

# Aesthetics then and now

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## Introduction: Aesthetics Then and Now

The phrase "American Aesthetics," the subject of this collection of essays, suggests a double focus: first, the notion that there is an aesthetics specific to America. This is a problematic approached indirectly in these essays, which rather address the second point of focus: the issue of how the category of the aesthetic is constructed from our twenty-first century perspective and the historical investment of American literary scholarship in aesthetic values. Consequently, the essays cover a broad historical sweep, from the eighteenth century to the present, and a range of American "literatures": from the canonical to ethnic minority writings. In both cases, the essays engage with the history of Western philosophical understandings of the aesthetic. Although reference is made to classical theories of the aesthetic, it is the rise of modern aesthetic theory with the European Enlightenment, and modernity's so-called crisis of representation, that provide the basis for much of the discussion of aesthetic values here.

In this Introduction, I want to offer a brief contextualization of the philosophical aesthetics mobilized by the essays, as the authors engage with a variety of concerns relevant to our contemporary scholarly moment: a time when we witness not only a certain rebirth of the aesthetic, after a period of scholarship dominated by historicist modes of inquiry, but also the return to ethical issues in literary criticism. We are engaged not in a simple aestheticization of literary study; rather, the question of how the aesthetic relates to the ethical, the ideological and the historical is posed with increasing urgency in publications such as: *Between Ethics and Aesthetics* edited by Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos (2002), J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), *Ethics and Aesthetics* edited by Gerhard Hoffman and Alfred Hornung (1996), *Ethics and Aesthetics* edited by Jerrold Levinson, and Christopher Norris' *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (1994). As contributor after contributor here notes, the aesthetic cannot be divorced in any meaningful way from the determining

contexts – social, cultural, political, as well as sensory and philosophical – in which the work of art is produced.

Beyond the relationship between art and truth, broadly conceived, the notion of a specifically American aesthetics has occupied Americans since the time of the Revolution. The assumed relationship between political and artistic autonomy has occupied thinkers since before Hector St Jean de Crèvecoeur posed the question “What is an American?” in 1782. If the Revolution brought into being a unique political culture that is American, what will produce a correspondingly American literary and artistic culture? The assumption that there is indeed an American culture distinct from British and other colonial cultures of North America empowers the ideology of American exceptionalism: the notion that America is exceptional in character and national identity. Exceptionalism is, of course, a discourse of migrants deployed by a nation of migrants. How to distinguish Anglo-Americans from native-born or nativist Americans (and Native Americans) is a question that only arises on the colonial scene. Francesca de Lucia, in her essay here, “Making America: The Narrative Structure of the Early Italian American Novel” offers a modern example of literary nationalism at work in the formation of the early Italian-American migrant novel. Pietro di Donato and John Fante work with two dominant migrant myths: the migrant labourer as the creator of the nation and the migrant as martyr to his own unrealizable dreams. This discourse of the American Dream and of American exceptionalism has structured such disciplinary formations as the national American literary canon, affiliated minority literary canons (like *Italian-American Literature*) and American Studies itself in ways we have been made acutely aware of in recent years when the exceptional shape of American Studies has come under fire from the globalizing perspectives articulated by transnational or postnational scholars such as Emory Elliott, John Carlos Rowe, Donald E. Pease and Janice A. Radway.

A similar transnational concern finds expression in Philipp Schweighauser’s essay, “Literature in Transition: European Aesthetics and the Early American Novel,” which addresses the issue of tensions between modernity and the pre-modern characteristic of the eighteenth-century novel in America. As the title of the essay suggests, he discovers a similar range of concerns in contemporary European philosophical aesthetics and early Republican writing. Novels such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte*

*Temple* (1791) and Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) represent the ideals of a pre-modern Western culture that assigns priority to religion, politics and morality over the epistemology of art. Any truth value that the work of art might claim is articulated in relation to a superior moral, ethical or spiritual truth to which the work must defer, by claiming for itself a didactic function that is subordinate to the power of the higher truth it seeks to inculcate in the reader. However, at the same time these texts reveal elements of modern aesthetics, particularly in the emphasis placed upon values of originality and artistic genius. The anticipation of Romantic aesthetic values that Schweighauser identifies in these early Republican novels makes a claim not only for a valorization of originality and genius but, concomitant with this, for the autonomy of the work of art that no longer claims significance via its proximity to external social and religious constructions of truth. As Schweighauser notes, this conflict between the eighteenth-century values of Enlightenment and nineteenth-century Romantic values suggests that on both sides of the Atlantic European culture was confronting similar philosophical questionings and trends.

