *Nachreifen*, a late ripening in the afterlife. It encodes into the process of recording a possibility of return to come from the future and in the future. It will come in the future as an affirmation of what has come to pass, whether the protagonists of this particular film called *The First Sail* are around or not (I certainly hope for the former, I have

some selfish interests in being around for many more years, and wish the same for Hillis!). So it is also a joyous occasion, do not touch that dial, we shall return after these messages! Our absence is from the start implied in the process of recording; the finitude of our *da-sein*, being here, is a condition of filming, even though we are around well and alive. But the repetition encoded by this film (of the great on camera time shared with Hillis during this project) and of the possibility of coming back, is also a cause for rejoicing. Both Derrida and Hillis teach us the importance of this performative aspect of media, at work any time we use a prosthetic apparatus to confine something to memory. It is both sad and joyous. It confronts him with the finitude of his friend's demise, but is also somewhat soothing. It is a sham simulacrum, this thing called film or television, nothing replaces the singular live being, but it also gives the memory of life a chance to live on in this spectral manner. And that spectrality is at work in life itself.

Any archive, Derrida said in *Archive Fever*, actually comes from the future, from the time yet to come, *a-venir*.

The book will contain all the filmed material in transcript, some thirty hours of it, more than 200 pages; the film of course will be about 85 minutes long. But the venue of publication is most fortunate. It will appear as a book with the Open Humanities Press, and in an online version with the University of Michigan. In the book version, I will be able to include all the anecdotes surrounding the filming, the work of some of my collaborators (like the editor, David Rodriguez) will be included, and I am particularly pleased that it will have an introduction by Henry Sussman. "The Cinema of J. Hillis Miller" will be the title I am toying with for my own essay to introduce the project. The book may also contain excerpts from recent essays by J. Hillis Miller. The online version will allow the inclusion of some

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streamed visual material from the interviews instead of just photographs. That multimediality fits this project perfectly.

As for telepathy. This project is a product (if one could employ the logic of causality here) of a number of coincidences. Starting with the first one that I met Derrida first as a signature on a guest book page in 1983 at Cornell University. He signed a blank page of a guest book in the Telluride House at Cornell, and I came two weeks later (I was then an undergraduate student from Belgrade, the former Yugoslavia, invited to stay there by Jonathan Culler), and signed at the first next available place, right below him! First we met telepathically, as signatures! On my way back home to Belgrade I carried two essays with me I made while at Cornell, J. Hillis Miller's "The Critic as Host," which you have (telepathically?) reproduced at the beginning of this interview, and Jacques Derrida's "Living On/Border Lines"—incidentally another essay on borders. Then there was an incredible coincidence that later on I worked with Derrida and Hillis at the University of California, Irvine, we became colleagues, I organized events with them, a conference in Hillis' honor, etc. And then when I moved to the University of Florida, it turned out that Hillis' father was the first post WW 2 president of the University, J. Hillis Miller Senior, that Hillis grew up here, frequently visits, is a *doctor honoris causa* of the University of Florida and has spent part of his life as young adult here! All the reasons for making a film about Hillis were right there! The latest one happened only three month ago. I was in Los Angeles when I was handed the tapes I believed lost I had commissioned of the Derrida conference ("Who or What—Jacques Derrida") that I organized at the University of Florida in October of 2006, with Hillis' keynote address! Something that took place five years ago and three thousand miles away resurfaced in California. I thought that was Hillis' and Derrida's way of telling me, "do not worry Dragan, the film will turn out ok, take these home, and welcome to California!" The

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footage from that conference in 2006 (Hillis' plenary talk) now actually opens the film in its rough cuts (the film should be finished by end of May 2011). I see in this a work of telepathy, an unfolding of an unwritten program, like an affirmation from a distance I am receiving (like a message) from these two great thinkers and protagonists of this film. Without borders indeed!

- 3) During one of the interview sessions, you take the opportunity to mention your "own being swept away by [Hillis'] writing;" in particular, your encounter with *The Critic as Host*, which you describe as a one of those "moments of absolute fascination." Many other scholars and students have also cited Hillis as a major source of inspiration and challenge for their work.

In the present academic climate, the trenchant glare of Deconstructive thought has waned, and many scholars have been left to wonder, where does criticism go from here. Do you think that in today's university's system, Hillis' work is still relevant? Appreciated? Not only through the works that emerged in debt to his ingenuity, but in terms of contemporary applicability and usage? Certainly many students continue to encounter Derrida, or at the very least can identify him, but does this hold true for J. Hillis Miller? Why or why not?

