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## Introduction: Transatlantic Perspectives on American Visual Culture

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In a recent issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* on early American visual culture the editors, Karsten Fitz and Klaus-Dieter Gross, suggested that although for more than twenty years the visual turn has been proclaimed as a major development, “the cultural implications of ‘the visual’ still need to be explored more deeply” (427). In one sense, this collection of essays can be seen as a continuation of this exploratory process. Assuming that the study of visual culture reveals crucial insights into cultural forms of communication and exchange, all of the essays address the theoretical, historical, and methodological challenges that are connected with the analysis of visibility in different media and historical contexts.

Yet in another sense, this collection also tries to cover new ground. By focusing on American visual culture from a *transatlantic* perspective, one of the concerns in the following essays is the question of how the study of visual culture can be pursued in a transcultural and transnational sense. Historically, painters, photographers, and film directors traveled extensively between Europe and North America, learning, refining, or revising their individual approaches and skills, while the twentieth century has witnessed an increasingly global impact of American visual culture. Concentrating on painting, but also taking into account other important areas of visual culture such as photography, graphic arts, film, and television, the essays examine, in a variety of periods and constellations, the creative encounters that took place. Indeed, the focus on transcultural relationships can be seen as an important, if somewhat unexpected, link between the study of visual culture and the New American Studies.

In recent years the history of American studies as an academic discipline has been viewed in highly critical ways, yet there is one aspect which has usually been stressed rather emphatically. It is the contention that the relatively short period of institutional life made American studies a particularly hospitable place for emerging and hitherto marginalized research agendas. Feminism, queer studies, the study of minority cultures, or popular culture often had their beginnings in the context of American studies which they subsequently left to form their own disciplinary fields, leaving behind the much lamented sense of fragmentation and disciplinary dissolution.<sup>1</sup> But despite this relative openness to new research agendas, the comprehensive and theoretically complex exploration of American visual culture never managed to create its own subcategory within American studies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For different assessments of this process, cf. Wise; Kerber; and Radway.

<sup>2</sup> However, over the years many scholars—among them W. J. T. Mitchell, Fredric Jameson, Alan Trachtenberg, Miles Orvell, or Richard Slotkin—have made important contributions to this field.

Indeed, even though the Myth and Symbol school professed an interest in “an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image” (Smith, *Virgin Land* v), it was clearly biased in favor of the traditional mental images created by literature. As Jonathan Auerbach has argued in a recent essay, the institutionalization of American studies in the 1940s and 50s was shaped by the assumption that the most potent contemporaneous producer of visibility—Hollywood cinema—firmly belonged to the sphere of mass culture and was thus not an appropriate topic for any kind of serious cultural analysis.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, some of the myths elaborated by practitioners like Henry Nash Smith were also very popular themes among the film studios of the time—such as the so-called mature post-war Westerns. But regardless of their professed desire to study American thought as an “integrated whole” (Wise 307), the Myth and Symbol school practitioners presupposed a hierarchy of cultural objects which reserved the lower ranks for visual culture.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, of course, the New American Studies have contested and deconstructed many of the assumptions of the Myth and Symbol school, most importantly the notion that American identity or the American nation can (and should) be understood or conceptualized as a coherent category. Instead recent work has emphasized diversity, multiculturalism, multilingualism, pluralization, hybridity, creolization, or heterogeneity, while the metaphorical descriptions of cultural analysis have shifted from unifying myths to rhetorics, border discourses, contact zones, dialogics, and instances of transculturation.<sup>5</sup> A recurring motif in these interventions has been the claim that the New American Studies should be conceived of and practiced as a comparatist, dialogical, and postnational, or transcultural discipline. Utopian and, indeed, almost infeasible as some of these schemes may seem, we believe that the aim of studying U.S.-American culture in relationship with other nations and cultures is a productive and necessary way of recognizing the complexity of cultural exchange and interaction—in particular with regard to visual culture which travels so easily and is taken up, imitated, adapted, contested, reconfigured, or recorded so quickly.

However, as Morpheus says in *The Matrix* (1999), there is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. It is one thing to suggest that American studies should reinvent itself as a comparatist (or even postnational) discipline, which, especially from a European perspective, seems to be a very important and worthwhile endeavour. Yet if these claims are not supported by profound and insightful forms of

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Nash Smith makes this point sufficiently clear in his influential 1957 essay on the search for a method, which scholars like Leo Marx still draw upon many years later. Auerbach points out that, judging from the early issues of the *American Quarterly* to which scholars like David Riesman made important contributions, there were important exceptions to this bias (among them also the unlikely appearance of Parker Tyler in the pages of *American Quarterly*).

