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Antje Dallmann, Reinhard Isensee, Philipp Kneis (Hg.): Picturing America: Trauma, Realism, Politics and Identity in American Visual Culture

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Antje Dallmann, Reinhard Isensee, Philipp Kneis (Eds.): Picturing America: Trauma, Realism, Politics and Identity in American Visual Culture

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Culled from graduate student essays on English and American Studies topics presented at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin between 2002 and 2005, this thematically-challenged and unevenly written collection purports to examine how the “cultural text [...] that influence[s] our understanding of the United States of America” is constructed. (p.9) Space constraints allow somewhat extended comment on but a handful of the volume’s eleven essays.

Eddie A. Bruce-Jones analyzes the symbolism of two photographs - of an American flag seen through a shattered window and of the Manhattan skyline reflected in the window of a Staten Island ferry - whose subjects refer to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He argues that these and similar images allowed Americans to

frame a "narrative of the event's historical significance" that "preceded in-depth historical, anthropological, and political discussions on September 11th, coloring one set of narratives with another." (p.15) Perhaps, but the author declines to demonstrate that his two chosen images carried more rhetorical weight in the aftermath of the attacks than did others that would have complicated his thesis: those of World Trade Center victims leaping to their deaths; of American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 colliding with the Twin Towers; of bystanders fleeing before clouds of immolated concrete, glass, and flesh; and of finger-wagging imams attempting to justify the carnage. Bruce-Jones also might have strengthened his analysis had he – instead of going it alone – solicited even a bit of theoretical assistance from the likes of Barthes, Benjamin, or Sontag. Finally, he mars his essay with the sadly familiar, unsupported outbursts characteristic of academese, whatever the topic: Passage of the U.S. Patriot Act "constitutes a great limitation on the privacy rights of citizens and non-citizens in the United States" (p.15). Which privacy rights? Whose have been infringed? The media are "a politicized instrument of communication." (p.16) Which media? Television, radio, newspapers, the internet? And politicized by whom? Bruce-Jones does not say.

Antje Dallmann, in the longest essay (and the one most in need of editing), unnecessarily drags the hapless reader through several pages of theoretical swamp to construe the meanings of "paranoia" and "paranoid style." She finally rises to the surface six pages into the essay to announce her thesis. Using Richard Condon's novel, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), and two film treatments of the same by John Frankenheimer (1962) and Jonathan Demme (2004), Dallmann argues that "many conspiracy fictions by white male authors are, far from solely representing a general postmodern condition, symptoms of [...] masculinity in crisis." (p.86) Yet, the reader is left to guess which of the many conspiracy fictions Dallmann refers to, besides the three named versions of *The Manchurian Candidate*.

Anthony Evans, on the other hand, contributes an admirable essay – well supported and to the point – on spirit photography and its relationship to memory and mourning. One can say against the piece – which is to say, against the editors – only that it seems out of place in a book about visual representations of American culture: most of the photographs and photographers that Evans cites come from France, Belgium, or Germany.

Other essays cover the role of food in Jewish American literature (though Nobel laureates Isaac Bashevis Singer and Saul Bellow somehow elude the analysis), depictions of crossing the U.S.-Mexican border in Stephen Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000) and Maria Novaro's *The Garden of Eden* (1994), and the psychotic narrative style – again, using paranoid techniques – and its implications for the spectator in select episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) (as if Robert Wiene – also unmentioned – hadn't shown the way almost ninety years ago in *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* [1919-20]).

Defining a readership for this volume – besides presumably the authors themselves – presents a challenge. Students and scholars of film, photography, television, literature, America? None will find a sufficient number of essays in any category to satisfy, nor do the methodologies employed in most of the pieces lend themselves to application beyond the individual problems at hand. More distressingly, despite claims that the volume “represent[s] a useful range of topics for the understanding of contemporary US-American culture” (p.9), the essays hardly convey the diverse flavors of the nation’s multicultural population. Isensee speaks in the foreword of “representations of American society and culture,” “American cultural discourses,” “national identity and the politics of culture in a global age,” and “representations of American society in a transcultural context.” (p.7) But native Hispanics, the nation’s fastest growing ethnic group (whose numbers will soon surpass those of whites in several states) find nary a place among the “interdisciplinary” essays. Anyone familiar with the United States would know that immigrants from Central and South America, along with their US-born descendants, possess a visual culture that goes back centuries and continues to inform contemporary American art, fashion, architecture, and film. Such contributions, however, fail to appear in this volume, as do those of Asian Americans and – possibly the most unkindest cut of all – Native Americans. Despite an obligatory nod to Spike Lee (almost invariably carted out in such collections to appease liberal notions of multiculturalism), *Picturing America* reads like yet another white examination of white America.

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