It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in his *Aesthetica* (1750-1758), who first introduced the modern term "aesthetics" in order to formulate and name a philosophical concept of artistic cognition or epistemology. While distinguishing the human perception of beauty from the faculty of reason, Baumgarten sought to establish the aesthetic as a "higher" faculty of cognition rather than a "lower" form of mere feeling. This view was most famously and influentially taken up by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790, known as the third *Critique*). Kant argues that aesthetic judgment is separate from pure reason and practical reason, but names the interplay between imagination, the conceptualizing faculty of the understanding and reason that produces the subjective experience of beauty as that which eludes determinate thought. At the same time, the aesthetic judgment mediates the conflict between the individual and the universal, between beauty and truth or goodness. Kant's view of aesthetics derives, in part, from Neoplatonic understandings of the work of art as shaping the particular into a universal, higher or spiritual and ideal form: as shown by Plotinus' example of the statue which is only a lump of marble until it is shaped by an artistic vision. In this respect, aesthetics names a relation between material and the immaterial, matter and spirit.



Kant, of course, distinguishes between the Beautiful and the Sublime, where the experience of former belongs to the faculty of understanding but the latter belongs to the faculty of reason and so is more closely akin to moral judgments. In the chapter "Analytic of the Sublime" in the third *Critique*, Kant further distinguishes between the "mathematical sublime" and the "dynamical sublime." The former is experienced when the imagination fails to take account of the grandeur and scale of natural objects and the faculty of reason invokes the concept of "infinity" to explain the greatness of the object. The "dynamical sublime" is experienced in the face of an overwhelming and frightening natural object, where the vast scale of nature threatens the destruction of the observing self but reason resists this threatened annihilation even though the object is recognized as limitless and incomprehensible and as a legitimate object of fear. In this insistence upon fear as a constitutive element of the sublime Kant follows Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke writes:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (39-40)

For Kant, the failure of imagination in the presence of the sublime is the occasion both for fear and for the display of the superior power of human cognition, and this pleasure in the exercise of human reason is the basis for Kant's identification of the moral character of this pleasure in the sublime. The experience of beauty is the consequence of the perception of harmony in the object and the occasion for the aesthetic judgment. This is not the same as the experience of the sublime which is associated with greatness, exultation and power, and the evocation of feelings of empowerment. For Kant, then, the experience of beauty demonstrates the value of human reason; in contrast, the sublime demonstrates the limitations of the faculty of reason. It is consequently surprising that the sublime should come to play such an important role in American aesthetics even from the early Republican period, when the

values and key documents of the American Creed stress the primacy of reason.<sup>1</sup>

It is in this context of discourses of the sublime that Claude Ziltener's discussion of Ralph Waldo Emerson's early writings can be located. In the essay, "The Death-Hymn of the Perfect Tree: Metaphor, Metamorphosis and the Sublimity of Music in R. W. Emerson's Poems "Woodnotes I and II," Ziltener analyzes Emerson's early understanding of the power of language to attempt to transcend the limitations of reason and to access an experience of the metaphysical sublime. American Transcendentalism can be seen as a New World interpretation of Kantian idealism, through the medium of English Romantic thinkers like Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, particularly if we view Kant's legacy from the perspective offered by Schopenhauer: that Kant's greatest insight was the distinction between the object-in-itself and the perception of the object that permits knowledge of it. New England Transcendentalism was similarly based on a commitment to transcendent principles rather than things-in-themselves. However, as Ziltener shows, the resistance of the world of appearance to facilitate metaphysical experience or to reveal a realm of ideas occupies Emerson even in his early poetry, dating from 1835 to 1839. The discrepancy between mind and world, the incommensurability of the ideal with the signs (natural and linguistic) that should make the ideal manifest is figured in this essay in the trope of the Fall. Further, Ziltener uses Emerson's deployment of the Fall to discuss the post-apocalyptic nature of Emerson's poetic rhetoric. Where the figure of apocalypse foreshadows a return to the full presence of nature, post-apocalyptic rhetoric sets up this figure yet always disrupts the promise of ontological presence. This discussion is framed by Kant's understanding of the sublime as "the apocalypse of the mind" and by Paul de Man's post-apocalyptic interpretation of the Kantian sublime in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" (1996). Ziltener contextualizes his discussion of sublime incomprehensibility with reference to Friedrich Schlegel's understanding of the impossibility of expressing thought in language. The consequence, Schlegel argues, must always be ironic. This necessary incompleteness of communication finds an echo in Paul de Man's theory of the allegory of

