

*Representation and Decoration in a Postmodern Age*. Ed. Alfred Hornung & Rüdiger Kunow. Heidelberg: Winter, 2009, 309 pp., € 44.00.

The essays assembled in the collection *Representation and Decoration in a Postmodern Age* are dedicated to Gerhard Hoffmann and based on papers given at an international and interdisciplinary conference in Würzburg/Germany, where Hoffmann is Professor Emeritus of American Studies. The contributions are in very different ways concerned with practices of literary and cultural semiosis, i.e. with the question of how texts relate to their outside constituents. The book has 5 parts, I. Theory, II. Novels, III. Art, IV. Drama and V. Emotions, which are preceded by the editors' introduction. In this introduction, Alfred Hornung and Rüdiger Kunow start off by explaining the title concepts "representation and decoration", which are not used as oppositional terms, embodying dualisms of the necessary v. the contingent, the serious v. the playful, etc. Rather, the essays in the volume understand "representation and decoration as signifying practices that are necessarily provisional and incomplete" (xi). Writing about representation after the much-heralded end of representation is a critical move not unrelated to that of postcolonial studies and a "return of the theoretically repressed" (xii). Unsurprisingly, many of the collected essays "treat representation as still profoundly affecting and effecting literary semiosis" and demonstrate that "representation continues to function especially in counter-hegemonic contexts as a foundational and enabling concept" (xii). The essays of the volume contribute to the debate about the (im)possibility of representation and share the critiques of the central concept. The second focus of the volume, "decoration", is a mode of excess, often considered to be mere décor. While transatlantic modernism banned decorative elements and aimed to achieve absolute purity of form and aesthetic design, "the turn to postmodernism was per-

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ceived by many as a departure from the stringencies of modernism and a return to decor" (xiii), which also meant an opening up for new material from what used to be called the "Third World" (whose forms of expression have been associated with ornamentation).

The first section on "Theory" assembles five essays on general theoretical concerns, including Herbert Grabes' "(Re)presentation: Epistemological and Ontological Underpinnings of Twentieth-Century Art" where he offers a historio-theoretical overview of non/representational theory in literature and the arts in the last century. Lothar Bredella in "Representation in Literary Texts" defends referential claims of literary texts against tendencies of deconstructing representation in contemporary theory, and Hans Bertens argues in his contribution "On the Fair and Dubious Reach of Literary Criticism" that postmodern and poststructuralist concepts ignore the findings of empirical sciences. Theo D'haen's "Representational Logic of Post-Americanist Narratives" surveys the debate between the "Old" and the "New Americanists" and his reading of contemporary Canadian post-national narratives demonstrates that since the 1970s there has existed a representational praxis which no longer presents inchoate identity as lack. The concluding contribution to the first part of the volume is Günter H. Lenz's "Radical Cosmopolitanism: W.E.B. DuBois, Germany and African American Pragmatist Visions for Twenty-First Century Europe" which relates W.E.B. Du Bois' classic *The Souls of Black Folk* to the recent debates about trans-cultural relations and radical cosmopolitanism.

The second section "Novels" is dedicated to the interrelation of representation and decoration in literature. The first contribution is Mita Banerjee's "Color Me Beautiful: Naturalism/Naturalization in Frank Norris' *The Octopus*" which she reads innovatively as a story about whiteness and color, thus bringing together the political/judicial (the legal debate of naturalization at the beginning of the twentieth century) and the aesthetic concerns of naturalism. In "An Epistemology of Violence: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and Sam Chamberlain's *My Confession*" William Goetzmann reads McCarthy's fictional account about the violence of history next to an autobiographical memoir that questions any possibility of authenticity in texts. Marc Priewe's contribution "Visions of 'Queer Aztlán': Ethnicity, Sexual Preference and the Invention of Community in Terri de la Peña's *Margins*" investigates de la Peña's novel against the backdrop of contemporary Chicana fiction and demonstrates how the portrayal of female characters shifted from decoration to representation, from women as embellishment of men and their causes toward giving voice to the female (lesbian) self and body.

The third section, "Art", is concerned with painting and photography from the modern period to postmodern and postcolonial practices. It comprises three contributions: Robert Crunden's "Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe, and the Personal Context of German-American Cultural Relations in the 1920s" traces the German impact on American modernism by critically adumbrating the latter's gendered interests. Jeffrey Meikle's "Foregrounded Vistas: Representing America in Linen Postcard Views, 1930–1950" includes several reproductions of postcards produced by the successful Kurt Teich Company; the postcard's significance as a technology of representation is explored as well as the graphic exuberance and pleasures of decoration that come with it. Lorraine Morales Cox's contribution "The Decorative Aesthetic as a Critical Painting Practice: The Art of Siona Benjamin" introduces the American artist of Jewish-Indian origin and her miniature paintings by analyzing in depth the play of cultural signifiers and postmodern decorative aesthetics that characterize Benjamin's paintings and her painterly style.

Part four consists of two contributions on twentieth-century American “Drama”: Jochen Achilles’ contribution “The Synchronicity of the Modern and the Postmodern: Eugene O’Neill’s Representation of Blackness and the African-American Drama of August Wilson and Suzan-Lori Parks” discusses O’Neill’s ‘white’ modernism in terms of both representation and decoration in the context of African-American postmodernism. Alfred Hornung, too, dedicates his contribution “Musical Word-Painting: August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *The Piano Lesson*” to an African-American writer, but focuses on the investigation of the intermedial relationships between August Wilson’s plays, the collages of Romare Bearden and the blues singer Ma Rainey (1886–1939).

The final section of the collection, “Emotions”, focuses on love and death and “the emotional investments in life made to counteract and ban the certainty of death” (xvi). It assembles three contributions: Richard Martin’s “‘The Vital Signature’: Autobiographical Representation in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*” which discusses the genre autobiography as both a representational as well as a decorative form of writing. Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* reveal the interconnection of the two styles, since his poems “share a basis in factual experience” (273), however, they are not mere reproductions of memories, but show decorative ingenuities with the effect that “isolated events gain an overall – often mythological and prophetic – significance for the totality of the relationship Hughes is attempting to relive through versification” (273). Kathleen Woodward in her contribution “A Feeling for the Cyborg” investigates questions of representation and decoration from the perspective of technological intelligence and negotiates the interface between the animate and the inanimate. Finally, Rüdiger Kunow’s “The Coming of Age: The Descriptive Organization of Later Life” discusses the issue of old age in society, fiction and critical theory, and succinctly unearths and summarizes the latter’s blind spots and problems.

Representation, in particular, but also decoration/ornamentation have become central terms in literary and cultural studies. This collection assembles a wide span of interesting essays, which help to re-evaluate twentieth-century developments in literature, literary studies, cultural studies, philosophy and the arts. Conference volumes in general are often wide-ranging and hence run the risk of being inconsistent, and it is not surprising that the topics of the collected conference papers at hand are also hugely diverse. Indeed, the volume covers not only an extremely wide span of themes but also a range of methodologies and theories, which sometimes endangers the coherence of the collection (cf. the diverse headings of its five sections and the fact that not all contributors refer back to the two important concepts mentioned in the volume’s title). However, the unifying thread is the contributions’ common concern with what acts of representation omit, repress and submerge. All in all, there is no doubt that the general reader and specialist alike will appreciate this carefully edited volume.

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