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# Aesthetics of Violence / Violence of Aesthetics: Some Remarks on the Cultural Work of Aesthetics and Practices of Aestheticization in Late Twentieth- Century American Civilization

Hartwig Isernhagen

The generalizing statement that "American culture is violent" recurs in everyday and not-so-everyday discourse in the US. Its scope is broad: from Schumpeterian reflections on *creative destruction* to comments on the widening gap between rich and poor to legitimations of imperialist habits of mind and action. It is only to be expected that in this climate of self-reflection the theorization of power that was central to so much thinking in the last third of the twentieth century would take on characteristic shapes that deserve comment. One such shape is the aestheticization of "American violence." This essay will briefly sketch the historical background of associations between the American and power-as-violence that comprises items as diverse as the postulate of a specifically American sublime and allusions to an imperial classicism that are pervasive in United States architecture. It will focus on the recurrence, in dominant forms of late twentieth-century American literary and cultural criticism, of a mental gesture or *habitus* that culturalizes, verbalizes, and finally aestheticizes power. It will, in this manner, find in them an "aesthetics of violence" that goes far beyond what is normally discussed under that heading. This is to say, too, that it will not accept the frequently promulgated reading of the period in question as being characterized by a "sociological approach" that constitutes a "loss of aesthetics." (If we do currently have a "recovery of the aesthetic," we have it in a different, very restricted sense.) This essay will also argue that such aestheticization is in itself an instance of social and cultural violence – epistemologically, in so far as it elides crucial ontological borders, such as (notably) that between material and non-material violence, and thus also sociologically, ideologically, and politically (ultimately, perhaps, morally), in so far as it obscures the kinds, loci and pathways of specific forms of power and thereby creates what we would formerly have called *false consciousness*.

The general statement that "American culture is violent" recurs in everyday and not-so-everyday discourse in the US. Its range of reference is broad: from the economics of living below the poverty line to imperialist habits of mind and action. It is only to be expected that in this climate of self-reflection the thematization and theorization of power that was central to so much writing, both creative and critical, in the last third of the twentieth century would take on characteristically "American" shapes that deserve analysis and comment.

This theme becomes interestingly virulent and complicated in cultural products that we call *aesthetic*. For in traditional theory, the relation between aesthetics and power/violence has primarily been antagonistic: the aesthetic has there been associated with play, *Zweckfreiheit*, and freedom in general – the very opposites of interested power. In more recent theory, on the other hand, we have seen a focus on an association between the terms – we have learned to accept as true Benjamin's statement that there is no cultural production, and specifically no artistic production, that is not associated with violence and oppression. To historicize the aesthetic and the criticism concerned with it is *also*, and in certain areas (such as the relation between "minority" and "majority") *above all*, to explore not only relations between the aesthetic and violence, but also the relation between the two views of such relations. In the concrete historical instance, the first question (concerning relations between the aesthetic and violence) will inevitably lead to the second, which concerns the relation between the two views (antagonism or association?) of such relations.

Since it is impossible to historicize *fully*, such questions will certainly lead to always only provisional answers – or, to put it a little more strongly, their purpose will be not so much to provide answers than to thematize a problem. In literary/cultural criticism and history, it will not be possible to fit such considerations into stories of a simple progress from enslavement to freedom, from injustice to justice, from "bad" representation to "good" representation. And it will not be possible to avoid terms such as *complexity*, *ambivalence*, and *ambiguity*.

An anecdote may clarify what I am trying to say. In a graduate seminar at Berkeley, around 1994/1995, Gerald Vizenor spent some time talking about Edward S. Curtis, whom I had just learned to regard as a very dangerous fellow: to my mind, he staged and arranged persons and objects in a highly artificial manner, and this obviously must have produced highly inauthentic, if beautiful, images of Indians for a white

market. He was, in other words, a ruthless exploiter of those Indians, he was doing violence to them. And here Gerald Vizenor, of all people, was talking about those pictures in the most positive of terms. He saw in Curtis's images a dignity, a beauty, a celebration that, together, made for a useful positive image (which I am not sure he would have called a stereotype) in a situation shaped by exercises of violence, in which group self-confidence was of the essence. And if I remember correctly, his choice of images was strongly on the side of heroic figures against skies, and dignified faces looking proudly at you. I, on the other hand, coming (among other things) from a critical look at T. C. McLuhan's *Touch the Earth*, was concerned with the use of those images in western culture and with Curtis's ability to create Vanishing Indians who were dying beautifully into the earth tones of his mellow photographs. I saw a blurred line of Navajos on horseback vanishing forever into the dark mists of Canon de Chelly. I saw Curtis killing them.