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Patrick Vincent for pointing out that the relationship, identified by Terry Eagleton, between the aesthetic of the sublime and the values of the Ancien Régime can be seen in a parallel between the sublime and the early American Republic.

reading, where the ceaseless quest for semantic presence and a fullness of meaning is met with arbitrary referentiality and substitute figurations.

The engagement between thought and language, ideas and nature, in the work of Henry David Thoreau is explored in a series of essays, beginning with François Specq's essay, "Henry David Thoreau's *Journal* or the Aesthetics of Spacing." In the manner previously described in relation to Emerson's attention to ideas of the thing rather than the thing-in-itself, Specq turns to the revision of the subject of life-writing in Thoreau's Journals where, rather than a daily account or record of his own developing self, Thoreau provides a detailed and painstaking daily account of the changing natural environment of Concord, Massachusetts. Every day for twenty-five years, from 1837 until 1861, Thoreau described the phenomenal, natural world as he experienced it. His aim, Specq argues, is not to pursue knowledge of nature qua nature but to engage in a ceaseless ontological confrontation with the external world.

Just whether the truth or significance of nature arises for Thoreau from some immanent value in the natural object itself, or from the higher aesthetic faculty of the observer or from a transcendent unity of the two (natural object and observing consciousness) is the focus of Henrik Otterberg's discussion in "Immanence and Transcendence in Thoreau's 'A Winter Walk'." Here, not only the objectivity of the aesthetic is placed into question. The question is productively complicated by the issue of Thoreau's relation to contemporary scientific models of epistemology and rational knowledge. Like Patrick Vincent in the following essay, "Rousseau, Thoreau and the Aesthetics of Romantic Taxonomy," Otterberg pursues Thoreau's relationship with ideas emerging out of the general scientific milieu comprised of thinkers such as Goethe, Humboldt, and Agassiz. In contradiction of the received view that in his early work like the essay "A Winter Walk" (1843) Thoreau adheres to the Transcendentalist values of Emerson, Otterberg shows how Thoreau even in such an early essay engages with, rather than simply accepting the values of idealist philosophy, while questioning the ontology of nature's immanent order. The relentless focus on modes of perception and the epistemological implications of human perception of external nature is complemented, in Otterberg's analysis, with an attention to Thoreau's rhetoric of correspondences that suggests an immanent relationship between world and mind.

Similar issues contextualize Patrick Vincent's essay, which focuses on the epistemological effort of taxonomy. Beginning with the observation that, while Romantic thinkers in general were opposed to the formal disciplines of science, prominent writers in this Romantic mode, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry David Thoreau, were both keen botanists and both were fully aware of Carl Linnaeus' system for the classification of living organisms. In its philosophical work of identification and classification, botany shares in common with aesthetics central taxonomical and epistemological issues. In Vincent's estimation, Thoreau's engagement with the tension between essentialism and nominalism that he found in his own botanical activities and in his scientific reading enabled him to evade aspects of Emersonian idealism in favour of a more direct attempt to apply aesthetic values to the natural world. Vincent writes:

Thoreau's analogy between the objective language of botany and the subjective language of affect most obviously points back to the Emersonian theory of correspondences, in which Nature is imagined as a symbol of the spirit. But rather than arguing for the symbolic value of nature, [he] insists on the difficulty of establishing such a transcendental leap, dwelling instead on the particular, concrete forms of the phenomenal world. (98)

Just as Otterberg perceives in "A Winter Walk," Vincent argues that in Thoreau's journal entries of the early 1850s the emphasis is placed upon the difficulty of finding an expressive medium that will make present an idea or thought or perception. Immanence versus transcendence; nominalism versus essentialism: a profound questioning of the relations between mind and world emerges from these discussions of Thoreau's works. As we see in later essays that discuss Poe's aesthetic of sensation, contemporary illness narratives like Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, in narratives of violence: it is perhaps not unreasonable to ask whether American aesthetics historically has favoured the sensorial and embodied over the ideal and transcendent, as a potentially more democratic approach to an aesthetics sympathetic to the republican nation.

