

Ästhetisches Amerika

Trotzige Faust

Was geschieht, wenn wir auf Fotos jenen Moment festgehalten sehen, in dem ein Mensch sich von den Türmen des World Trade Center herabstürzt? Fragen wie diese standen im Mittelpunkt einer Tagung zum Zusammenhang von Politik und Ästhetik in der amerikanischen Kultur in der Bayerischen Amerika-Akademie. Winfried Fluck (FU Berlin) zeigte am Beispiel John Deweys, wie sich in der pragmatischen Philosophie ästhetisches Denken an sinnlichen Erfahrungen zu bewähren hatte, die nicht mehr auf eine Elite beschränkt waren. Er erinnerte an die Analysen Tocquevilles zur demokratischen Gesellschaft, die den einzelnen veranlasse, sich von der Masse der Gleichberechtigten abzuheben. Daß ästhetische Distinktionsbemühungen gerade in der amerikanischen Kultur oft zu enttäuschend gleichförmigen Ergebnissen führen, blieb an dieser Stelle ungesagt. Fluck nahm allerdings ein verwandtes Dilemma in den Blick: Obwohl amerikanische Denker und Künstler immer wieder versucht haben, das Ästhetische als eine alltägliche, „kunstlose Kunst“ mit demokratischem Potential zu mobilisieren, verfestigt es sich doch unaufhaltsam zu einem Produkt, das sein kulturelles Kapital aus „hierarchisierenden Institutionen“ schöpfe.

Miles Orvell (Temple University) kommentierte die fotografischen Bemühungen, den 11. September zu bewältigen: Im Vergleich zeigten sich unterschiedliche Strategien im Umgang mit dem schuldbewußten Vergnügen an Bildern der Verheerung: James Nachtwey hat auf Mittel zurückgegriffen, die den Betrachter entlasten, indem sie an sein ästhetisches Bewußtsein appellieren und die Bilder in tröstliche und heroisierende Kontexte stellen. Joel Meyrowitz, der fast 8000 Fotos der Katastrophe aufnahm, wurde dagegen von Colin Powell zum offiziellen Berichterstatter ernannt, und die amerikanische Regierung nutzte die Wanderausstellung „After September 11“ zur ideologischen Selbstdarstellung. In dem kommunalen Fotoprojekt „Here is New York“ sah Orvell schließlich einen gelungenen Gegenentwurf: Die auch im Internet zugängliche Ausstellung widersetzte sich der Instrumentalisierung, weil sie Bildern namenloser Amateure ein Forum gab und so an Walt Whitmans „demokratische“ Poetik erinnerte.

Philip Fisher (Harvard) plädierte am Beispiel von Jasper Johns und Richard Serra für eine Abrüstung ästhetischer Terminologie zugunsten jener Beschreibungskunst, mit der sich die englischen Wahrnehmungstheoretiker des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts Phänomenen wie dem Rauhen und dem Glatten, dem Plötzlichen oder den Schreien von Tieren angenommen haben. Hatte Orvell die entlastende Formel eines „destruktiven Erhabenen“ in Bildern des 11. September gefunden, so zog Fisher dem Sublimen das Kleine, Lokale und Konkrete vor; und wo Orvell den alles einschließenden Whitmanschen Gestus pries, plädierte Fisher für eine Sammlung alltäglicher Lebenswelten.

Judith Halberstam (Los Angeles) faßte ihre Überlegungen zu den Bedingungen der Möglichkeit politischer Anteilnahme als ästhetische Reflexion über das Scheitern aus einer entschieden homosexuellen Perspektive. In einer Tour de force, die von dem lesbisch anmutenden Fisch Dory im Trickfilm „Findet Nemo“ über die Schönheit „gescheiterter“ Vierter bei Olympischen Spielen führte, nahm sich Judith Halberstam schließlich der Fotografien und Gemälde von Cabello/Carceller und Judith Bamber an, um Gesten des Scheiterns als ästhetischen Stil und politisches Programm darzustellen. Hier, so glaubt sie, würden die Sichtweisen von Außenseitern zu einer Kritik amerikanischer Träume verdichtet: In den Fotos von leeren Swimming-pools offenbart sich eine kalifornische Dystopie; in den Horizonten der entdramatisierten, sich wiederholenden Seestücke der Blick auf eine „Frontier“, die eben nicht für alle Amerikaner einen utopischen Fluchtpunkt darstellt.

