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Amst 54.1 (2009) Appropriating Vision(s): Visual Practices in American Women's Writing

Birgit Spengler - Guest Editor

BIRGIT SPENGLER

"Introduction: Appropriating Vision(s): Visual Practices in American Women's Writing"

ELIZA RICHARDS

"Death's Surprise, Stamped Visible": Emily Dickinson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Civil War Photography

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the ways that U.S. Civil War photography affected perceptions of death registered in Northern literary expression. Comparing the essays of Oliver Wendell Holmes and the poems of Emily Dickinson, the study explores the divergent ways that two writers on the home front thought through the ramifications of distant violence. While enacted in the name of 'the people,' much Civil War violence could only be understood by individual persons remotely, through the mediation of emergent mass information networks. While Holmes celebrates the ways that technologies of photography and war can both expose and heal the illnesses of the nation, ultimately expanding American knowledge and power, Dickinson emphasizes the narrow singularity of any insight photography can provide. Photographs can transmit knowledge of death, but can do nothing to convey the living contexts that produce death. This narrow understanding emerges from a congruity between the photograph and the dead body: both register a place where life has been and is no longer. Dickinson suggests that war itself produces nothing more than this basic understanding, available to those who can make sense of the mediated transmission of information about mass death on the battlefronts. Her poetry articulates this process in order to enable that understanding. This argument seeks to demonstrate that, contrary to longstanding assumptions about Dickinson's isolation, she was as involved as the public figure Holmes in analyzing an emerging mass media's relation to total war. The differences in their perspectives may be attributed in part to differences in gendered social positions.

BIRGIT SPENGLER

Visual Negotiations and Medical Discourses in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing

ABSTRACT: According to Michel Foucault, a paradigmatic change in the visual organization of power marks the onset of modernity and turns Western societies from societies of the spectacle into societies of surveillance. This shift becomes particularly obvious in the organization of spaces in modern institutions—for example prisons, schools, military barracks, or clinics. Taking its cue from Foucault's argument, this article analyzes the role of vision in medical settings as presented by American female writers of the later nineteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, medical discourses present a highly charged field that reflects the gender and power relations at work in American society. Such discourses are shaped by essentializing notions of male and female 'nature' that present women as physically and psychologically fragile deviations from the male 'norm.' This article suggests that nineteenth-century women writers use vision as a metaphor for the gender and power relations that shape their society, thus demonstrating a remarkable insight into relations of power by questioning the epistemological implications of vision, by presenting female protagonists who appropriate the gaze, and by involving their readers in processes of visual education that aim at re-organizing the nation.

BÄRBEL TISCHLEDER

The Deep Surface of Lily Bart: Visual Economies and Commodity Culture in Wharton and Dreiser

ABSTRACT: Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser's literary portrayals of American culture at the turn of the twentieth century display a fascination with the visual. This essay is premised on a broader definition of visual culture that encompasses not only art or media but also the visual dimensions and perception of the urban landscape—the crowds in the street, in stations, theaters or hotels as well as shop windows, department stores and conspicuous interiors. *The House of Mirth* (1905), which forms the focus of this essay, and *Sister Carrie* (1900) present public arenas that locate people in a dynamic field of vision—a web of sights and looks that determines the subject's social place and defines personality as an assemblage of visual effects and attributes. Both novels are concerned with the impact the orientation towards the visual has on the psyche of their protagonists. They exemplify that commodity culture, especially modes of commercial display, serves as a model for modern subjectivity. Wharton draws the picture of a society that puts its stakes in appearances and whose assets and tastes are of value only when they are converted into a kind of visual currency. Her protagonist, Lily Bart, reflects these values not only in her accomplished self-fashioning, but also in her psychic make-up—her deep surface.

ERIKA SPOHRER

Colonizing Consciousness: Race, Pictorial Epistemology, and Toni Morrison's Jazz

ABSTRACT: Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is a book of pictures—portraits, moving pictures, imagined images. This article explores seeing as epistemology, as a way of making meaning, especially of the gendered and raced self. At times an empty signifier, the female image signifies not a meaning beyond itself but instead only the logic of its gazers' preoccupations; at other times, seeing makes meaning by colonizing s/he who is seen. Morrison also offers a version of femininity not tied to the visual, femininity beneath it. Finally, *Jazz's* narrator emerges as unreliable precisely because she thinks she is immune to the gaze. Through the narrator's delusion, Morrison in effect forces the reader to examine her own position vis-a-vis the text; she uses the narrator's imagined space outside the text to reveal the reader's position outside the text as just that—imagined.