This group of essays addressing American Transcendentalism, broadly conceived, also engages the historical tension that can be characterized as a conflict between Romantic and Rationalist understandings of aesthetics. The idea, in opposition to the immanence of beauty, that art consists in a range of strategies that use the rational powers of perception to organise particulars into experience of beauty is found in the



work of modern philosophers from the Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's immediate target was Thomas Hobbes' argument that the pleasure we take in beauty is a selfish pleasure. Like earlier philosophers such as Plotinus, Shaftesbury argues that it is the harmonious elements of art that give rise to aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, in terms of Shaftesbury's republical politics, art's capacity to harmonize conflict is comparable to the satisfaction provided by a well-ordered society and gives pleasure. This connection between mind and politics through the mediating power of the aesthetic is powerfully presented by Friedrich Schiller, most notably in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). By resolving the competing claims of the "formal" drive of reason with those of the "sensuous" drive of personal desires, the harmonizing effect of the third, "play" drive generates beauty and, Schiller argues, thereby opens the possibility of psychological and political unity. Hegel's largely contemporaneous development of an idealist understanding of aesthetics forms a key aspect of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Hegel attributes to art the power of connecting the human faculty of thought and the realm of ideas with our faculties for sense and feeling, and in this way the aesthetic is seen to contribute materially to the development of consciousness towards the "Ideal as the true Idea of Beauty." For Hegel, this power exerted by art is part of a staged historical process by which "absolute spirit" becomes manifest. Art constitutes the first of these stages. However, within this stage Hegel proposes an evolutionary development: symbolic art exemplified by architecture; classical art of which the exemplary form is sculpture; and Romantic art exemplified by poetry, music and painting.

Marx's materialist inversion of Hegelian aesthetics promotes a view of art as reflecting and engaging with the contradictions and conflicts of capitalist society. In Hegel's philosophy, the teleology of material history is generated by the dialectical progress of Reason, as each successive stage responds to the contradictions characteristic of the preceding stage. For Marx, the conditions of material history generate the ideological structures of culture that include philosophy, law, religion and art. The British Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), argues for a correspondence between the construction of the work of art and the structure of a just society: the parts should be related to each other forming into a harmonious whole but in which no single relation dominates over others or the whole. Eagleton takes as his



starting point the etymological roots of aesthetics in discourses of the body, through the Greek term *aisthesis*. He argues:

The aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of the human, which post-Cartesian philosophy, in some curious lapse of attention, has somehow managed to overlook. It is thus the first stirrings of a primitive materialism – of the body's long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical. (13)

The need to bring sensible experience under the control of reason is, for Eagleton, the primary motive of the rise of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany, during a time of political absolutism. While aesthetics itself is a branch of philosophy fundamentally concerned with the relations between mind and sensation or feelings, so the aesthetic object is concerned with relations between the political mind and the body politic. Ideals of aesthetic control, regulation and unity cannot be separated from the social order in which the aesthetic participates and from which it derives. As a consequence, these aesthetic ideals will change in different political environments, and have changed as they crossed the Atlantic.

Though he does not speak from within a Marxist theoretical discourse, it is such a view of the aesthetic object as responsive to political and social context that informs Martin Heusser's essay, "Et in Arcadia Ego: The Aesthetics of Suburbia in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*." In Heusser's analysis of what we might call the suburban sublime, Eugenides' novel emerges as an elegiac meditation on the nature of contemporary American society. The fundamental subject of this narrative is, in Heusser's discussion, a culture that engages with the real only through the imagery, discourses and experience of death. This is a society in which the failure to face basic ontological questions produces a lifeless stasis and melancholic nostalgia for a past that is always already out of reach. Heusser's use of the pastoral genre to characterize the narrative nature of this text, together with his deployment of the classical motto "Et in Arcadia Ego," underscores the presence of death within the ideal, the body in the abstract realm of thought, and the past always in the present. In this way, Eugenides' novel works as a particularly subtle form of social critique, exposing the contradictory values of life-in-death and death-in-life that mark contemporary American suburban culture.