Judith Halberstam schloß mit der Vision eines Kollektivs der Scheiternden, und Fred Moten (Los Angeles) stellte eine ähnliche Idee vor: Er versuchte, ausgehend von der triumphal gereckten Faust eines schwarzen Geschworenen nach dem Freispruch von O. J. Simpson, den man des Mordes an seiner Frau angeklagt hatte, eine politische Ästhetik gestischer Verweigerung zu begründen. Für Moten manifestierte sich in der Kritik an der als irrational und melodramatisch gedeuteten Geste des Geschworenen der Geist einer pragmatischen liberalen Vernunft, die sich auf die besorgte Ablehnung eines exzessiv artikulierten schwarzen Radikalismus gründet, durch den der Konsens außer Kontrolle geraten könne. Gegen die Abwertung der Theatralität des schwarzen Protestes versuchte Moten, die Kantische Kategorie einer „Phantasie“ zu aktivieren, die – anders als die „Einbildungskraft“ – in „gesetzloser Freiheit“ operieren und dabei „Unsinn“ produzieren darf. Die gereckte Faust des Geschworenen geriet zur gestischen Signatur eines ästhetischen Moments, der sich der Instrumentalisierung und Institutionalisierung entgegenzustellen vermag. Anders als Judith Halberstam, die nicht darauf einging, daß nicht allein eine Geschichte des Mitleids, sondern auch jener Posen erzählt werden kann, in denen sich das Scheitern ästhetisiert, versuchte Moten solche historischen Resonanzräume auszuleuchten. Als Philip Fisher in der Abschlusss Diskussion seinen Kollegen empfahl, sich häufiger aus der Zeit herauszustehlen, mußte diese Vorstellung dem afro-amerikanischen Kollegen als luxuriöse Utopie erscheinen: Diese hat tatsächlich keinen Ort in der skeptischen Vision einer amerikanischen Demokratie, die dazu neigt, produktiv-verstörende ästhetische Erfahrungen pragmatisch zu nivellieren.

JULIKA GRIEM

lonial history), and since the overall location of islands within a transnational remapping of literary space would certainly deserve some more attention, it might have been wise to discuss the story of Clare Savage in this same context rather than moving it to the end of the study.

Instead, her next chapter is dedicated to Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*, in which the author expertly analyzes the juxtaposition of two gendered spatial spheres: the patriarchal, color-coded town of Ruby on the one hand, and the inclusive community at the Convent on the other. As Schröder notes, these two spaces are intricately related and can thus be read as a microcosmic comment on national (and, one might add, international) identities as well: "One could even speak of a dependency since Ruby needs the Convent as a scapegoat, a screen on which to project its fears and discontent" (189). Besides the texts' chronological order and the fact that Morrison's novel geographically returns to Oklahoma (which is also central to Joy Harjo's poems and would have made for a nice frame), another argument for ending the study with Morrison rather than Cliff would be Schröder's own criterion of "openness, change, and processuality" (244). This is most efficiently envisioned in *Paradise*, as this novel provides the most radical intertextualities and historical overlaps, and the most complex engagement with (trans)national ideologies. The author herself emphasizes that it is particularly Morrison's ending which expands the fictional spaces by a meta-fictional dimension: "The circle that encloses the novel is not complete, signaling a change – the attack will not be an ending but a beginning that leads somewhere else" (195). Just as readers have to complement the landscapes of Jamaica in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (cf. 240), they are, even more so, required in *Paradise* to piece together the narrative fragments in a continuous, metafictional process.

Schröder's interpretations are highly resourceful and nuanced: Devoting careful attention to textual detail, she provides an enriching reading experience for anyone interested in transcultural American literatures. Her conclusion that space is, eventually, "processual, contested and contestable" (13) is plausibly elucidated, and her literary examples to prove this point are aptly chosen. Despite a few (scarcely any) misprints (32, 244), redundancies (such as the somewhat repetitive definitions of the palimpsest, or the "main protagonist" [204]), or occasional syntactic or stylistic idiosyncracies (she speaks of "heterotopical" rather than "heterotopian" space [224]), this is an elegantly written book. Structural outlooks prepare each new part, and frequent summaries of results at the end of every chapter render the study particularly reader-friendly. In this same context, as always, an index would have been helpful – but the division of each interpretive part into thematic subchapters allows readers more easily to return to specific passages and adds transparency to the project.