<sup>4</sup> This can be inferred from Gene Wise’s description of the ‘intellectual history synthesis,’ one of the American studies paradigms in his highly influential overview. In this paradigm, the study of popular minds is a legitimate interest, yet the underlying assumption holds that “America is revealed most profoundly in its ‘high’ culture” (307).

<sup>5</sup> Among the scholars who have made these arguments—albeit in a variety of ways—are Rowe; Lenz; Porter; Kaplan; Fox-Genovese; Fisher; Bercovitch; and Ickstadt. Many seminal essays have been included in the anthology edited by Pease and Wiegman.

cultural analysis, then the disciplinary desire for a comprehensive form of transculturalism could once more be interpreted as a typical example of vague generality and fuzziness, which American studies has been accused of in the past.

Although the revisionist discourse in American studies has been deceptively quiet on questions of visibility, we believe that the study of visual culture is a crucial test case for the attempt to move into the field of comparatist studies. In fact, in the more specialized field of film and media studies this has been an important consideration all along. In many ways, technically as well as aesthetically, the cinema as an institution—and Hollywood in particular—can only be understood as a cosmopolitan phenomenon: transcultural, postnational, and global in practice long before this condition was ‘discovered’ as an important aspect of cultural exchange within the New American Studies. Quite possibly this was also one of the reasons why the cinema was not included in the early attempts of American studies to define the “national self-consciousness” (Smith, *Virgin Land* 3).

But the opportunities for transcultural forms of visual culture analysis obviously go far beyond relatively old media like the cinema. As the rapid dissemination of images depicting the burning twin towers or the torture victims at Abu Ghraib demonstrates, the transcultural analysis of iconographies that are related to, or connected with, U.S.-American culture in complex and often confusing ways, is actually one of the most pressing issues for which American studies scholars should find suitable concepts and methodologies. After all, the mediated and globalized public sphere is the crucial arena feeding the imaginary construction of national identities, and a highly contested space for gaining political support and legitimacy for a nation’s actions.

We believe that much work on the circulation of visual images and the diverse ways of reading, interpreting, and reappropriating them needs to be done. Transcultural analysis is by no means an established field of inquiry but an emerging interest bridging a number of disciplines. Yet we want to suggest that certain research questions and designs have yielded interesting results and may serve as models for future studies: a) the influence of a national visual culture on individual artists—reconceptualized, as Günter Lenz has suggested, in a dialogical sense to conceive of influence in a two-directional way; b) the study of institutions—in Raymond Williams’s sense—creating structural frameworks for the production of visual works of art, and the comparison of these institutions in different cultures (e.g. art academies or the studio system); c) the comparatist study of aesthetic strategies and styles embodied or performed in different media; d) the analysis of visual culture in the context of debates about the value, status, and relative position of cultural objects (e.g. the discourse about the *avant-garde*); e) the function of visual culture in the analysis of power within the larger context of communication and mediation, of producing and receiving signs that may be used for rhetorical and persuasive purposes but also reassembled, recoded, and reinserted in counterhegemonic ways.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Among the analyses contributing to these different approaches have been studies by Gunnig; Vasey; Rogin; Williams; and the work collected in Horak; Ellwood and Kroes; or Maltby and Stokes.

As indicated, this semiotic struggle over, and negotiation of, the meaning of visual culture must be understood as a trans- and postnational phenomenon, precisely *because* the mass-mediated and technology-based character of these forms of communication—despised by the Myth and Symbol school—creates a dense and unpredictable network of communicative encounters. And yet, what would a postnational approach to these phenomena, advocated by the New American Studies, look like? In our estimation, this is by no means clear and should be addressed more thoroughly, both at a theoretical and historical level. For example, choosing a comparatist perspective implies comparing and contrasting certain identifiable and unique features. We agree that the concept of a coherent national culture is highly questionable, yet some notion of cultural specificity must be retained in order to make meaningful comparisons. Furthermore, if we abandon the concept of a coherent (American) culture, how do we evaluate and assess the relative value of cultural objects? Put differently, if we hold on to a notion of representativeness embodied in cultural objects, even at a lower, more regional or local level, how do we legitimize our choice of objects? Who decides which cultural objects are representative of a particular culture or subculture and thus worthy of critical attention?