The point here is not that Vizenor was right and I wrong. I don't think I was. We were merely contextualizing and historicizing Curtis in very different ways, according to our momentary agendas. But our different interests were, both of them, shaped by the fact that the problem aesthetics/violence is particularly urgent between "minority" and "majority": no aesthetic (indeed, no cultural) production in that field cannot *not* be affected by the question of power/violence, since the power differential that we refer to as we use the terms "minority" and "majority" is foundational to it.

This is obviously not just a question of critical perspectives. Literature itself explores the opposition as well as the association. I will initially take my examples from a "minoritarian" literature (Native American), but the discussion will inevitably return to the American *as such*.

Leslie Marmon Silko's three novels lend themselves to a somewhat systematic, though obviously not exhaustive, treatment of basic possibilities of accommodating the representation of violence in literary texts. Such representation is obviously not the only linkage between violence and the aesthetic, but it is a convenient place to begin. In this context, *Ceremony* can be read primarily in terms of an aesthetics of pacification that makes visible the ugly face of violence. A major function of the ritual chants/"poems" in the text is that they contribute to its aesthetic nature. The ritual and the spiritual are connected with an intense experience of reality that has strong sensory qualities – what we have is, in a sense, a "realist" aesthetics. Betonie's aesthetics of bricolage, for in-



stance, points toward a transcendent order that is a replica of the universe, and this effect is sensorily reinforced (125ff.; cf. also 109).

The aesthetic, that is, is a road toward the spiritual and toward health. The association reaches high points in Tayo's encounter with the mountain lion (204) or whenever he is together with T'seh: here we have pastoral linked with the beauty of a sexuality that is not associated with individualized love, but "sublimated" in the direction of a union with the universe (238). The representation of violence in the scene at the uranium mine is a counterpoint to such aestheticization – or, conversely, the aestheticized pastoral enhances the implications and intended negative valuations of the violence by way of counterpoint. It highlights its ugly face, its essential formlessness. (There is also a ritual performance of evil, but this is ritual that has lost its ability to create form and order. It can only create chaos – and not a carnivalesque, but a terminal one at that).

The opposition between the aesthetic and violence towards which *Ceremony* strongly inclines and which it uses in the establishment of ethical distinctions is present at most very sporadically in *Almanac of the Dead*, which can largely be read under the heading of an aesthetics of conflict. Violence is pervasive in the world of that novel, whose problem then is how to integrate it into a representation of history that can still claim aesthetic value. One of several mechanisms that produce this effect is the linkage of the question of violence with the question of survival: violence is necessary to counter violence. Thus, the Barefoot Hopi's predictions that Mother Earth is going to rebel against the violence of white exploitation with earthquakes, and his plea for violent revolt (618-619), present counter-violence as not only politically just and justified, but as historically inevitable – a strong sense of historical inevitability, in fact, pervades the book.

One might raise the question, of course, of the extent to which there is an element of parody in the figure of the Barefoot Hopi. I think there is, indeed, but this does not invalidate the argument. It merely gives an interesting twist to it. We have here what one might call a very grim form of the carnivalesque that demonstrates how seamlessly violence and the aesthetic are integrated with one another, and into the scheme of the book. For all through it, violence is often supremely, though grimly funny (see Awa Gee 685). Silko employs the comedy of violence that we also have in such genres as slapstick, commedia dell'arte, or satire, in order to establish a precarious balance between the free play of art

and the purposeful drive of propaganda. This is an instance of the capacity of the aesthetic text to contain within itself the tension between the aesthetic and violence – and between its own aesthetics and its own violence.