From the perspective of Adorno, Eugenides' novel is a work of true art: functioning to negate the images of false social harmony and meaning that surround us. The major thinkers of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School – Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse – reconceptualized the Hegelian principle of social contradiction, that motivates the evolution of Reason further towards the Ideal, into the understanding of art as a kind of “negative” knowledge. Rather than entice us into a new relationship of collusion with socio-economic institutions, true art should expose to us the operations of ideological contradictions within advanced capitalist society. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966, trans. 1973) addresses the use of identity as a strategy for conferring reality only upon those aspects of experience that conform to dominant concepts and relegating to the realm of the unreal or unintelligible all that does not harmonize. Consequently, advanced capitalism is able to quash all internal criticism by disallowing the proper existence of all avenues of critique: only a negative dialectics would resist such cooptation. The influence of a powerful popular culture industry is key to the production of a docile and complicit citizenry. The Frankfurt School pursued a distinction between popular culture, which is complicit with structures of ideological control, and high cultural productions which reveal, engage and deconstruct these hegemonic discourses.

The conflict between residual aristocratic values and the vulgarity of modern consumer society provides one of the several historical contexts deployed by Jerusha McCormack in her discussion of the American 1890s as a period of aesthetic transformation, a paradigm shift from late Victorian to Modernist aesthetics. In her essay “American Decadence: A New Field for Research” McCormack outlines a field of scholarly inquiry that is sadly neglected, despite the considerable attention invested in the English 1890s. She focuses upon the artistic circle organised loosely around Ralph Ellis Cram (1863-1942) and that included the poets Richard Hovey, Bliss Cameron and Louise Guiney, the book designer Bernard Goodhue, and the photographer Fred Holland Day. The artistic legacy of this self-consciously “Bohemian” group includes the architecture of Gothic revivalist churches such as St. Thomas on Fifth Avenue in New York, and the murals painted by John Singer Sargent for the Boston Public Library. This “Boston Bohemia” not only set the scene for the rise of a modernist aesthetic developed and practiced by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens, but also crystallizes the cultural changes that were producing such transforma-

tions in sexual and gender roles as the New Woman and a new attention to masculinities, especially homoerotic sexual identities. This “queering” of identities, and the changing understandings of aesthetic experience and aesthetic objects that support that process of discursive queering, is also addressed in a Modernist context by Agnieszka Soltysik in her essay, “Poe’s Aesthetics and American Modernism.” Soltysik identifies, underlying the New Critical attacks on Poe’s artistic talents, by T. S. Eliot and Yvor Winters, for example, a virulent criticism on Poe’s masculinity. His failure as a literary artist is rhetorically equated to a failure to be a real man. In fact, however, if we return to Terry Eagleton’s observation about the necessary relation between aesthetics and the body, then we find with Soltysik that Poe is a practitioner of “high” aesthetic values. She identifies within Modernism two forms of aesthetic discourse: an aesthetics of irony and detachment, to which Poe’s critics were committed, and an aesthetics of sensation which Poe’s work exemplifies. In the context of the Kantian pleasure that is the experience of beauty, distinct from the fearful awe experienced in the presence of the sublime, Soltysik locates Poe’s aesthetics of feeling, response and affect. This attention to the body enables her to stage a response to criticisms of Poe as an indulger in “Art for Art’s Sake” aesthetics and to reinscribe the power of critique within Poe’s work.

