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The Fiction of America

Performance and the Cultural Imaginary in Literature and Film

campus

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The Fiction of America—America as Fiction

The English translation of *America* (1988), Jean Baudrillard's "collection of traveler's tales from the land of hyperreality" (backcover), opens with a frontispiece by Chris Richardson, which shows a man on a horse, looking at the screen of a drive-in movie theater that is centered against a mountainous desert landscape (see Fig. 1).[1] On the screen, he sees his postmodern alter ego: a space explorer, who is on a mission to conquer the final frontier. This frontispiece depicts something that is easily and unmistakably identifiable as 'America,'[2] and it does so by engaging two concepts: performance and the cultural imaginary. It is by way of performance that a notion of 'America'—or, more specifically, of 'Americanness'—is produced which is anchored in the imaginary, in national fantasies that serve to unite a very diverse body of American citizens.

Richardson's photograph creates this notion of Americanness through the simple, yet very effective strategy of doubling. The photograph captures various items from a vast archive of cultural concepts, symbols, and

1 Richardson's frontispiece does not appear in the French original *Amérique*, and, interestingly enough, *Amérique* features completely different pictures than *America* throughout. While the pictures in *America* primarily show highways and desert(ed) landscapes, *Amérique* additionally contains photographs of graffiti art, storefronts, and billboards. It is also interesting to note that the graffiti art included in *Amérique* is violent and aggressive, as it shows, for instance, menacing, masked men shooting their guns. In short, the images in *America* seem to perpetuate fantasies of America (wide and open spaces, absolute freedom), whereas the illustrations in *Amérique* ostensibly contribute to a more critical and nuanced portrayal of life in the United States.

2 Throughout this study, I use 'America' when I refer to a cultural concept, that is, to representations of national fantasies and imaginings, which "provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity" (Berlant 1991, 20). I will use the term 'United States' when I refer to the geographical space on the North American continent and its concrete political, economic, or social developments. Of course, the terms 'America' and 'United States' conflate and determine each other in the daily reality of American citizens and in the perception of the United States in the rest of the world. For analytical purposes, however, it is important to make this distinction.

myths that are commonly associated with American culture and doubles them by pairing each of these items with a counterpart. The cowboy, the embodiment of American masculinity, meets his *alter ego*, the astronaut; the 'original' frontier, the vast territory of the West, collides with the 'final' frontier, the indefinite reaches of space; the asphalt highways and (empty) automobiles of a tamed civilization impenetrate the wilderness of untouched nature in the imaginings of American landscape. In his frontispiece, Richardson assembles mythical figures and concepts that are deeply engrained in American culture and that re-surface again and again in literature, film, music, paintings, photography, advertising, and other cultural products, which lets these notions appear to be 'typically' and 'naturally' American. However, as Judith Davidov reminds us, the crucial point here is that "everything—the landscape before us and the moonscape on the screen, western hero and space explorer, the artwork itself—is a construction, or what Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum*" (1998, 296–297; italics in the original). In other words, the Americanness of this piece is not intrinsic to the cultural concepts used by Richardson, but is carefully constructed through a process of performative doubling.

Fig. 1: "Space Cowboy" by Chris Richardson

(reprinted by permission of the artist)

Baudrillard defines the simulacrum as an image that "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever" and has become a truth in its own right (1999, 6). This definition can certainly be applied to Richardson's frontispiece: it depicts a version of America that does not correlate with the political, social, and economic 'realities' of the United States. Rather, it is a representation of a very specific imagining of American culture which is grounded in an elaborate system of stock concepts and images, whose manifestations in actual cultural products may vary and are contingent on the context in which they appear. However, the basic structure of these concepts essentially remains the same. What is more, it is precisely the transformability of these images/concepts and their ability to adapt to the course of time that contributes to their persistence in American culture. Their continued presence is so strong that it appears as if they indeed reflected a 'reality' when, in fact, they represent an imaginary version of 'America.' Most crucially, it is through performance, through reiteration, through "*a stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1990, 179) that specific stock concepts, such as the individual items depicted in Richardson's frontispiece, have come to signify American culture, or Americanness.

