Introduction

The essays in this volume are a selection of the papers presented at the jointly organized conference of the Swiss Association for American Studies (SANAS) and the Austrian Association for American Studies (AAAS) held at the University of Zurich on 9-10 November 2012. Choosing "Conflict" as the motto for the annual conference of two associations devoted to the study of the United States of America seemed appropriated in times when the international role of the United States has been a controversial one, producing and provoking rhetorical and military conflicts on numerous levels.

What became apparent early on in the organization of the conference was that these geopolitical conflicts were not the prime targets the participants and their papers had singled out for investigation. Rather than these straightforward conflicts that America has been engaging in for over a decade, the papers at the conference seemed to be more attentive to metaphorical antagonisms within different forms of artistic expression. This interest in tensions and conflicts on numerous structural levels of culture within the field of American Studies seems, at first glance, unusual or unexpected. However, it turns out to be a leitmotif of American culture throughout its entire history, namely, in the form of a deep and profound preoccupation with the Other as a source of conflict or friction.

Beginning with the age of discovery and the colonial period, America has always been exploring the tension between Europe or the European settlers and the new continent with its native inhabitants. This continues in the Early Republic by stylizing England as a crucial force for defining the identity of the United States through notions of demarcation and separation. Conflict is also at work in the literature and philosophy of transcendentalism with its urge to overcome the division between the individual and nature in a mystic sublation of this very divide. Struggles and conflicts between social strata characterize the literature of the Gilded Age and realism in the second half of the nineteenth century, man-

ifesting themselves in narratological experiments that highlight these antagonisms. This kind of opposition is reinforced in the culture of modernism, which gravitates around time and space as two conflicting dimensions for perceiving the world at large, thereby generating new media, including film and other mechanically reproducible forms of artistic expression, as well as new modes of storytelling in literature and the visual arts. Parallel to these structural conflicts fought over media of expression, racial or ethnic Otherness has been engaging in a creative friction throughout twentieth-century American culture at large. Also the resurfacing of American exceptionalism in the twenty-first century, modeled on Puritan notions of America as being the chosen nation, testifies once again to this long-standing conflict within American culture that directs its energy toward the Other in a variety of dimensions, spanning religion, politics, philosophy, class, media, and ethnicity, to name just a few.

The essays in this collection address these moments of conflict in American culture from a variety of vantage points, mostly looking at structural areas of friction within different forms of artistic expression, including literature, film, photography, digital technologies, advertisements, and representations of sexual violence, all roughly grouped under the rubrics of media, narratives, and realities.

Conflicting Media

In her essay, Barbara Klinger uses the conflict between media technologies in film as a way to explain the constitution of a film canon or the emergence of films as movie classics. In close readings of the media transformations of films such as *Gone with the Wind* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, Klinger demonstrates how, in an almost Darwinian manner, the cultural memory of films constitutes itself through recirculation of films in new formats. Her case studies illuminate how TV adaptations of films, their republishing in digital formats, directors' cuts, or similar modes of redistribution, shape the fate of a film with respect to its position as a major work in film history.

In a similarly media-conscious way, Isabel Capeloa Gil approaches the concept of representational conflicts through the tension between the actual realm of war and what could be referred to as the "home front." By looking at early film material as well as at contemporary photo art, she demonstrates how essential this conflict between the home and the combat zone, as two seemingly exclusive dimensions, is for the representation of war. Domesticity becomes the backdrop or

larger frame that is necessary for realizing the visual mimesis of the war experience.

Mimetic issues are also at the fore of Johannes Binotto's analysis of the James Bond movie *Quantum Solace*, in which he highlights the film's media-specific self-reflexivity with respect to digital cinema. Binotto demonstrates the extent to which the visual grammar of the film is deeply influenced by digital technology, arguing that digital visualization is also at the core of the film's plot and narrative. Through the use of specific frames, the film also reflects on digital imaging as a larger meta-cinematic dimension, thereby making wider claims concerning the status of cinema in the twenty-first century.

Conflicting Narratives

These new media formats go hand in hand – not just in cinema – with new modes of storytelling. Cornelia Klecker approaches in her essay what she terms "mind-tricking" narratives in recent Hollywood film, that is, films with a twist ending. By comparing *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist* she is able to pinpoint mechanisms of a new mode of storytelling that relies on two competing narratives or plots within one film. Surprise endings of a number of recent films make the viewer question what she has experienced up to this point. One final moment of revelation retrospectively creates a conflict of competing narratives in the viewer's mind.