Thomas Austenfeld, in his account of Philip Roth’s most recent (2006) novel, “Only Sensations Remain: The Hypertrophy of the Aesthetic in Philip Roth’s *Everyman*,” also turns to corporeal experience as a counter to idealizing understandings of the aesthetic. In contrast to earlier text bearing the same title, the medieval drama *Everyman* and the early modernist *Jedermann* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, which culminate in the surrender of temporal, corporeal identities in favour of ideal and sacred destinies, Roth reverses his protagonist’s experience. Consequently, he finds himself embracing and endorsing the ephemeral yet universal experience of the aging body. An aesthetics of the senses supercedes an ascetic ideal but at the same time, as the text addresses illness (including hernia, appendicitis, migraine, occluded arteries, enlarged prostates) and mortality, an elegiac tone accompanies the celebration of life-affirming embodied experience. Austenfeld argues that Roth’s eponymous hero is situated in a world in which the individual acquires meaning only through aesthetic perception. Not only within the text, but also in its form, in Roth’s self-conscious reflection upon the significance of the text as an aesthetic object attributed meaning through the

sensory affect produced by his words upon the reader's capacity for feeling, the novel raises questions about the semantic capacity of literary language and aesthetic artefacts.

Precisely these questions of representation and the adequacy of the aesthetic artefact to convey both intellectual and sensory experience are explored in "The Aesthetics of Illness: Narratives as Empowerment." In this essay, Franziska Gygax discusses the genre of autobiography and specifically the emergent genre of "autopathography": illness narratives which engage with the experience of suffering such terminal illnesses as cancer and AIDS. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's short narratives about breast cancer, "Queer and Now" and "White Glasses" (1993), Nikki Giovanni's short text about lung cancer, "A Deer in Headlights" (2002) and Christina Middlebrook's account of mastectomy and terminal cancer, *Seeing the Crab: A Memoir of Dying Before I Do* (1996), provide the focus of the discussion. Gygax questions the narratological strategies by which authority is conferred upon such narratives and their narrators, as a consequence of their status as victims/survivors by the proximity of their experience to death and suffering. In particular, Gygax asks how it is that these narratives present us with a speaking "I" that is continuous with but distinct from the "real" I that the narrator experiences as separate from the self that is under siege by a decaying and dying body. The discursive relationship between epistemology and ontology proposed by Elspeth Probyn is used to fine effect to complicate and extend the idea of sensory aesthetics. Indeed, the complexities of representing embodied experience, the aesthetics of sensation that are discussed in more abstract terms by Austenfeld and Soltysik, are here explored by Gygax in the intense experiential context of terminal illness and in the personally focussed genre of lifewriting.

Terminal illness provides a context for aesthetic discourse that translates the sublime into the environment of everyday experience. Pain and death, the fear that the prospect of such suffering evokes, is surely an instance of the awesome power of nature described by Kant but turned inward upon the subject rather than externalized in the monumental artefacts of nature. The aesthetics of the everyday have been powerfully theorized by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980, trans. 1984). De Certeau seeks to investigate how individuals engage the mundane practices that constitute culture; how in everyday life the aesthetic is actualized through ritual, language, symbolism, exchanges and movements. In these details of lived experience lies the



possibility that individuals resist and subvert the pressure toward conformity of institutional life. In "Urban Aesthetics: Movement as Performative Utterance," Christina Ljungberg builds on de Certeau's perception of the urban cityscape as a dynamic semantic environment, constituted by the intersecting actions and gestures of all the individual actors in this spatial drama. The aesthetics of space, then, is Ljungberg's subject, explored through Paul Auster's fiction: *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) and *City of Glass* (1988) and complicated by de Certeau's claim that: "the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statement uttered" (98). In de Certeau's terms, the formal construction of the city facilitates certain kinds of movement but blocks others, it determines the forms of involvement and interaction that are possible in the space. However, the city space is more than the formal layout of streets and divisions; the city is a space of actualizations where, every day, individuals actualize, map and remap the city's potential for meaning.