ANGELA LAFLEN

"There's a Shock in This Seeing": The Problem of the Image in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*

ABSTRACT: Throughout her long career, Margaret Atwood has written only two speculative novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. In both, Atwood traces ideas and practices already present in contemporary culture to their logical conclusions, and a comparison of the novels reveals the evolution of Atwood's perspective on a number of recurring topics, visual culture being chief among them. The context for Atwood's evolving concern about visual culture is the rise to dominance of the image in contemporary culture. In the nearly two decades that followed the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the use of visual culture to aestheticize political and social life accelerated to the point that image and reality became nearly impossible to distinguish. Similarly, the stakes of visual representation are much higher in *Oryx and Crake* than in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Atwood suggests that not only civil liberties but humanity itself is threatened by an increasingly degraded and dehumanizing visual culture. Nevertheless, despite changing conditions of visibility, Atwood continues to recommend literature as a viable space within which to develop a critical response to visual culture.

CHRISTINA JUDITH HEIN

"Can the Squaw Bluff?": Negotiations of Vision and Gazes in *Tracks* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* by Louise Erdrich

ABSTRACT: Theories concerned with the abstract, larger structures that influence the distribution of power in a visual regime—negotiations of social life facilitated through modes of seeing and the exchange of gazes—have quite importantly established that whiteness as well as maleness constitute positions of privilege. Non-white women, according to such theories, are mostly considered as objects of the look and

relegated to the margins. In the encounter between raced and gendered persons, however, the ability to gaze and exert power might be distributed differently. This essay suggests an expansion on Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the essential and subjectivity-constituting exchanges of looks between 'me' and 'the Other' so as to accommodate the structural differences inherent in hierarchically organized societies. The theoretical gains of this approach are then illustrated in a reading that focuses on the negotiations of the gaze as well as of the visual in the very particular situations of three female characters in two novels by Anishinaabe-German-American literary writer Louise Erdrich. Her texts illustrate that agency and power are not necessarily assigned exclusively to those advantageously positioned within a Western scopic regime and that being structurally privileged by hegemonic culture might carry with it some drawbacks.

Amst 54.2 (2009)

MATTHEW PETHERS

"This Small Herculean Labor": Literary Professionalism, Georgic Work, and *Walden*

ABSTRACT: Although the professionalization of authorship has emerged as an important topic in recent decades, literary historians largely continue to focus on the economic and institutional factors which are deemed to have brought it about. This article, in contrast, focuses on the ideological transformations which made possible the establishment of 'literature' as a discrete, specialized discipline. For much of the eighteenth century, the exercise of social authority was understood to be dependent on freedom from work, and this principle was reflected in the idealization of literature as the domain of the leisured gentleman. Thus, for the professional author to become a respected figure, the relationship between labor and literature had to be rewritten, making occupation central to identity and wisdom reliant upon industry. In order to unveil this complex process, I begin by discussing some of the key traits of modern professionalism and trace its contested development during the antebellum period. I then concentrate on Henry David Thoreau's struggle to write for a living, paying particular attention to the ways in which *Walden* (1854) participates in the nineteenth-century redefinition of labor. Finally, a turn to the American georgic, and the forms of labor which it privileges, allows me to draw all of these threads together into a new reading of how that redefinition was achieved.

JÜRGEN WOLTER

"The Yellow Wall-Paper": The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses

ABSTRACT: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has generated a plethora of different, often contradictory readings. The text's richness results not only from the fact that it has been approached from various perspectives. Rather, the article argues, the story's contradictions and ambiguities remain unresolved because Gilman wrote at a time when major issues raised by her story were at the center of changing discourses. The article focuses on three of these issues: the change in the use of wallpaper in interior decoration, the debate about the color yellow, and the controversy about the effects of intellectual activity on the health of women.

MARCUS HÖRETH

Die Etablierung verfassungsgerichtlicher Streitschlichtung: *Marbury v. Madison* als richterliche Selbstautorisierung und sanfte Revolution

ABSTRACT: Since the path-breaking *Marbury v. Madison* decision in 1803, the USA has been well-known as the 'home of judicial review' and has as such served as a role model for constitutional courts around the world. However, the precarious political circumstances in which Chief Justice John Marshall had to operate in this case and the long prehistory of *Marbury* is less known. In this article both will be explored. It will be shown that 'judicial review' originally stemmed from a concept in British common law that, ironically, was used by the American independence movement against British parliamentary acts that were seen as illegitimate such as the infamous Stamp Act. Nevertheless, despite its widespread acceptance at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Chief Justice Marshall took a substantial personal risk in pursuing judicial review against the anti-federalist Jefferson administration. But the way he undertook this veritable quiet revolution proves Marshall's capacity to avoid a no-win and therefore disastrous confrontation between judicial branch and the new government. In the end, it is the reasoning in this over 200-year-old judgement that explains why the power of the Supreme Court to declare acts of the Congress void is still widely accepted to this day.

