

KATHRYN HUME, *Aggressive Fiction: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2012), 200 + xiii pp.

When Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* was published in 1991, *Washington Post* critic Jonathan Yardley called it "a contemptible piece of pornography, the literary equivalent of a snuff flick." The entire latter part of the text, he writes, "can only be described as repulsive, a bloodbath serving no purpose save that of morbidity, titillation and sensation; *American Psycho* is a loathsome book."<sup>1</sup> This kind of reaction—even though Yardley is not specifically mentioned in the book—is Kathryn Hume's starting point for her study on what she terms "aggressive fiction." "Why should we keep reading," she wonders, "when novelists strive to undermine our values, push gross unpleasantness in our face, omit connectives and explanations that would help us understand, reduce characters to placeholders, and fail to come to any resolution?" (2). By "aggressive fiction," however, Hume does not exclusively mean fiction of extreme physical or sexual violence; she also includes four other types of "attack" that have "the effect of making ordinarily competent readers wish to stop reading" (8; emphasis in orig.). These types, which form the structural framework for her study, include—next to "extreme sex and violence" (10)—narrative speed, modes of complaint, grotesque imagery, and the destabilization of readers' ontological assumptions. One can wonder about the definition of what makes an "ordinarily competent reader," of course: especially since he or she is the central gauge for the various "modes of undermining reader comfort" (11), mostly through emotional effects such as "frustration, revulsion, irritation, discomfiture, and anxiety" (9).

After establishing her thesis around the Horatian "author-reader contract" (1), a tacit agreement by which literature should provide both entertainment and information, Hume displays a wide spectrum of ways in which this contract is broken in her selection of "contemporary fiction" (14)—novels published, for the largest part, between the 1960s and 1990s. With exemplary glimpses at novels such as Ishmael Reed's *The Terrible Twos*, Rob-

ert Coover's *John's Wife*, Fran Ross's *Oreo*, Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, or William Burroughs's *The Ticket that Exploded*, she looks first at three ways of producing the effect of narrative speed—an "aggressive" tactic, because in the novels, according to Hume, "events are hurtling by too fast for real understanding" (14). The mechanisms of speed include multiplication (of plot elements or characters, for instance), subtraction (of realist details or connective narrative), and the use of what the author calls "phantasmagoria"—"the creation of puzzling anomalies for which no explanation is given" (26).

The next chapter is dedicated to "modalities of complaint," which Hume defines as "the relentless articulation of discontent, usually characterized by strong emotive elements" (44; emphasis in orig.). This phenomenon is subdivided into self-centered complaints (e.g., Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* or Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*), complaints about oppressors (e.g., Andrea Dworkin's *Mercy*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, or Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*), as well as the more empathetic complaint over the plight of others (William Kotzwinkle's *Doctor Rat* and Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*). In the author's defense, she notes the "achievement of self-supporting independence" that shapes the ending of *The Color Purple* (61), for instance, but her argument that "complaint is a frustrating genre because in its purest form, it does not offer a solution" (63) seems to fall short of acknowledging the necessity of social criticism, even in excessive form, in order to provide an operational stance of narrative intervention.

"Conjugations of the Grotesque," the study's third chapter, first offers a wide range of definitions of the grotesque itself (from Bakhtin to Harpham), before analyzing the interrelated phenomena of bodily grotesque (with the examples of novels such as Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* or Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*), of "grotesque worlds" (85)—which focuses more obviously on social issues (including James Morrow's *Towing Jehovah*, Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*)—and of modified or "normalized" grotesque (108), which operates, for instance, by making the grotesque useful or valuable or by displaying characters' positive responses to grotesque

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Yardley, "American Psycho: Essence of Trash." *The Washington Post* 27 Feb. 1991.

situations. “The writers in this chapter,” the author concludes, “all side to a greater or lesser degree with the anti-orderly values, which significantly differentiate contemporary grotesque from that of the medieval or Renaissance periods” (114). Again, the chapter diligently collects examples and functions of grotesque elements; yet some of the finer points of cultural difference would have deserved a little more attention. It is surprising that, even though the analysis of Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart* acknowledges the concepts of “totemic irony” (104) and the Anishinaabe author’s criticism of victimry, it also posits that what “makes his worlds grotesque is that they represent for him white cultural values, themselves repulsive and astounding from a Native American standpoint” (102)—which ultimately reduces the ironic and tricksterish qualities of the text to a binary stance.

