

Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung (eds), *Emotion in Postmodernism*. American Studies – A Monograph Series Vol. 74. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997. iii + 439 pp; ISBN: 3-8253-0543-0; cloth.

'Four thousand pounds of ugly Detroit steel on his toes and *not even a twinge of pain*' (272), says Pedro, the killer in Carl Hiaasen's *Native Tongue*; in 'Emotions Flattened and Scattered,' Hanjo Berressem links such apparent 'lack of psychic and physical coherence' to the 'increase of the borderline syndrome in postmodern culture' (280). Pathological or not, this quote in many ways points toward what has been conceived as a certain numbing, waning or transformation of affect in contemporary culture, and it is this alleged development that is at the heart of most of the twenty-two pointed and well-written articles in this volume, edited on behalf of the German Association for American Studies after a conference held at Mainz in 1996.

Occupying centre-stage is a 45-page essay by one of the editors, Gerhard Hoffmann, who in 'Emotion and Desire in the Postmodern American Novel' probes in an impressive, learned and concise way into the complexities regarding emotions and their representation. Even if 'one does not follow the extreme positions of Wittgenstein and Lacan in respect to the fundamental problems of representation' (181), says Hoffmann, emotions, in their fluidity, complexity and transparency, present a range of difficulties for the author. In a broad sweep, Hoffmann reviews the construction and evaluation of emotion in Victorian and modern literature as a backdrop to a discussion and analysis of its place in postmodern fiction, whose 'confinement to the present' often transfers 'integrating feelings like joy, anxiety, or pain' (which 'appear to have a causal or teleological dimension of time') into 'what one might call *'mood,'* which itself does not necessarily have a definable cause' (188). Emotions are here, as it were, 'under erasure.' Various constellations of behaviour, action, reflection, imagination, emotion, and desire are discussed and exemplified by a range of fine readings of American novels from the last three decades (Barthelme, Barth and Pynchon among others); and the conclusion reached in relation to John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* is extended to postmodern literature in more general terms: 'The conclusion is that emotions and desire, represented or not, are not only strong motivating forces in the postmodern novel, but that the central emotions, even when they are ironized [and absent], are also the central *values* not only of Barth's novel but more or less of all postmodern fiction' (218).

Hoffmann is not alone in reaching such a conclusion; indeed, many of the articles are somehow conceived in opposition to Fredric Jameson's (widespread) notion of the 'waning of affect' in postmodernism. While some merely react to the call for papers in which a similar notion was aired, others engage more openly in a polemic against Jameson. Richard Martin confronts Jameson – although not very successfully – from within contemporary popular music in 'Why should I not admit it?': Displays of Emotion in Postmodern Popular Music,' whereas Theo D'haen, in 'Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, or, The Emotional Depths of Postmodernism,' argues more pointedly from a post-colonial perspective. While some 'postcolonial critics,' says D'haen, 'will cheerfully

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allow that there is a good deal of formal and tropological overlap between 'primary' texts variously categorised as 'post-modern' or 'post-colonial' (228), there is, he says, a great deal of difference in how 'subjects' are presented: in the former category subjects are often left in mired confusion, while in the latter they are mapping their 'relationship to the new global system' (228). In opposition to what he calls 'central postmodernism,' which basically is Jameson's, D'haen posits a 'counter-postmodernism.' While Jameson's arguments, 'albeit indirectly, because shaped by his negative appraisal of 1980s poststructuralism's positive evaluation of the same phenomenon, [are] predicated upon a body of literary work that is limited to white male America whites of the 1960s and 70s,' D'haen points to a postmodernism that seeks to recover the 'subjectivity and historicity' of those not included in Jameson's frame of reference, those left out by a wholly negative evaluation of the political and cultural potentialities of late capitalism. What 'passes for depthlessness in central postmodernism,' D'haen ends his essay, 'is depth in counter-postmodernism.' And although it is true, as Herbert Grabes points out in 'Aesthetic Emotion,' that the emotional commitment and complexity expressed in for instance Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's novels stand in a marked contrast to the 'overloading of aesthetic distance,' its 'being immediately ironized' (336) and intellectualised, in for instance Bartheleme or Barth, one should be careful in setting up a dichotomy between confused main-streamers trying to think their way across a commodified media-landscape and clear-headed and grounded minorities with a firm sense of direction. In any case, this does not do away with the overall and common mechanisms that Jameson is trying to come to terms with; and when many of the contributors pay attention to the market, Jameson (and with him Baudrillard and Debord) still lurks underneath.