I discovered "deconstruction" at the age of 19 in Belgrade, then Yugoslavia. I was writing my first term paper, called "Plato's Concept of Literature." For that paper I read some of the classic assessments of Plato's work by A.E. Taylor, etc. The works like Taylor's assessed in an exemplary scholarly way Plato's ideas but told me nothing about why exactly this is relevant today. Then I stumbled on a paragraph from Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy* which took my breath away. No one

told me to read this, this imposed itself onto me on its own at a very young age. Just like no one told me to copy these two essays (at a great expense then, for a student from Yugoslavia budget in 1983, to bring them with me back to Belgrade, they just powerfully imposed themselves on me). Since then, I have heard about “deconstruction” that this was all premature, the time for this has not come yet, this is all only fashion, etc. And now the trend is to say, oh, deconstruction, it is passé! So it never quite took place! It was too early and now too late, too bad for it! Which is probably something that Derrida would agree with, deconstruction may be that which gives place but is never at one with itself, but for different reasons than those who assess it in bad faith. For me deconstruction was never a question of a “trend.” What I sensed spoke to me about the great achievements of the Western literary and philosophical tradition, and made them alive, relevant, vibrant, lively! That moment of encountering the work of Derrida and Hillis (in my introduction to the “J” section in *Critical Inquiry* I likened their texts working on me from a distance like letters, sealed with a kiss) is now thirty years behind me. That is when I first read the pages from Hillis’ seminal essay “The Critic as Host.” But the fascination is new as always. In two hundred years our epoch will be known as the epoch of deconstruction.

And I urge you if you have not yet read Jacques Derrida’s essay about “9/11,” to do so; I consider it to be the most lucid essay written about what is happening to the world and to the U.S. at the current moment. No one has given a better political analysis of our own time, of the most pressing matters related to this event, than Jacques Derrida. And maybe that is why many who have vested interests in keeping the status quo, perpetuating certain securitarian measures in this country are afraid of it. Or read what Samuel Weber, another thinker close

to Derrida and “deconstruction” has to say about “9/11” in his *Theatricality as Medium*, or what J. Hillis Miller writes about the current crisis in the United States in his recent essays, and you will see why for many a deconstructive intervention with probing political insights represents a threat. These writings challenge some very powerful interests in politics, society and academia while reaffirming others. These thinkers are reworking the political or historical and theoretical ground on which we stand.

This film is in itself a testament to the vibrancy of J. Hillis Miller. A year ago I approached David Rodriguez to serve as editor to the film. He was so infatuated with the material (no doubt due to Hillis’ magnetic on camera influence though he never met in person) that he chose to write his MA Thesis about the making of this film in the light of J.Hillis Miller’s work! And he wrote an amazing document that I will use in the book to accompany the film. So I say, Hillis is going strong in his ability to attract and inspire any scholar who stumbles upon his work!

4) Who is the intended audience for this project? Does the intended audience for the book differ from that of the film in any way? In what spheres do you see this film and accompanying book to be utilized? Where will they be made available? From the interview, Hillis seems enthusiastic and supportive of the movement to create online collections and libraries; will this project be available in this format?

This has been an object of extended discussion with my editor, David Rodriguez. We of course have no clue who will in fact watch the film in the end. But some calculation is part of the decision process: what to put in the film, what to cut, in what order, etc. We want the film to be “accessible” to the “lay” audience. Hillis

comes from a long family tree of Virginians, his great great grandfather is one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence. Hillis talks about that in the film. His father was a commissioner for higher education and as such a founder of the State University of New York system, and then moved on to found the great Medical School at the University of Florida. Hillis' father passed away at an early age of 53 while still in the office. Hillis had a difficult life at times (I've read in his archive his letters requesting financial support from various institutions where he was a graduate student), before becoming one of the greatest American minds of our time. This is a biography of an exceptional man by any standards. I am carefully weighing my words. It is worth telling on its own. In addition, Hillis has had an outstanding career, of a kind that is less and less possible at an American University. This is also a film on the background of the decline of a great system of higher education in the U.S.. We discuss numerous topics which should be of concern to everyone, there is no "ivory tower" discussion in these interviews (or for that matter in Hillis' later works): climate change, health insurance, US securitarian policies, Homeland Security, wars, the reactionary politics of the Republican (Tea) Party and the Bush years, etc. This film and the topics raised are of concern to anyone who wants to hear a wise man reflecting on the current state of the world, and that will be featured prominently. In addition, these reflections show the power of deconstructive thinking and will show that Hillis' work has always had this potential. He is using it now when it politically matters the most, and when such interventions have the greatest political value and effect. In any case, when they are terribly needed.