*Almanac* does not only use this linkage between violence and the aesthetic, it does not only go through comic performances of the free play of violence, which constitute a sort of aesthetic transcendence of the sordid reality of the violent – it also uses ultimately religious questions to forge another link. With the historical inevitability, there appears on the horizon of the text again and again an apocalypse that has its own beauty, or that is presented as if it did. Such transcendence toward the spiritual is, at least on the surface, not much different from what happens on the frontier in classical “white” texts: a person (a group, a society, a culture) experiences the annihilation of its old (in some way deficient or provisional) self and undertakes the passage towards a new (better or perfect, and certainly historically preordained) self: a *rite de passage* towards, *initiation* into, or (to pick up Slotkin’s term) *regeneration* of a more real reality, in aestheticized violence.

Isolated instances of such a perspective also occur in *Gardens in the Dunes*, though as a whole it follows different principles. After her rape, Hattie very quietly goes into a devastating and wholesale act of revenge against an entire community – “very quietly,” because almost automatically: Silko refuses to analyze the motivation, though she does analyze the numbing effects of trauma as well as the liberating effect of revenge to an extent. When Hattie burns the town of Needles down and thereby punishes the entire community for its mendacity and violence, which it hides under a veneer of respectability, she enjoys the moment of revenge with great intensity: the ecstasy of violence has a healing effect, whose psychological component is clearly heightened by the fact that there also occurs a moment of transcendence (474-75).

As has already been suggested, *Gardens* as a whole follows different laws. It is easy to over-harmonize the book – among other things because Silko foregrounds the child’s (Indigo’s) conventionally innocent perspective in order to create sympathy for her own ecofeminist agenda. But also the moment of Hattie’s revenge is merely preparatory, as the sequence of events after it makes clear: after the conflagration, Indigo and Sister Salt do not hear from Hattie until a message reaches them from England that places the recovering woman firmly within that pacific nexus of ecofeminism that provides the dominant perspective of

the novel (476-77). This ecofeminism is realized in terms of a pastoralism which operates with both archaism and globalized hybridity, and it is here (as I have argued elsewhere) that a notion of intercultural exchange becomes text-generative to an extent that makes it possible to talk about *Gardens* in terms of an aesthetics of exchange. Once again, as in *Ceremony*, there predominates the conflict between violence and the aesthetic, rather than the fusion.

The latter, which is the more problematic and therefore certainly in many respects the more interesting writerly move, recurs with other authors, in scenes that embody the beauty of killing and dying, and violence as beautiful transcendence. These are key scenes in which a crisis takes place or the *telos* of a life is reached, in texts by authors as different as Tomson Highway, James Welch and Scott Momaday.

Tomson Highway's first play, *The Rez Sisters*, with all its naming of social problems and with all its references to their causes, uses Indian humor and the central metaphor of the (Bingo) game to transform the essential violence behind the life of the fictional village/reserve of Wasaychigan Hill into comedy. But there is one moment that cannot be integrated into comedy: the natural (or, in common parlance, precisely *non-violent*) death of 39-year-old Marie-Adele Starblanket. Death – naked, unmotivated and unexpected, unaccounted for, senseless, and in this sense the ultimate violence that can be offered to the individual – disrupts the comedy and requires a different strategy of representation. Highway chooses poetic sentiment that skirts and brilliantly avoids sentimentality, as he transforms the master of ceremonies of the Bingo game into Nanabush, who carries Marie-Adele away in a Dance of Death that combines the beautiful (not the sublime!) and a sense of spiritual union with a larger whole. Or rather, Nanabush, the Ojibway trickster hero, is imported into the comedy to play "the Seagull (the dancer in white feathers), the Nighthawk (the dancer in dark feathers), and the Bingo Master" ("Cast of Characters" xiii). His intrusion constitutes the irruption of an entity endowed with otherworldly or spiritual powers into normalcy: a moment of extremely beautiful transcendence (103/04). And this moment redeems the inescapable violence in beauty.