I think that Richardson's visual representation of an imaginary America is an excellent example to illustrate how the cultural imaginary and performance work together in constructing Americanness, and how they sustain each other in the process. As an archive of images, affects, and desires that stimulate imaginings of 'America,' the cultural imaginary depends on constant reiteration, otherwise it could not reach a degree of institutionalization. Any kind of performance, on the other hand, needs to be embedded in a larger set of established performances, as every replication must be based on something that had been there before. Americanness emerges in the interplay of the cultural imaginary and performance, and is instituted through "acts which are internally discontinuous [and] which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 1990, 179).

This study investigates how the Americanness of American culture is constructed in the interplay of performance and the cultural imaginary. More specifically, I argue that the construction of Americanness is always already troubled and undermined in the very moment of its production by the specters that haunt dominant imaginings of 'America.' Most crucially, then, my study conceives of 'America' as a practice, as a concept that is

constituted by performative acts.[3] That is, I understand America as a dynamic concept, as something that is *done*, rather than as an object of study that just *is*. In my analysis of American cultural productions, I juxtapose 'classics' of American literature with recent films and twentieth-century pop culture phenomena; I compare, for instance, selected essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson with Pixar's animated feature film *Finding Nemo* (2003), Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) with the blockbuster *Spider-Man* (2001), and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) with music videos by pop artist Madonna. By bringing these texts into a dialogue, I aim to show that Americanness is produced through the reiteration of 'foundational scenarios' that have come to define a distinctly *American* culture. My starting point is the American Renaissance, the brief period between 1850 and 1855 in which, as F.O. Matthiessen says, America "came to its first maturity" and affirmed its "rightful heritage in the whole expanse of literature and culture" (1941, vii). As Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman have noted, the institutionalization of an American literary canon in the mid-twentieth century helped to promote an "imaginary homogeneity," a powerful ideology which proposed "that every moment of historical

3 My understanding of the term 'performativity' is informed by J.L. Austin's notion of the 'performative' and is based on Judith Butler's usage of the term. For Austin, a performative refers to cases in which "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (1975, 6). A performative utterance is thus an illocutionary speech act: it is both deed and effect at the same time. 'I hereby declare you husband and wife' would be a prime example of a performative utterance. Utterances as these are not merely conventional, but, as Austin says, "ritual or ceremonial," hence repeated in time and not restricted to the moment of their uttering (ibid., 19). In her definition of performativity, then, Butler takes her cue from Austin and from Jacques Derrida, who replaced the term 'ritual' by 'iterability' and thus established a structural model of repetition. Derrida sees both world and stage as characterized by a pervasive theatricality, where individual, collective, and institutional identities are iteratively constructed through the repetition of complex citational processes (cf. 1977, 72). In the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler introduces the concept of performativity when she states that "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. […] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990, 33). While I do not mean to suggest that 'gender' and 'Americanness' are constructed or operate in the same way, I do believe that the notion of performativity can be usefully applied to 'America/nness.' I acknowledge the differences between individual and collective identity formation; however, I find Butler's definition of gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*," immensely useful in thinking about the performative quality that is common to all constructions of identity (ibid., 179; italics in the original).

time constituted the occasion for the potential repetition of the sacred time of the nation's founding" (2002, 16). My study will highlight re-foundings of the nation in American literature and popular culture, showing how 'America' continuously re-invents itself in performance. Although Matthiessen's position has been scrutinized and revised in the past decades, the works produced in the American Renaissance are still generally perceived as the first 'classics' of an 'original' and markedly *American* literature (cf. Pease 1989, vii).[4] If these works are indeed 'foundational' in the sense that they put American literature on the cultural map, then juxtaposing them with recent texts might enable one to identify the stamp these works have left on American culture and to discern recurring cultural patterns, which, borrowing from Diana Taylor, I will call 'foundational scenarios.'