We want all of this to be visible in the film. However, there are aspects of this interview for which one needs to be receptive to intellectual topics. But true

intellectual cinema will also have the power to go across cultural borders. Hillis does all the work!

There is another aspect of the film, related to the possibility of engaging strategies of deconstruction in making this film. David and I have had long discussions related to both the ethics and aesthetics of representation, both in terms of content and in terms of the film material. For example, the following sequence: It starts with the establishing shot of Hillis' house in Sedgwick. Then there is a flow of the nearby brook for fifteen seconds (passage of time? of life?). Followed by a slow motion close up of Hillis' one eye and a cut in his skin visible above it, without any explanation. Followed by a question, Where did you get this cut? In Irvine, California, I fell, the glass lens cut above the eye. Then we go on and discuss Jacques Derrida's lecture in Irvine dedicated to Hillis work. Here is briefly the thinking that went into that sequence: a cut above the eye (a cut in the skin, *pelicula*, the little skin of cinema), a wounded gaze, related to California (where Hillis last saw Derrida, discussed in the segment), an eye almost cut by a lens (which should bring to mind the modernist tradition, the broken eye glasses in Eisenstein's *Odessa steps* from *Battleship Potemkin* as well as the split eyeball in *Un Chien Andalou* by Louis Bunuel and Salvador Dali). Followed by the question of mourning and the discussion of the relationship between and image and the specter, etc. I am mentioning these greats of cinema not to compare myself to them, but to show the theoretical and historical knowledge I have as an academic, which has gone into the making of the film. I hope some of these procedures will be visible and make sense even to those who do not know Derrida's work on the testamentary logic of the sign, or Hillis' on performativity. I hope that this knowledge put to work (as well as the great camera work by Georg Koszulinsky) will be visible to all without any prior knowledge and that it adds to the intertextual and other effects of this film.

- 5) You have hours of footage of Hillis – interviews both in Gainesville and at his house in Maine, on his boat, in his office, etc. How do you plan on condensing this material into a documentary film? Is there a specific theme or topic you want to focus on?

Indeed this is a vast amount of material. The standard ratio in documentaries is 20 or 25 hours to one hour minimum. For each hour of the documentary, you have to make 25 hours of filming. The ratio of all the material I have is one to one.

Everything filmed is filmworthy, I practically have no on camera time that cannot be put into the film. And then there are several lectures: Hillis on Derrida's notion of autoimmunity from the 2006 conference at the University of Florida; his lecture on the critical climate change from 2010 at the University of Florida. There is an abundance of material that has to be condensed in a bit of over an hour. We have our work cut out for us.

I am pleased to say that the interest in this project has been very encouraging. I have already held a projection of the rough cuts at the University of California, Berkeley in the Comparative Literature Department two weeks ago (April 1, 2011).

- 6) The full interview with Hillis is vast. Through anecdotes and analyses, we learn of everything from Hillis' childhood to the politics behind the tenure of his colleagues. He is prompted by questions that are well-developed and thoughtful, as contributed by yourself and the colleagues, friends, and students of his you contacted. However, I was surprised that a question regarding the controversy surrounding the anti-Semitic, wartime writings of the late Paul de Man never arose. Hillis has indeed written about it, but it seems to be an odd omission. In fact, some of the submitted questions you received listed this as a question to ask Hillis. It seems likely intentional?

Otherwise an anomalous accident or act of the unconscious? If it was, in fact, intentionally excluded, why?