One aspect that is not quite as persuasive is the author's selection, integration, and application of theoretical sources. While one might accept that Pierre Nora – whose distinction between history and memory has not been uncontested in the past two decades – is exclusively introduced for his term of the "sites of memory" and not reflected along more critical lines, it is rather surprising that Foucault's highly useful notion of the "heterotopia" is not mentioned until the very last chapter. His definition of the heterotopia as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacrit-*

ics 16.1 [1986]: 24) would have provided a most suitable background not only for the visual and textual spaces of Harjo's *Secrets*, but also for the constructed homeland of Ruby in Morrison's *Paradise*, which, as Schröder well argues, comprises both the medieval *hortus conclusus* and the Puritan "city upon a hill" (cf. 162). In light of this concept (had it been applied consistently), Schröder's convincing conclusion – that each of the texts discussed here can be read in terms of nation-building, as narratives which "draw and redraw the map of literary America" (245) – could have been even stronger. Likewise, Klaus Benesch and Kerstin Schmidt's encyclopedic volume on *Space in America* (2005) or Martina Löw's *Raumsoziologie* (2001) are somewhat regrettably missing. Readers partial to terminological precision, who wonder why there is no distinction between the terms 'place' and 'space,' except "in terms of size and familiarity" (47), might not be consoled by the concession that "[w]hile this distinction might be too simplistic and fuzzy for any philosophical inquiry into space and place, it suffices for the present undertaking" (47). The inclusion of Edward Soja's model of the "third space" – which the author mentions only in passing (21, 67) – or of the "itinerary of migrancy" as developed by Rüdiger Kunow would have provided valuable additions to this distinction, especially for the examination of identity and cultural difference. That such a discriminating terminological engagement in combination with a comprehensive theoretical survey is possible, even within the scope of a dissertation, has been masterfully demonstrated by Katja Sarkowsky in a similar project (*AlterNative Spaces: Constructions of Space in Native American and First Nations' Literatures* [Heidelberg: Winter, 2007]).

This being said, Nicole Schröder presents an adept exploration of her field, skillfully showing that notions of home and subjectivity are not only closely intertwined, but also being radically rewritten since the 1980 and 90s. Since we tend to think about both identity and space in dichotomous terms, the author compellingly encourages us to follow these texts' agenda and remap our understanding of space "as performative, i.e., as ongoing and emerging, and as constructed in interaction with the world, which highlights the possibility of (ex)change" (36). If Frank Lloyd Wright was correct in claiming that "space is the breath of art", this book makes a notable contribution to both.

Würzburg

BIRGIT DÄWES

Klaus Benesch and Ulla Haselstein, eds. *The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture. Publications of the Bavarian American Academy Volume 7. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007. 127 pp.*

The concept of aesthetics has recently resurfaced as a ubiquitous and popular topic in the humanities, leading to controversial discussions and equally heated debates about the aestheticising of everyday life and its implications. Klaus Benesch and Ulla Haselstein's *The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture*, which appeared as a volume in the Bavarian American Academy's publication series, is a welcome and valuable contribution to the study of how the aestheticising of human practices is inscribed by the social dimension while, at the same time, and conversely influencing that very same dimension. As a collection of selected contributions to the 2005 BAA conference, essays by seven prominent art historians and scholars illumi-

nate the power and politics of the aesthetic element in American culture and beyond, discussing them in terms of concepts such as race and sexuality, fashion, aesthetic theory, or the visual arts. As the synopsis on the back cover already suggests, it aims at shedding light on the "American dimensions" of aesthetic phenomena, since these often remain opaque in the context of the general sense of Americanisation.

The multifarious forms of aesthetic discourses as explored in this volume provide an interesting view on how aesthetics are currently being scrutinized for new insights with reference to the problems of contemporary U.S. society. Caught between current challenges and tradition, aesthetic concepts have found their way into consumer culture as well as the political sphere and thus play a significant role in every individual's life. Be it simply in terms of which dress to buy in order to make a specific impression or which wallpaper to choose for one's computer desktop, aesthetics is fundamentally about arousing emotion. Therefore, the characteristic quality of aesthetic objects to show rather than to tell and to evoke the impression that they delight rather than instruct is constantly being used as a means to influence the individual and society as a whole.