In a similar vein, Anna Iatsenko shows how recent novels engage in analogous narratological strategies. Her reading of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* shows how the novel is able to suppress a conflicting plotline which, similar to a mind-tricking narrative, surprises us as readers by violating the plot we had, up to this point, been constructing in our minds. In an epiphany-like moment, when the narrator discloses a minute element of the story, the hitherto assumed plot shatters into pieces which the reader consequently has to reconstruct, thus producing a new narrative that stands in utter conflict with the previously believed-in meaning of the story.

This narrative tension can, of course, also manifest itself as different narrative voices within one text. Barbara Straumann's analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* shows how the male narrator's voice in the novel constantly collides with the voice of the dominating female figure of Zenobia. By using the Bachtinean concept of heteroglossia and by stressing the notion of the female figure's continuous performative stance, Straumann reads these competing voices as larger principles at work in the novel as such.

While the above essays are interested in how the ends of narratives violate or overwrite the memory of what the viewer or reader had experienced until arriving at the surprise ending, Johannes Mahlknecht focuses on how the beginning of a film shapes the expectations of moviegoers. By using the legal disclaimer, Mahlknecht selects one paratextual element of the opening sequence in order to explore the thin line that separates fiction from truth in film. As a minute framing device, the claim to the authenticity or assurance of the fictitious nature of a given film – usually positioned in the opening credits – shapes our mental disposition when watching this film. However, in many cases, as Mahlknecht's close readings demonstrate, these disclaimers turn out to problematize the status of truth and authenticity in film rather than clarifying the very questions they claim to answer.

Conflicting Realities

Problems of authenticity and truth also lie at the heart of New Journalism as a narrative mode that tries to explore the gray areas between fact and fiction. This borderline, which is being negotiated between fiction and truth in New Journalism, in a transformed way, also lies at the heart of the story told in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.* Bryn Skibo-Birney analyzes Wolfe's rendering of Ken Kesey's drug experimentations in his attempts to create a drug-induced counterreality as a conflict between reality and fiction akin to the New Journalist enterprise.

Another borderline that separates reality and imagination, that is, the conflict between the world and the perceiving mind, is explored in Roberta Hofer's essay on human puppeteering. Films like *Being John Malkovich* and *Stranger than* Fiction, together with J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*, serve as springboards to delve into the murky waters in which fact and fiction, self and Other, as well as reality and performance, blend and consequently get into conflict with one another. All three works problematize, through notions of performing human puppets, integral dimensions of narrative literature or narrative film, including the conflicting functions of author, narrator, character, and point of view.

These performative aspects that govern any kind of reality transgression surface in a totally different guise in Simone Puff's essay on skin color in African American standards of beauty. By screening advertisements and articles in *Ebony* magazine over a number of decades, Puff traces a latent conflict within African American print culture that gravitates around skin color as an indicator for a mostly female aesthetics. By juxtaposing globalized concepts of biracial beauty with African Ameri-

can beauty standards, her essay lays bare an unreconciled conflict within African American self-expression during the second half of the twentieth century.

The conflict between personal agency and outside control, which can manifest itself in normative beauty standards as well as in allegories of human puppeteering, also governs the last paper of the collection. Ralph Poole's exploration of the representation of sexual violence against young males in sports returns to questions of how to depict events of undocumented violence in journalism or the media. Using a number of real cases as well as adaptations of sexual transgressions in films and TV series, Poole locates the mechanisms at work in mainstream mass communication. By emphasizing violence and media, the last paper comes full circle to the first essays of the collection, returning to questions that had been raised by the first papers with respect to the representation of war and its underlying conflicts.

The essays in this volume try to span a large array of dimensions within American culture in which concepts of conflict fuel representational practices. Ranging from media-related levels, narrative modes, to ways in which to come to terms with different realities, the individual contributions map out a multitude of mostly structural forces of conflict. Despite their foregrounded representational agendas, these investigations, nevertheless, derive their momentum from a number of unmediated, that is, directly experienced forms of conflict that have always been at work throughout American cultural history.

Mario Klarer and Christina Ljungberg