David Nye's intriguing 'De-Realizing the Grand Canyon' only points in that direction; here, Nye traces the changing perceptions and experiences of one of America's famous landmarks from John Wesley Powell's expedition in 1869 to the contemporary tourist's 'compressed' experiences of the canyon in an off-site IMAX theatre. This is, however, only one aspect in the slow and complex process through which Nye argues that the canyon has been 'de-realized,' that is, regulated, controlled and mediated, partly because of increasing ecological strains and partly because of temporal and pecuniary limitations of many contemporary visitors. But although visitors still may be touched by a measure of the sublime, and although Nye rightly cautions against devaluing contemporary experiences as simply commercially produced, one cannot help but feel a slight nostalgia for the 'nineteenth-century grand tour [which] proffered a leisurely banquet of the senses' as opposed to the 'visual fast-food and shot of adrenaline' consumed by the postmodern tourist' (89).

In Riidiger Kunow's article it is not the nineteenth century which forms a backdrop to contemporary America, but rather the overarching event which carves our (intellectual) century into two, namely the Holocaust. What Kunow addresses in 'Representing the Holocaust in Fiction' is the 'obvious paradox' of recollecting 'genocide in tranquillity' (247). What is delved into here is the fascinating and unsettling question of a (or *the*) gap between the 'force of outrage' and the 'form of outrage,' the awareness of the 'risk [and

inadequacy] of representation involved in aestheticizations of the Holocaust' which underlies Adorno's statement 'After Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric' (249), or Elie Wiesel's less dramatic but equally telling '[a] novel about Birkenau is either a novel or not about Birkenau, but not both at once' (250). The Wordsworthian formula – 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' – which according to Kunow 'since the Romantics [has] served as something like a descriptive shorthand for two of our culture's most privileged means of memory' (248), namely art and history, has in a post-Holocaust world become problematic, and this partly because of this event's amorphous unspeakability and refusal of hermeneutic distance, and partly because of an overall 'change in cognitive orientation' (two things which ultimately at some level are causally related). Kunow's analysis of 'second-generation' fictional representations of the Holocaust – a 'name' which according to Lyotard 'marks the confines wherein historical knowledge sees its competence impugned' (253) – nonetheless identifies a revealing and important 'reference' to the horror, albeit in the nature of a 'void' brought out by a conscious balance 'on the margin between the speakable and the unspeakable.' 'One does not look directly at the sun,' as he ends by quoting Aharon Appelfeld (269).

This is, however, often what it seems like when emotions are excessively flaunted, for instance in contemporary talk shows. 'Emotion has,' says Linda Nicholson in 'Emotion in Postmodern Public Spaces,' emerged as 'an explicit focus of attention' (2) through what she calls a 'reconfiguration of the association of reason with publicity and emotion with privacy' (1). What specifically interests Nicholson are the processes through which 'affective elements as a factor in the decision-making' have become increasingly important since identity, in the sixties, 'began to matter not only as a means to ferret out specific forms of exclusion but also as a means to evaluate the social manifestations and psychic consequences of race and gender' (17). Rather than lamenting this in relation to 'the group specificity of the [various] goals,' Nicholson sees a danger in the claim that 'only those physically marked in ways which make them subject to differentially negative experiences can understand or be motivated to challenge those social practices which perpetuate such differentiated experiences' (18). The 'therapeutic turn has,' ends Nicholson, 'left a powerful, and I would regard, importantly democratic, imprint on the shape of our politics' (21).

As I hope the above suggests, *Emotion in Postmodernism* contains a wealth of illuminating and probing insights far beyond what can be discussed here, and it is no doubt a volume worth consulting for anyone interested in contemporary America as well as in well-grounded and thoughtful engagements with the conglomerate of theory called postmodernism.