Foundational scenarios designate patterned performances; that is, they act out those values, ideals, or characteristics that are, because of their frequent recurrence in cultural productions, oftentimes regarded to be quintessentially American. The Emersonian scholar, who encourages his fellow citizens to be self-reliant and nonconforming individuals, constitutes such a foundational scenario, which is re-worked, for instance, in *Finding Nemo* (2003). Or, the social experiment of self-sufficiency and self-governing Henry David Thoreau performs in *Walden* (1854) is a foundational scenario which one can find in slightly different form in numerous literary texts and films, including the blockbuster *Jurassic Park* (1993). However, foundational scenarios are not merely endless repetitions of cultural patterns that one can stack in an archive of performances. Rather,

4 Arguably, the most substantial examination and revision of Matthiessen's ideological project has come from a scholarly movement which Frederick Crews called "The New Americanists" in an essay for *The New York Review of Books*. The New Americanists, Crews writes, "claim to belong to the first scholarly cohort that does not consist of ideologues" and the "most familiar issue on [their] agenda" is, therefore, their preoccupation with the institution of the ideologically charged canon (1988, 68). He applies the term "New Americanist" to the authors of the essays in two edited volumes and of five monographs, which include *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, edited by Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (1985), Russell S. Reising's *The Unusable Past* (1986), Donald E. Pease's *Visionary Compacts* (1986), Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* (1985), David S. Reynold's *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988). Crews believed that the New Americanists would significantly shape academia in the years to come; however, he had several concerns about the movement, which led him to dismiss it. In his essay "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon," published in a special issue of *boundary 2*, Donald Pease performed a close reading of Crew's article and called into being a critical Americanist project for which he appropriated Crew's catchy label.

their reactivation or reiteration opens up a space that allows for affirmation and consolidation, but also for parody, reversal, and reconfiguration. In other words, the space opened up in the reiteration of foundational scenarios always harbors a potential for revisions of the meanings of 'Americanness' and 'America.'

A juxtaposed reading, I thus want to argue, allows one to see a disruptive moment in the performance of America, which exposes American culture as highly ambivalent, paradoxical, and fraught with tension. This disruptive moment emerges out of a spectral narrative, I suggest, which runs parallel to dominant narratives of 'America,' but has been systematically subdued and pushed to the background. Haunting American culture since the inception of the United States, this spectral narrative seeks to break surface and leave an imprint on dominant notions of 'America' and 'Americanness.' My study zooms in on those moments in which the spectral narrative moves to the foreground and American culture is confronted with its inherent contradictions and inconsistencies.

As it turns out, the seemingly coherent Americanness that we find in artifacts like Richardson's frontispiece is troubled in its very moment of production. Let us, for instance, consider the cowboy, who is not only the emblematic representation of an idealized, white and heterosexual American masculinity but also embodies values such as unrestricted freedom and self-reliance, which are central to the dominant American belief-system (cf. Packard 2005, 2). Recently, Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" (1997) and its film adaptation have challenged this very straightforward image in quite radical fashion by presenting us with two cowboys who fall in love with each other. Quickly labeled 'the gay cowboy movie,'[5] Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) put something on screen that had been there for ages, albeit in a more subtle way: homosexual desire, or homoeroticism, between men who seemingly embody everything that 'America' stands for. Same-sex desire has always, in fact, been an essential element of popular representations of cowboys in literature and film, as Chris Packard notes: "References to lusty passions appear regularly [in Westerns], when the cowboy is on trail with his partners […] In fact, in the

5 Whether or not the moniker 'gay cowboy movie' aptly describes *Brokeback Mountain* divides critics and audiences alike. As Erika Spohrer points out, calling *Brokeback Mountain* a 'gay' film may be restrictive and misleading, as the film deals with the protagonists' complex and painful struggle with their sexual identity and their desire to fit into their conservative social environment (cf. 2009, 28).