

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Nelson, Jennifer. Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's Ambassadors

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Volume 43, numéro 2, printemps 2020

Transformative Translations in Early Modern Britain and France
Traductions transformatives dans la première modernité française et britannique

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072222ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34861>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Jary, S. (2020). Compte rendu de [Nelson, Jennifer. Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's Ambassadors]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(2), 396–398. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34861>

hath deserved” (xvii). In this amalgam of continuity and evanescence lies the difficult truths Wyatt’s poem explores even as Murphy’s book provides singular access to the “vse of Poesie” as the original cause for what it means to be human.

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Nelson, Jennifer.

Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein’s Ambassadors.

University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 198 + 43 ill. ISBN 978-0-271-08340-7 (hardcover) US\$99.95.

Jennifer Nelson’s *Disharmony of the Spheres* presents an insightful, new reading of homogeneous space during a period coined by Michael Sauter as the “spatial reformation.” Rather than focus on the unity that often accompanies homogeneous space, Nelson argues that the positive attributes of “sustained difference” are encapsulated in Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), which Nelson uses as a point of reference in her analysis of sixteenth-century European literary texts and inventions. Drawing attention to the centrality of the anamorphosed skull, Nelson states her intention to correct a common misreading that the skull is indicative of “the vain desire for correspondence among things” (4). Nelson argues that contemporary readings of the skull by Lacan and Žižek, for example, fail to understand the importance of disharmony to free will. Nelson argues that Holbein’s anamorphosed skull is a perspectival technique used to suggest the existence of spatial unity that extends to the real, only to reveal the opposite—that the painting’s disjunctive space “interrupts” the real (7). Disjunctive space that interrupts the real is the conceptual foundation upon which Nelson constructs an argument in favour of spatial contingency. Nelson’s study examines the ways in which sixteenth-century Europeans engaged with the concept of contingency, using the work of Erasmus and the inventions of Philipp Melanchthon and Georg Hartmann as examples of self-dissimilarity caused by the turbulent religious and political climate of early modern Europe.

Nelson uses an adapted version of the postmodern concept “transrealism” to describe how “an individual or group seeks to preserve difference rather

than homogenize it in the name of coherent identity” (10), because she stresses that fragmentation is a precondition of reality experienced individually or collectively. Nelson argues that all three writers and inventors in her study held a longstanding fascination with sustained difference, or dissimilarity, which underscores her argument that pluralized realities are inherent to humankind’s orientation in the world.

The first chapter, “Anamorphosis as Symbolic Form,” both establishes her conceptual framework and methodology and introduces the elements of Holbein’s painting to which she refers in the following chapters. The second chapter, “Melanchthon’s Imperfect Mathematics,” discusses how the Lutheran reformer—Melanchthon—pluralizes the world by drawing his readers’ attention to imperfections. Melanchthon’s work on geodesy inspired sixteenth-century astronomy, but he also helped Luther complete his 1522 translation of the New Testament. Although Melanchthon and Luther were friendly, they could not overcome their differences in regard to how one is meant to approach God. Nelson argues that two possible readings of the anamorphosed skull capture the epistemological divide between Melanchthon and Luther. The interpretation of the skull that aligns with Lutheran theology would read the carpenter’s square and mathematical instruments as a vain attempt to understand God’s creation in the face of transcendent death symbolized by the skull; on the other hand, the mathematical instruments can be interpreted as an affirmation that the mastery of mathematical instruments is what makes transcendent death visible, which aligns with Melanchthon’s theology. The second chapter also discusses monetary exchange and the need for a universal system of measurement, as well as early timepieces. Nelson points out that Melanchthon’s mathematics were wholly devoted to a pious understand of God, yet as measurement of Nature and the cosmos increased, so did the number of discrepancies.

In the third chapter, “Hartmann’s Locative Science,” Nelson focuses on Hartmann’s inventions, specifically his locative and autonomous sundials. Nelson argues that the production of timepieces plays a fundamental role in imperialism, noting that autonomous instruments—which do not require the input of local information—hold epistemological pretenses that anticipate a “forcibly harmonized, neoliberal world,” which justifies Nelson’s adaption of the postmodern concept of transrealism. Hartmann’s instruments played a role in Europe’s attempt to homogenize the world, which appears to contradict Nelson’s argument of disjunctive space; but spatial contingency is established

through her observation that, whereas geodesy sought to homogenize the world, Hartmann's measurements revealed largescale discrepancies that challenged homogeneous space. The fourth chapter, "Erasmus Enumerates Europe," is where Nelson's arguments begin to converge. The first three chapters were at times fractured, but Nelson's analysis of Erasmus's *Adages* makes her argument coherent and impactful. In this chapter, Nelson explains that Erasmus's writing style exhibits his "eclectic humanism," or the idea that truth exists on a continuum. The final chapter, "The Self-Dissimilar Salvation of Holbein's *Ambassadors*," brings the *Ambassadors* into discussion with the previous chapters, but also devotes time to a deeper analysis of the painting. Nelson provides a point-by-point analysis of the array of seemingly unrelated items portrayed by Holbein and argues that self-dissimilarity and sustained difference are related to freedom. In other words, it is disharmony that allows free will to prosper. Nelson also concludes that Holbein's representation of transcendent death through the painter's portrayal of the skull reveals that life is finite, mathematical, and thus subject to manipulation.

Nelson offers an impressively detailed analysis of the painting, as well as the instruments and texts introduced in each chapter. I found the first three chapters a bit scattered—or perhaps fragmented—simply because the attention paid to minute details makes it challenging to follow the overarching argument, but this may also be a manifestation of the project's ambition to highlight incongruity and spatial interruption. I found the last two chapters the most compelling, because they drew necessary connections between items in the earlier chapters, providing retrospective clarity. As a whole, Nelson's *Disharmony of the Spheres* is a dynamic new way of thinking about changing conceptions of space in early modern Europe. Nelson presents an impressive body of research, and the means by which she explains the value of sustained difference and self-dissimilarity is highly convincing.

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