The contributors of this essay collection address these and other questions within the larger framework of transatlantic relationships. They examine which creative encounters have taken place and, more generally, how they can be understood as participating in a discourse of visual aesthetics. As indicated, this aesthetics has become an increasingly transcultural exchange particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as visual culture can no longer be considered a phenomenon contained within national boundaries. However, as some of the essays included here suggest, it never could. Thus, as Karsten Fitz and Michaela Keck show, there has been a long-standing tradition of creative encounters between European and American visual artists. Often, these have taken the shape of personal contacts resulting in mutually influential relations among individual artists from diverse cultural as well as aesthetic backgrounds. Moreover, artistic centers, schools, and movements functioned as more organized attempts at negotiating aesthetic innovations across national borders. The ‘American School’ at the Düsseldorf Academy of Arts and its major influence on American history painting in the 1840s and 50s is a prime example of all of the above. By focusing on individual painters such as Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, who was trained in Germany before he moved to the United States where he became one of the foremost landscape painters of the mid-nineteenth century, Fitz demonstrates how a particular style of history painting ‘traveled’ across cultures, thereby acquiring and also conveying new meanings in changing cultural contexts. As a consequence, his argument suggests, the resulting paintings have to be understood as *interpretations* rather than mere representations of history.

Another way of studying the transatlantic commerce of visual culture is to look at a particular motif or theme and the way it is negotiated cross-culturally. Michaela Keck attempts this by contrasting one of the best known paintings of the Hudson River School, Asher B. Durand’s *Kindred Spirits*, with Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Mist* predating the former by roughly thirty

years. Both paintings depict the traditional walk through nature and thus share certain iconographic characteristics related to the peripatetic tradition intimately connected with Romantic sensibilities. What is striking, however, is how differently both paintings—and, by implication, artistic traditions—conceive of man's relationship with nature. In brief, whereas the European subject-in-nature as conceived by Friedrich seems to convey an abstract spirituality reflecting an anthropocentric worldview, Durand's painting suggests a kind of transcendence which goes beyond the separation between the inner and outer experience of nature and, indeed, the separation of the natural and social world. While it would no doubt be a mistake to view artistic conventions as disparate, national phenomena, it is certainly useful to critically review individual well-known works of art partaking of certain thematic as well as iconographic traditions and compare how they negotiate these transculturally, thereby also gaining insight into the traveling, and thus forever-changing, nature of aesthetic idea(l)s.

Besides looking at the ways in which motifs travel and artists more or less directly influence each other across national borders, another productive approach to studying transatlantic visual culture is to analyze the structures and institutions that produce and promote (or, in some cases, inhibit) it. Thus, it is useful to learn about the economic practices of how works of art are commissioned, selected, and exhibited or disseminated. Moreover, it is always significant how an artifact or a whole group of works is categorized, labeled, and marketed, as this indicates the (cross-)cultural status and aesthetic value attached to it. Finally, the systems and conditions of production, for example of Hollywood or other movie production sites, need to be taken into account when trying to understand the intricate institutional structures 'behind the scenes' of international visual culture.

There are two contributions in this collection that attempt to shed some critical light on these important questions, Bettina Friedl's essay on fashion photography by American photographers working in post-World-War-II Europe, and Christof Decker's analysis of New Hollywood director Robert Altman, whom he brings into a dialogue with the Spanish surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Post-war fashion photography is a compelling subject in the context of transatlantic visual culture on at least two levels: in concrete terms, it offers insights into the question of 'who was who—and where' in American photography at a crucial moment in Euro-American relations, namely in the period directly following the Second World War. As Friedl shows, many American photographers now known for their innovative art photography such as Edward Steichen, Man Ray, Clifford Coffin, and Richard Avedon, among others, worked for mass-marketed, international fashion magazines in Europe for some time. Apart from being 'transplanted' to a scene recently struck by the disaster of war, which serves as an unlikely backdrop to much of this body of work, the emerging photographers faced the problem of working in a field that was decidedly *not* considered art at the time (and by some critics' standards, is still not today). Thus, they had to juggle the task of bringing their own artistic ambitions to a heavily commercialized system while negotiating, more often than not, the quasi-documentary character of their work, which inadvertently reflected the historical moment of post-war Europe. In the process, accepted generic boundaries were seriously questioned and frequently transgressed.