In this activity of reformalizing, decentering and subverting the formal possibilities for meaning, Ljungberg brings us not only into the realm of negative aesthetic knowledge, of the potential for a negative dialectics, but also in confrontation with the postmodern critique of aesthetic theory based on Enlightenment reason. Martin Heidegger, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida are among the philosophers who have most powerfully promoted the idea that the truth of art is to be found in the revelation that all truth is culturally constructed through the medium of linguistic metanarratives. One response to this idea is the poststructuralist effort of breaking down the boundaries between literature and the non-literary. We could see Ljungberg's pursuit of de Certeau's correspondence between speech acts and town planning as an example of this; the inquiry by Vincent and Otterberg into Thoreau's deployment of scientific discourses would be another example. A complementary strategy for investigating the role of linguistic metanarratives in the construction of aesthetic truth is the inquiry into what Dorota Glowacka calls "Aesthetics and Otherness." Following Emmanuel Levinas, she notes that "aesthetics, traditionally understood as producing a likeness of the Other, colludes in the appropriation of Otherness by the same" (Glowacka 3). She describes the effort of thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Lyotard, Blanchot and Derrida as they "have searched for ways to articulate the exteriority that transcends thought itself and therefore remains nonrepresentable" (3), that might provide an avenue



for an alternative aesthetics which could accommodate the Other while resisting the potential for collusion.

Hartwig Isernhagen offers a reworking of conventional views of aesthetics and majoritarian/minoritarian conflict through the artistic, social and physical fact of violence in his essay, "Aesthetics of Violence / Violence of Aesthetics: Some Remarks on the Cultural Work of Aesthetics and Practices of Aestheticization in Late Twentieth-Century American Civilization." The orthodox view of aesthetics as a mechanism for coping with social violence has been outlined above: the aesthetic offers us an experience of harmony and unity that disavows conflict, chaos and violence. However, aesthetics can also be seen as a function of social violence; Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) is a classic study of the productive function of violence in the formation of American culture. In this view, all aesthetic production is involved in negotiating structures of cultural power, whether as appropriating and colluding discourses, or as negative epistemologies that expose the absence of authentic forms of harmony in an otherwise chaotic world. Isernhagen's contribution to this debate is the perception that the aestheticization of violence from a majoritarian perspective is necessarily and constitutively different from that which we construct from a minoritarian viewpoint. The ethics of violence, the legitimation of violence, the pragmatic effect of violence will be different in canonical American literary texts when compared with texts such as Isernhagen's examples from Maori literature (Keri Hulme's 1985 novel *The Bone People*), Canadian First Nations literature (Tomson Highway's 1988 play *The Rez Sisters*) and Leslie Marmon Silko's Native American fiction: *Ceremony* (1977), *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). To contextualize this distinction, Isernhagen offers a provocative discussion of the aesthetic object, not so much as a representation of violence (aesthetics of violence), but as itself an agent of coercive social power (the violence of aesthetics). The aestheticizing of power in late twentieth-century American culture, Isernhagen argues, represents a form of violence that is at once epistemological, sociological, ideological, moral and political: a form that is akin to the Marxist notion of "false consciousness" that is the product of appropriative and complicit aesthetic discourses.

Here, Isernhagen is taking forward a debate that is both ancient and troublingly modern. Emory Elliott, in the introduction to the volume of essays that collects the proceedings of the 1998 University of California,

Riverside conference entitled "Aesthetics and Difference: Cultural Diversity, Literature, and the Arts," comments upon the double-edged nature of aesthetic judgment in an environment characterized by profound differences in economic power, social privilege and cultural legitimation. On the one hand, he points out, to make a positive aesthetic judgment may be to construct a bridge across the gap of difference; on the other hand, for a person in a dominant position to offer a negative aesthetic judgment of another who is placed in an inferior economic, political or legal position is to render the other inferior in a supplementary sense and then "the aesthetic may operate as a tool of divisiveness, enmity, and oppression" (Elliott, et al. 3). As all the essays gathered in this particular collection before you make clear, the aesthetic questions of the past remain as vital and urgent now as they have been at any time in the history of Western civilization. The peculiarly American quality of the aesthetic works under discussion in these essays is a product of a close exchange across the Atlantic since the founding of the Republic (and earlier). The crisis of representation that is modernity has affected the United States of America perhaps disproportionately because it is the first modern state founded upon the values of the European Enlightenment. That the philosophical aesthetics of the Enlightenment should inform and continue to shape the aesthetic culture and thought of America is not, in this context, surprising. Nor is the necessity that thinkers and scholars must continue to attend to the transformative power of aesthetics in our globalized world culture, as our "now" becomes tomorrow's "then."

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