I have actually had the chance to ask only a fraction of the questions asked of Hillis by his friends. I had to make choices, often made by the course of the interviews. And when it concerned Hillis' published work, I concentrated on his current writings, not what he wrote in the past. Apart from a discussion of Victorian Literature, most if not all of the theoretical discussion is concentrated on the critical climate change, Hillis' relationship with Derrida (several friends asked him that in fact, and it is something I have been engaged with in my work), the current state of the university, the media, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, etc. So I focused on the most recent writings and on current issues. And I would have wanted to ask Hillis about many other books of his, he wrote some 40 of them, and hundreds of articles! The Paul de Man "affair" simply did not come up, but that is among many other topics omitted. These omissions have not been calculated in any way. And I wish I had had 30 more hours of interview time to ask all I wanted to ask, and what his friends asked him. However, I am glad you brought this up, anti-Semitism is, in fact, the topic of his latest published book (to appear in Summer 2011 by The University of Chicago Press) called *The Conflagration of Community: Literature After Auschwitz*. The book raises the issues of literature and the Holocaust in a systematic way, from Kafka and Benjamin, to Imre Kertesz. And my work with Hillis on the film and my own book is not finished. I plan to ask him all the omitted questions when we prepare the transcript for publication. In addition, I am organizing an event in October of this year, which will be focused on this latest work on the Holocaust and literature by J. Hillis Miller, with his participation. We hope to screen for the first time *The First Sail: J. Hillis Miller* on that occasion as well and have a discussion in his presence. In preparation for that, I am in the process of writing my own interview

with Hillis on the topic of anti-Semitism and literature, to be published in *Ha-tanin*, the yearbook of Jewish Studies at the University of Florida. So I will have an opportunity to raise the issues you mentioned in conjunction with Hillis' recent work on literature and the Holocaust. I intend to include that new written interview as an appendix to the interview material transcribed from the film once we publish it as a book. So this omission (together with a number of other questions still pending) is only temporary and the questions and additional responses will find their way in the final version of the book. This is still a work in progress.

- 7) Hillis is a very affable figure on the screen; he clearly takes immense joy in his work and his trademark "what, me worry?" – Alfred E. Neuman – attitude mitigates the darker edges of Deconstructionism.

What was your favorite part about working with Hillis? How do you think the audience will appreciate him?

Let us not end on a "darker" note. This is also a good opportunity to remind us that "deconstruction" is a great philosophy of affirmation and laughter. In my own work, I have written about Jacques Derrida and laughter and have coined the word "deRIDEology" (from the Latin *rideo, ridere, risi, risum*, to laugh, combining it with Derrida's name to form the name of this, to paraphrase Nietzsche, "Merry Science" that deconstruction is), to capture this force of originary affirmation, which Jacques Derrida called the "yes saying" or the "yes laughter" (*oui dire* and *oui rire*), for example, when he wrote about Joyce. His last, unfinished essay, dedicated to his friend Samuel Weber, is called, "You Must Be Joking" (*Vous voulez rire*)! Throughout his work Derrida wrote about laughter. So let us not forget that while "deconstruction" has tremendous probing interpretive powers to cut through the alienating ruling ideologies (thus while dealing with the darker side of life, it is not

dark in itself), it is first and foremost a philosophical practice of transformation, and a thought of originary affirmation. Nothing “dark” about it. You gotta be joking!

And indeed, it has been a profound joy to work with J. Hillis Miller, I consider my encounter with him and his work a blessing of my life! And his on camera persona simply emanates warmth, wisdom, intelligence and humor. He mitigates not only the “darker sides of Deconstruction” but also the darker side of life! Just consider the anecdote (this will be in the film) he tells how he and his wife Dorothy decided where to be buried. “We knew that people DO die in California, but we could not think of us being buried there!” Hillis’ stories are full of such anecdotes and warm memories of his friends. And since you started with the quote from “The Critic as Host,” may I say how great a host that critic, J. Hillis Miller is? Both my cameraman and I were treated royally by Hillis and his wife Dorothy, and made available their homes for our filming, upward of forty or fifty hours to include the prep time, us the intruders with our cumbersome equipment, questions, imposing on their time, moving the furniture around, etc. Hillis is an exceptionally generous host. He in fact allowed us to be hosts in his own house. Some of the decisions regarding the choice of the filming shot close up for most of the time during the interviews, were motivated by the sense that Hillis has a great cinematic presence, and that the most interesting drama in the film is the one played out on his face, all else is secondary! I had a long discussion with my cameraman, Georg Koszulinsky, before we started, regarding what kind of shot format should be used. I wanted to capture that spirit, wit, humor, and a sense of serene wisdom which he emanates in real life, so we set on a close up, at rare times extreme close up, and pulling back to medium close when we wanted to underscore some point he was making, and show him in the environment of his library. I am glad that you think we managed to make those qualities come across.