The final two chapters are the study’s shortest; they deal with forms of narrated violence (chapter four) that aim at effects of terror (e.g., Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*), horror (e.g., Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*), and revulsion (e.g., Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk*) and with forms of upsetting readers’ ontological frameworks (chapter five) through characters’ minds (e.g., Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*), through textual features of uncertainty (e.g., Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*), or through multiple storylines or sets of reality (e.g., Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*). The distinctions in these chapters are well-argued (especially in contrast to genre horror, which usually stabilizes social and political norms), and especially the analysis of Ellis’s *American Psycho* is appropriately located among previous positions of criticism. It is interesting that the author seems to be much more patient with Ellis’s narrative excess than with Acker’s or Dworkin’s lamentations; and in more general terms, the latter half of the study seems to make stronger and more convincing points than some of the rather cursory treatments of novels in the first two chapters.

Exemplarily looking at some forty fictional texts, Hume collects enough representative material to make a case for the phenomenon of “aggressive fiction”—a trendy theme also touched upon by Jennifer Doyle’s recently published *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. The analysis of these novels in relation to one another is certainly original and the

book deserves credit for both its transparent structure and its meticulous analysis and classification of the various narratological functions and effects. Obviously, the condensation of a wide field such as the “contemporary American novel” into 172 pages demands certain sacrifices, and the choice of texts should have been rendered explicit to make readers wonder less about conspicuous absences and imbalances. Not only Canadians would frown upon the categorization of Douglas Coupland as an American novelist, only three novels are actually from the twenty-first century, and while six novels by Kathy Acker are discussed, Don DeLillo and Ronald Sukenick are missing entirely, as are most contemporary Native American writers—and there would have been plenty of “aggressive” material in Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* or Alexie’s *Indian Killer*. While exclusions such as these are forgivable for a study of this scope, it would have been useful to include more theory on affect (Melissa Gregg’s 2010 *Affect Theory Reader* would have been a good starting point)—especially considering the study’s essential focus on readers’ reactions and emotions.

My major point of critique, however, is less about the book’s specific methodology or corpus than about its unconcealed hostility towards theory. Theory is not, as the introduction and preface suggest, something inaccessible to “the less sophisticated” (12) and separate from the “readability and enjoyability” of a text (13). Instead, it helps us to define terms and concepts within clear and explicable boundaries, it safeguards scholarship from operating with speculations on authors’ intentions, and it forces us to ask questions and leave well-trodden paths rather than to find our particular perspective confirmed. To merely expect “pleasure and instruction, the traditional rewards of the reader-author contract” (164) is a practice that tacitly perpetuates dominant ideologies, and it is precisely the point of much literature—contemporary or historical—to intervene with these practices. Thus, when Hume rather uncritically writes in her introduction that “[p]leasure mostly involves reinforcing values that make us feel good about ourselves” (2), the book’s trajectory is misleadingly phrased. This is exactly what Althusser defines as “ideological activity,” which is “sustained by voluntary or involuntary, conscious or unconscious, adherence to an ensemble of representations

and beliefs” (24).<sup>2</sup> As if to confirm this point, some of the positions taken in Hume’s study (e.g., towards William Burroughs’s “having used every drug and combination of drugs invented by humanity” [27]) are intuitively moralistic rather than academically reflected. The point of fiction, however, is the opposite of such “adherence to [...] beliefs”: in its exploration of the cultural imaginary, it is a most suitable site for the development of alternative viewpoints. If we sought fiction that simply confirmed our worldview, social and cultural change would become impossible. “The limits of my language,” Ludwig Wittgenstein famously summarized “mean the limits of my world.”<sup>3</sup> If it were not for critical, experimental, or alternative uses of language, Western society would still be writing (to give a random example) about “the admiration, love, and devotion which the negro feels for the children of a beloved master,” (211) as Massachusetts-born writer Caroline Lee Hentz did in her highly popular novel *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, a “non-aggressive” book by the author’s standards.

In Kathryn Hume’s defense, the final pages of her book make this point as well.

“The degree of discomfiture caused by aggressive fiction,” she concludes, “can free us from our usual mental schemata by making them inoperable. This fiction liberates us from automatic responses” (169). In light of the introductory dismantling of theory, however, this insight could have been placed both at an earlier point in the book and more prominently, it could have been prepared more thoroughly, and emphasized more convincingly. Fiction that “knows otherwise,”<sup>4</sup> to use a phrase by Alexis Shotwell, may be experienced as frustrating simply because it is different—but the process of exposing ourselves to this difference raises our sensitivity toward heteroglossia, enhances our appreciation of diversity, and supports an acknowledgment that the frontiers of our knowledge are fluid, dynamic, and changing. These are particularly welcome effects in transnational American Studies, in which the implicit proximity of alterity and violence that this book suggests should have long become outdated.

Vienna

Birgit Däwes

<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (trans. C. K. Ogden, 1922, London: Routledge, 2007) 5.6.

<sup>4</sup> Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2011).