In his essay "Terror, Aesthetics, and the Humanities in the Public Sphere", Emory Elliott takes two novels, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, as examples in order to illustrate how texts challenge readers to critically reflect on the American self-image, arguing that both literary works are used as means to question the United States' contemporary political climate. Additionally, Elliott – as President of the American Studies Association – deplors contemporary university planning in the United States and the regrettable neglect of the humanities.

Winfried Fluck's contribution focuses on the concept of a democratic aesthetic, an anti-elitist concept of art that is based on popular forms of entertainment and self-expression, and assesses American practices of the aesthetic as originating from the egalitarianism of American culture. Arguing that there is a certain trend in American culture to turn art into an aesthetic repertoire "for individual self-expression and a claim for social recognition" (7), Fluck states that the rejection of elitist notions of art by supporters of minority cultures can be considered as drawing upon Bourdieu's concept of a cultural capital of art.

Moving into the world of fashion, Barbara Vinken compares two texts by Charles Baudelaire and Heinrich Heine, suggesting that both express an interplay between antique art – namely a marble statue – and fashion that is supposed to exemplify the temporality of the modern: Both writers treat fashion as a fleeting counterpart to traditional art forms but also turn it into a trope in order to disrupt notions of the timelessness of art. Vinken refers to the concept of "fashion after fashion" that aims at foregrounding transitoriness and time by deliberately making fashion look old and used: This controlled decomposition shifts "into a new, old aesthetic, an uncanny image of the classical statue, the epitome of the eternal" (53).

Art historian Juliane Rebentisch, on the other hand, discusses the "dual context" of art and argues that neither the presence nor the absence of context is enough to explain aesthetic phenomena. Among others, Rebentisch refers to context-oriented pieces of art, or more precisely: Pieces of art that achieve their desired effect within a particular surrounding, such as those by Richard Serra and says that the performativity of experiencing the aesthetic is situated between practicality and theory. According

to Rebentisch, aesthetic experience is defined as an interplay or event between subject and object. Analogically, art theory should at long last deal with "the critical return of the aesthetic" in contemporary art works.

Judith Halberstam and Fred Moten both move beyond the abstract discussions on the definition of aesthetic experience. While Halberstam, in "Notes of Failure", deals with the aesthetics of queer art, Moten, in his article "Gestural Critique of Judgement", relates to Kantian notions, looking at black art and politics and their relation to law. Making use of Judie Bamber's seascapes, among others, Halberstam argues that these images "speak to a queer temporality that constitutes a rejection of futurity and proximity to the now" (83) and claims that aesthetic structures are connected with location or particular spaces. Moten, on the other hand, embarks on an analysis of black semiotic discourse, arguing that bodily gestures (such as one juror's raised fist in the O.J. Simpson trial and the controversial reactions it evoked) function as a serious expression of anti-instrumental impulses and a rejection of "a certain system of judgment, a testimony in and [...] a critique of the testimonial modes that system offers" (109).

Last but not least, in his concluding essay Miles Orvell discusses photographs of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, providing a new perspective on the aesthetic in an age of catastrophe. Referring to a storefront exhibition and, eventually, online collection entitled *Here is New York* consisting of well over 5,000 images – both professional and amateur – of September 11 (and also loosely linking it with Walt Whitman's famous *Leaves of Grass* and the poet's notion of a democratic aesthetic), Orvell argues that these recent social or cultural developments have brought about an innovative form of presentation for the visual arts outside the confines of traditional mass media. This new stage, which is of course heavily determined by the internet, has subsequently delineated a new way of aesthetic experience.

Apart from being a highly interesting book for anyone interested in the aesthetic dimensions of cultural practices, Benesch and Haselstein's *The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture* also lends itself to a wider readership as a valuable reflection on a phenomenon that is all-pervasive in today's society. Hardly anything can be criticised in this collection of perceptive and insightful essays, all of which are well-argued and give detailed examples of the concepts discussed. Possibly, a chapter on the aesthetic in American films or particularly television shows, which recently seem to be seizing established themes and turning them into sometimes quite unusual new forms, might have been a nice addition to this volume. However, this is but a minor – and certainly subjective – point in a work that deals eclectically with a wide field but nevertheless gives the reader an informative and intelligible insight into the vast topic of aesthetic discourses.

Duisburg-Essen

STEFANIE ALBERS

Reingard M. Nischik, ed. *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations. European Studies in American Literature and Culture*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007. x + 426 pp.

Early in her useful introduction to this useful volume, editor Reingard M. Nischik writes that the "intention here is to offer a well-founded survey of the Canadian short