DAVID FAFLIK

Forum: Myth, Symbol, and American Studies Methodology: The Post-National Persistence of the Humanities

ABSTRACT: Since at least the appearance of scholar Bruce Kuklick's seminal 1972 statement, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," the conventional 'myths' and 'symbols' that were once synonymous with the discipline largely have lost their former status as a legitimate methodology. As is well known, Kuklick insists that symbolic/semiotic methodologies cannot substitute for material, quantifiable research of 'America' in all its complexity. His is an empiricist's plea against symbolic

signification. Kuklick's critique quietly prevails today, in an age when comparative sociological and ethnographic approaches to the study of American society and culture enjoy a conspicuous, if not uncontested, ascendance, at least in the United States. Within the context of the globalization of American Studies and current post-national approaches in the field, this essay argues that the worldwide images that 'America' projects, and the icons by which it is widely identified, retain not only the legitimacy of methodology, but suggest as well their necessity as a cross-cultural epistemology. On the one hand, language barriers alone recommend symbolic, iconographic study as a practical means of knowledge production and apprehension in lieu of an alternative common critical idiom. On the other hand, a resurgent European interest in 'America' as symbol suggests a tacit defense among international members of a growing American Studies community of symbolic figuration itself as a means of cultural comprehension.

BIRGIT BAURIDL AND
SUSANNE LEIKAM

Publications in American Studies from German-Speaking Countries, 2008

Amst 54.3 (2009)

American History/ies in Germany: Assessments, Transformations, Perspectives

Volker Depkat - Guest Editor

VOLKER DEPKAT

Introduction: American History/ies in Germany: Assessments, Transformations, Perspectives

PHILIPP GASSERT

Writing about the (American) Past, Thinking of the (German) Present: The History of U.S. Foreign Relations in Germany

ABSTRACT: This sixty year survey of the most prolific field in West German historiography of the United States argues that the developments in scholarship were closely related to 'real time' German-American relations. For German historians writing during the 1950s, studying U.S. diplomacy promised to yield practical insights into the political decision-making process in the capital of the country's military protector. Later, during the 1960s the history of transatlantic relations became entangled in the 'Americanization,' 'Westernization,' and 'democratization' of the Federal Republic's political culture. Because approaches to U.S. foreign relations mirrored the changing intellectual climate within Germany, scholarly trends did not closely follow those within the

United States. German historians of U.S. diplomacy usually stressed ideology or political decision-making processes—a trend which became even more prevalent with the recent cultural turns. Also, the field only reluctantly embraced methodological innovations. Methodologically, the biggest breakthrough came during the 1960s and 1970s, when German historians of the United States acquired the necessary financial means to travel abroad and to carry out multi-archival research projects. This, combined with the remarkable institutional expansion of U.S. history in Germany, led to a quantum-leap in the quality of German works on U.S. foreign relations.

WOLFGANG HELBICH

German Research on German Migration to the United States

ABSTRACT: After a slow beginning in the 1970s, the last two decades of the twentieth century saw a flowering of German migration research, mainly focussed on German emigration to the United States. After the turn of the century, however, it petered out rather rapidly. Still, it was far more than just a passing fashion without lasting results. A dozen major projects yielded unique results, like Günter Moltmann's meticulously researched publications and the mosaic of PhD dissertations he supervised, Dirk Hoerder's theoretical and methodological extension of the migration concept, Hartmut Keil's multidisciplinary study of Chicago's Germans, Christiane Harzig's comparative study of women in the same city, and Wolfgang Helbich's compilation of German emigrant letters resulting in the largest and best researched archive of the kind anywhere. Taken as a whole, German migration research of the period yielded results and set standards second to none, unsurpassed even by American scholars working during the same time span. The advantages of location and culture enjoyed by German historians in the field paid off, aided by ingenuity and innovation—and definitely not least by generous VW Foundation financing.