James Welch makes do without the appeal to myth, or rather he dissolves it into universally and instantly comprehensible symbol, as he permits Jim Loney to orchestrate his own death in such a way that it becomes a moment of transcendence: in the final scene of the novel, the enigmatic hallucinatory bird, which had embodied his loss of reality, is

transformed into a representation of his soul and of its transition into a different state, as the bullets from Doore's rifle hit him with the impersonal violence of a willed and fated, but incomprehensible (self-)annihilation.

If violent death can constitute a moment of transcendence, so can the moment of killing – a risky business, of course, and one that needs careful narrative preparation and framing. In Welch's *Heartsong of Charging Elk*, the protagonist experiences a moment of deepest self-alienation, as he is drugged by his lover, a prostitute, and becomes the sexual plaything of the rich white homosexual Armand Breteuil in what amounts to a rape. This moment can be taken to stand for innumerable other moments of victimization and exploitation, of powerlessness and exposure to overwhelming "other" forces in the life of the protagonist and his group – and the killing of the rapist becomes another moment of regeneration. Welch establishes the contexts with great skill so as to exonerate the killer: the reader sees everything through his eyes, his drugged sleep is beautifully invaded by hitherto unknown forms of sexual pleasure, the shock of recognition as he sees who is manipulating him creates an insupportable tension between Charging Elk's notion of maleness and what is being done to him, and to kill the white man becomes a necessary act of liberation that is represented in a visionary or almost epiphanic manner. That is, it is highly charged not only with emotional, but also with epistemological and symbolic intensity: the violent act reaches out towards a lost reality and reconstitutes it, and it stands for the recovery of selfhood (277). And the scene has great beauty, which (in a tightrope act) derives to a considerable degree from the surgical precision with which Charging Elk slits Breteuil's throat: it is the sparse beauty of an act well performed.

In Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Abel kills the Albino in a moment of transcendence that is quite similar. Like Charging Elk, he engages Evil itself – consummate, absolute – in a deadly battle; like Charging Elk, he has to kill, if he is to survive as the person he knows, as a character with whom he can identify. Selfhood, in other words, is at stake again. And once again, the evil opponent is *white* – in this instance only symbolically, but that only increases the semantic impact of the term. The salient difference between Momaday and Welch is that in *House Made of Dawn* the struggle is much more highly charged in terms of religiousness – less a specific religion than a syncretistic or hybrid religiousness that manifests itself in the symbolism, between an Indian



notion of witchery and Christianity's Satan as the eternal snake, and that has both social and sexual implications and overtones. Here, too, evil emasculates or at least threatens maleness, and here, too, the threat to the individual has a collective dimension. What Momaday, with his (late) high modernist aspirations, has, and what Welch, with his quasi-existentialist stance, avoids, is the metaphysical implication that, of course, gives the ultimate sanction to the killing – however mistaken, however embedded in debilitating patterns of self-destruction it may on other levels be. This is a dimension of Momaday's art that has perhaps not received enough attention, for the phenomenon recurs in his oeuvre in different shapes: a metaphorization and metaphysicalization of power and violence that may place him more closely at the center of the general American literary canon than one might otherwise suspect. (One more example would be, again in *House Made of Dawn*, the reference to Martinez 77-79.)

In texts and reflections like these, violence is clearly on the road to some kind of validation through aestheticization – validation not in the simple political sense, according to which it may be used to achieve worthy ends such as liberty, etc., but in a fuller and graver sense: it ceases to be destructive and becomes the only available or the most fundamental constructive move. Within the field of cultural production constituted by the interaction of minority and majority, such aestheticization of violence has two radically different pragmatic sides.