The transgression of generic as well as geographical boundaries is also central to the New Hollywood cinema of Robert Altman. Taking up the recent critical appreciation of this significant œuvre, Christof Decker proposes that Altman's work has been "characterized by ambiguity and reflexivity," which are "usually associated with the European cinema of the 1950s from where it began to influence the New Hollywood Cinema" (63). Beyond such generic cross-fertilization, Altman has also taken up European themes directly, for example in *Gosford Park* (2001), which is set in an upper-class English country home and whose sardonic tagline reads, "Tea at four. Dinner at eight. Murder at midnight." Decker suggests that it would be too facile to read Altman's films as simply ironic, however. Instead, he argues that the filmmaker, like his Spanish counterpart Buñuel, engages in what the author calls the "interrelation of comic deconstruction and performative self-creation" (63), which is tantamount to subversion, certainly when compared to more traditional Hollywood fare. In fact, the critical force of Altman's œuvre came full circle in *The Player* (1992), whose close-up view of the Hollywood movie industry reveals a "closed, oppressive society" (76), which becomes the object of the director's subtle ridicule. Moving well beyond the confines of the American entertainment industry, and thus inviting fruitful comparisons with certain strands of European art cinema, the irreverent work of Robert Altman casually debunks its most cherished conventions, to say the least.

Another group of essays included in this collection analyzes American visual culture from a comparative and conceptual vantage point. Thus, even though visual culture has to be understood as a productive exchange between cultures, the authors show that this extends to the very concepts behind what is conceived, labeled, and valorized as art as well. What is more, the self-reflexive nature of much of contemporary visual art and its frequently unreliable status as bearer of social and historical meaning is revealed by closely examining the role of art in contemporary, increasingly mass media-dependent societies. In particular, the present proliferation of inter- and multi-medial artistic productions and their ambivalent truth claims nowadays often conceptualized as hyperreal seem particularly striking. A consequent sense of crisis has accompanied much of digital photography and other media as well. By juxtaposing the photorealist, high-precision paintings of American artist Richard Estes with the work of German photographer Andreas Gursky, whose œuvre is known both for the massive size of his prints and also the fact that most images are digitally (though often invisibly) manipulated, Johannes Völz contrasts Estes's iconography of average American cityscapes with Gursky's more anonymous images of globalization and industrialization, respectively. Moreover, the comparison of (digital) photography and photorealist painting allows him to critically evaluate their uncertain truth claims within the aesthetic parameters of hyperrealism in both media.

Peter Schneck's contribution about Don DeLillo's visual poetics continues the critical probing into the ambivalent power of images in contemporary Western cultures. As Schneck shows, the author incorporates such diverse media as painting, photography, television, and the internet into his work, resulting in a highly visual poetics. Rather than merely integrate literary representations of visual artifacts in his œuvre, however, Schneck argues that DeLillo juxtaposes, contrasts, and at

times conflates different media, thereby destabilizing each medium's relation to truth and history. Moreover, the author also draws attention to how an individual visual artifact is taken out of its original iconographic tradition and placed in a contemporary American context. This is exemplified by the famous Bruegel painting *Triumph of Death* (c. 1562), which plays a central role in *Underworld* (1997), where it serves as a dark commentary—perhaps even moral judgment—on American sports history but also on the devastations of the nuclear bomb and the meaning of mass death in the mid-twentieth century. More generally, the appropriation of a certain allegorical tradition is seen as indicative of the voraciousness of American visual culture, which continually absorbs other iconographic traditions in its unending hunger for 'powerful images' allowing for aesthetic responses to otherwise unfathomable traumatic events, as Schneck aptly demonstrates.

Laura Bieger, finally, looks at how a quintessentially American landscape, namely the far western landscape she refers to as 'Marlboro Country,' has been represented, first by European explorers in the early nineteenth century but also since then, both in visual as well as in textual forms. Invoking the seminal work of W.J.T. Mitchell, Bieger traces the iconographic development of 'Marlboro Country' from the recognizably picturesque to the long-anticipated, and long-lost, wilderness ideal which, she argues, survives "in the visual rhetoric of the Marlboro campaigns today" (121). This development allows her to call into question the status of iconographic visual representations vis-à-vis the historical realities we are familiar with. Furthermore, her critical take on American landscapes and their various representations throughout history opens up a transnational and trans-cultural, comparative perspective on iconic cultural images and their respective imaginaries.

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