MANFRED BERG

German Scholarship on American Constitutional History

ABSTRACT: This essay offers an assessment of German historiography on American constitutional history. In addition to identifying key fields of research and to evaluating major books and other academic achievements, it discusses the dual challenge to German historians of translating American constitutional culture for German audiences, on the one hand, and getting the attention of their American colleagues on the other. Constitutional history played a major role in establishing American history as a subdiscipline at German universities and produced significant scholarship recognized on both sides of the Atlantic. Like their colleagues working on diplomacy and immigration, German constitutional historians have often focused on German-American themes, particularly on the influences of

American ideas on German thought. Moreover, German historians have consistently sought to improve the understanding of American constitutional concepts among German audiences. However, the future of U.S. constitutional history in Germany is uncertain. In recent years, younger scholars have shown little interest in this sometimes dry and complicated area. Yet, even if constitutional history will most likely not regain its former prominence among German historians of the United States, the constitutional dimension remains indispensable for a better understanding of American politics, society, and culture.

VOLKER DEPKAT

The 'Cultural Turn' in German and American Historiography

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the academic debates about the 'cultural turn' in U.S. and German historiography in terms of convergence and divergence. While the 'new cultural history' in the United States and Germany seem to be pretty much alike on the conceptual and theoretical level, the political, social, cultural and institutional contexts of historiography are significantly different in both countries. This explains the rather different dynamics of the cultural turn on both sides of the Atlantic. In Germany, the debate about the cultural turn stood in the long shadow of historicism, and it evolved as a largely academic discussion between post-historicist social historians revolving around the question of how to arrive at a deeper and more complex understanding of why people in the past acted the way they did. In the United States, the cultural turn, while it was moving on the academic plane, was still inseparably tied to the 'identity politics' and 'culture wars' of an American society that became increasingly self-aware of its diversity and multi-ethnicity. Against this backdrop the role of Germany-based experts on U.S. history in the debates about culture on both sides of the Atlantic is assessed critically.

KIRAN KLAUS PATEL

'Transnations' among 'Transnations'? The Debate on Transnational History in the United States and Germany

ABSTRACT: Comparing the rise of transnational history in the United States and Germany is difficult, mainly because of the many connections between these historiographies. Still, the article argues that the paths into a transnational historiography were quite different on both sides of the Atlantic. Apart from similarities and connections, the text therefore highlights the intellectual as well as institutional differences between the debates in the USA and Germany.

SIMON WENDT

Transnational Perspectives on the History of Racism in

North America

ABSTRACT: This article explores the possibilities of transnationalizing the history of race and racism in North America and considers the role that German historians of the United States can play in this scholarly endeavor. Such a project first requires overcoming certain methodological problems, including the tension between the national and the transnational as well as the tendency of many scholars to rely primarily on English-language sources. The history of racism in the United States and Canada suggests that analyzing its transnational dimensions could begin on the North American continent since it offers numerous examples for studying comparative perspectives and transnational entanglements. Ultimately, however, a transnational history of race and racism will have to examine the global nature of this phenomenon. A number of German historians of the United States have laid important foundations in this field of research and are likely to make innovative historiographical contributions in the future.

MITA BANERJEE

Forum: Cultural Studies and Americanization

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STEFAN L. BRANDT

The City as Liminal Space: Urban Visuality and Aesthetic Experience in Postmodern U.S. Literature and Cinema

ABSTRACT: This article suggests that the postmodern city as represented in recent U.S. literature and cinema is constructed as a symbolic place based on visions of liminality—a term I borrow from social anthropology. The fictional metropolis, I argue, is negotiated as a quasi-organic agglomeration of signs and references, engaging the reader by means of what can be termed an 'aesthetics of the body.' At first glance, the postmodern city seems to figure as a closed space—a labyrinth that leaves protagonists and readers in a state of disorientation, fragmentation, and constant decentering. At second glance, however, the maze-like organization of the 'postmetropolis' also offers numerous opportunities, making aesthetic experience, and movement in particular, a central motor of the production of meaning. The protagonists as well as the readers become involved in a 'rhetoric of the body' —or, more specifically, a 'walking rhetorics' (de Certeau 131)—that turns the fictional city into a tactile, almost visceral event. The cityscape in postmodern literature and film seems at once empowering and claustrophobic, conveying to the intrepid flaeur an aura of mysteriousness and bottomless enigma. By privileging abstract space over historical space, postmodern urban fiction creates an

erie field of alienation and potential deconstruction, in which the center becomes periphery and vice versa. The notion of closure is further abandoned in this liminal space in favor of the concepts of transition and ambiguity.