A discussion of Keri Hulme's *Bone People* by Maryanne Dever (1989) that (as far as I can see) has not had the impact on discussions of minority writing which it deserves develops the argument with great clarity. Powerlessness, to put it very simply, produces a speechlessness that in turn generates a violence that becomes the only remaining form of interaction/communication with the world. Essentially, Dever does not do more than explore a set of key terms that the literary text itself offers repeatedly, such as when Joe is caught in cycles of violence (175, 189-192), or when his primary victim Himi almost, but not quite, mentally articulates the mechanism: "All morning the feeling had grown, start a fight and stop the illwill between his father and Kerewin. Get rid of the anger round the woman, stop the rift with blows, with pain, then pity, then repair, then good humour again. It works that way . . . it always did" (192).

The fusion of violence and meaning is here, once again, based in and realized through the aesthetic: it is, once again, a pure, sparse transcen-

dence of the average that embodies a different order of "meaning." This is essentially the same gesture as in much majority writing in America. A closer look, however, permits one to argue that what appears to be the same in essence serves different functions and hence has different cultural import and meaning.

The fusion occurs, for example, in Frank Norris's variant of American naturalism – of one of those moments in literary history, in other words, when power becomes the motivating center of an aesthetics. One only has to think of *The Octopus* as a whole, but also (on a minor scale) of moments such as that towards the end of *McTeague*, where the protagonist discovers an instinctive reaction to his pursuers in himself:

But once more the spur bit into his body, goading him on. . . . The brute that in him slept so close to the surface was alive and alert, and tugging to be gone. There was no resisting that instinct. The brute felt an enemy, scented the trackers, clamored and struggled and fought, and would not be gainsaid. (312)

It "would not be gainsaid" because what is inside McTeague and at the same time transcends the limits of his mind and body, of his being, is, of course, a vitality that struggles for survival – it is Life as such. And Norris's frequent dubious editorializing vanishes into a narrative discourse that ultimately does present itself in terms of an aesthetics of violence.

In so far as it is not just Life, but also the western landscape that embodies such transcendent power, it is also America that is being represented here in an instance of the association between America and power with which we began. And from Naturalism to Postmodernism there is little change in this respect: When Don DeLillo's Eric, in *Cosmopolis*, fantasizes his own death, it is as the ultimate fusion with power – which will destroy him, but such destruction will simultaneously be transcendence, and it will be American:

He wanted to be buried in his nuclear bomber, his Blackjack A. Not buried, but cremated, conflagrated, but buried as well. He wanted to be solarized. He wanted the plane flown by remote control . . . , reaching maximum altitude and leveling at supersonic dash speed and then sent plunging into the sand, fireballed one and all, leaving a work of land art that would interact with the desert . . . (208-09)



The fantasy – highly reminiscent of the final *delta-t* of *Gravity's Rainbow* – is immediately followed by an ironic reference to the meretricious conventions of a market society, in which this piece of land art, too, will be marketed like anything else. This is a juxtaposition that only heightens the difference between such sordid normalcy and the ecstatic moment of the individual's becoming one with power. Eric's fantasy is a fantasy of a sublime moment in the American mode, postmodernized in acknowledgment of a pervasive commodification of life.

It is also very much an aestheticization of violence from a "majority" standpoint. Between DeLillo and my American Indian examples, we have a decisive political difference that affects the ethics of the texts and their reception. Briefly put, what we have from Norris to DeLillo is a celebration of power that is only possible if one is in some sense "with it," if one positions oneself, however vicariously, virtually, or mistakenly, inside it. And in so far as it is majoritarian, it is oppressive. But the "same" aestheticization of violence from a position of (relative, "minority") powerlessness is essentially non-oppressive, because it simply does not have the power to oppress; and it is potentially a road to cultural emancipation. In other words: the two aestheticizations are not really "the same," pragmatics affects semantics.