KATJA KANZLER

Architecture, Writing, and Vulnerable Signification in Herman Melville's "I and My Chimney"

ABSTRACT: The following essay discusses Herman Melville's "I and My Chimney" (1856) as a text that engages architecture and writing as interrelated systems of signification. Fueled by a variety of historical developments, domestic architecture emerges as a powerful purveyor of meaning in the antebellum decades. Architecture, in this cultural context, is construed in analogy to writing (and, to some extent, vice versa), as creating houses-as-texts that tell stories about their inhabitants in terms of their individual, familial, and national identities. Thus conceived, domestic architecture is characteristically enlisted in the articulation and stabilization of hegemonic narratives of, e.g., gender and nationhood. Melville's text invokes this cultural convention to cast the signifying function that architecture and writing perform as being vulnerable and in crisis. This crisis is narrated by an idiosyncratic narrator for whom the semiotic instability documented by his narrative resonates with the social and cultural vulnerability that he experiences—his authority as master of his house and family is challenged in the course of the tale, along with the structural integrity of his chimney with which he wants to symbolically reinforce his authority. I argue that this crisis of signification performs double work in the text. On the one hand, it serves to articulate the anxiety of mid-nineteenth-century cultural elites about what they perceive as a cultural decline. On the other hand, allegedly dysfunctional signification unfolds a critical potential, bringing to light things which 'functional' signification had worked to conceal and thereby unlocking hermetic narratives of self, family, and nation.

BERNHARD MALKMUS

The Birth of the Modern Picaro out of the Spirit of Self-Reliance: Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*

ABSTRACT: Melville's *The Confidence-Man* can be read both as a modification of the classic picaresque tradition and as a precursor of the modern American picaresque mode as it emerged in the twentieth century. This essay focuses on the latter and argues that Melville enacts a dramaturgy of social trust and distrust akin to more recent explorations of the genre. The novel is read against two backdrops—its socio-economic context, the antebellum crisis, and its philosophical underpinnings, Emerson's transcendentalism. Melville's satire ridicules American society on the threshold between the Puritan legacy and industrial modernity and at the same time attacks Emerson's universal optimism, thus creating the confidence man as a quintessentially

American picaresque type—self-reliant, not because he buys into Emerson's pathos of self-reliance, but because the social currency of this very philosophy allows him to exploit others in their relentless pursuit of happiness.

KONRAD LINKE

Dominance, Resistance, and Cooperation in the Tanforan Assembly Center

ABSTRACT: From May through September 1942 the Tanforan racetrack served as a temporary detention camp for Japanese Americans from the San Francisco Bay Area. Taking a microhistoric perspective, this essay explores how the inmates dealt with the detrimental living conditions and the loss of freedom and analyzes how they responded to the various means of control employed by the camp administration. Dominance, resistance, and cooperation were the most widespread manifestations of power relations between prisoners and keepers, but concepts such as assistance, compliance, and accommodation also had their place in everyday dealings. This study demonstrates that detainees generally sought cooperation but protested against conditions they deemed intolerable, against incompetent keepers, against arbitrary treatment, and against paternalism. The overall goals were improvement of the facilities and self-determination. In the final analysis, the violation of basic democratic rights by the United States government confirmed to the inmates that it was necessary to hold on to these principles. Thus, Tanforan's detainees stand for the dialectical relationship between external oppression and internal emancipation, and for the lasting effect of the myth of the 'American Dream.'

ANNE-MARIE SCHOLZ

Forum: Adaptation as Reception: How a Transnational Analysis of Hollywood Films Can Renew the Literature-to-Film Debates

ABSTRACT: This article contends that scholarly approaches to the relationship between literature and film, ranging from the traditional focus upon fidelity to more recent issues of intertextuality, all contain a significant blind spot: their lack of theoretical and methodological attention to adaptation as an historical and transnational phenomenon. Herein I argue for a historically informed approach to American popular culture that reconfigures the classically defined adaptation phenomenon as a form of transnational reception. I focus on two Hollywood blockbusters, both produced by Columbia Pictures: *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). Analyzed through the prism of transnational reception, these films allow us to see how the process of adaptation itself reveals the material nature of heretofore ahistorically defined intertextual phenomena. Exploring the transnational reception of American-made films can reinvigorate the literature-to-film

debates by highlighting the ways in which intertextual dynamics are material dynamics; they operate in cultural force fields that are tangible and confrontational and carry with them concrete material effects.