An important aspect of such cultural emancipation through the aestheticization of violence is that it constitutes a forcible entry into the realm of the aesthetic. The framework in which Dever argues is, of course, the exclusion of the "minoritarian" from discursive (and other) fields that have symbolic (and other) power. Conceptions/definitions of aesthetic value, too, are exclusionary mechanisms, preemptive exclusions. They are power moves, and they are political. As one finds that there is no room of one's own, one encounters the violence of a particular aesthetics in a particular sociohistorical moment. The aesthetic object, then, becomes a gesture or performance of power, in the sense that the acting-out of power is written into it; it is not only its use that is such a gesture or performance, but its very presence in the world. Within the American canon, this has been the case, for example, in US architecture since the time of the young republic, which took over a then-dominant European rationalist classicism that was itself already associated with a fusion of the imperial and the revolutionary – a fusion that made it eminently suited to a society and culture which was beginning to make exceptionalist claims for itself and that was soon to develop notions of manifest destiny. This classicism has, of course, not

reigned unchallenged or uninterrupted, but the fact that it has once again re-emerged in a prominent position in much postmodern architecture *and* that it has become part of the architectural vernacular of housing development after housing development in the US speaks for itself. And it is, of course, firmly enmeshed in a system of imperial discourses that can trace their heritage back to the ideologeme of *translatio studii*, and hence already to Puritan culture.

Such celebration-through-aestheticization of power is nowhere stronger, perhaps, than where it produces an association between secular power and the sublime, and the American sublime would appear as a cornerstone of a triumphalist aesthetics. But there is also a general, "creeping" aestheticization of the Other – of the minority by the majority – that may ultimately have an even greater impact on the cultural life of societies. It belongs within the context of a mental gesture or *habitus* that culturalizes, verbalizes, and finally aestheticizes power and that is present in dominant forms of late twentieth-century literary and cultural criticism. The *habitus* deflects attention from material conditions as factors in the creation and conservation of sociocultural differences, and by deflecting attention from the material aspect of those differences. It is an act or strategy of thematization (of culture), and thus simultaneously an act of de-thematization (of material conditions).

In the process, power is de-materialized through arguments regarding the continuity, or even identity of sorts, of the material and the immaterial – arguments that do have some, but only limited, merit. It is certainly true that exclusion from the dominant, prestigious discourses and cultural patterns of a society goes together with and may not only manifest, but reproduce powerlessness; but the reverse is not true: participation in the prestigious discussions of a society does not necessarily make one powerful. A glance at intellectuals inside and outside the university tells one as much; it may even teach one that too competent a participation in such discussions may exclude one from real power. There is frequently quite a gap between the two.

This gap may, in its turn, be explored so as to convey prestige, or symbolic power – as, for example, by hermits, the poorer monastic orders, etc., well into modernity. But in relations between classes or ethnic groups, it does not. The last three decades of the twentieth century saw a vibrant discussion of ethnic and other forms of difference, which has ended up postulating difference itself, and thus also ethnicity, as a value, without producing any great material change in the living conditions of

many or most ethnic groups. (Among American Indians, casinos have arguably done much more, for good and evil, than that entire discussion.) This has been so, because the value of ethnicity has been wholly cultural, and by and large purely aesthetic, in a general sense, and it has on the whole been articulated in and as aesthetic work. (An old argument, in fact, that tends to get overlooked or submerged in facile connections between cultural and political work.) The value of ethnicity has, as we have seen, occasionally manifested itself as or through an aesthetics of (emancipatory) violence, but the culturalization through aestheticization itself, in so far as it tends toward the preservation of a status quo that is characterized by hierarchy, by inequality, and frequently by exploitation, is an ideological and political act that has great potential for (oppressive) violence.

Or rather, such aestheticization is in itself an instance of social and cultural violence – epistemologically, in so far as it elides crucial ontological borders, such as (notably) that between material and non-material violence, and thus also sociologically/politically (and perhaps ultimately morally), in so far as it obfuscates the *loci* and pathways of specific forms of power and thereby creates what we would formerly have called *false consciousness*.

In conclusion, this is also to say that if we do, indeed, have the widespread uncritical and celebratory aestheticization of violence that I have been trying to talk about and that goes far beyond what is normally discussed under the heading “aesthetics of violence,” the frequently promulgated reading of the last decades of the twentieth century as a period characterized by a “sociological approach” that constituted a “loss of aesthetics” appears dubious. Should we indeed have experienced a “recovery of the aesthetic” since then, this has been in a different, very restricted sense: as the recovery of older strategies of writing. But that is a different story.

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