Does Politics Ruin Art?

Mark Shackleton. *Ars Americana Ars Politica: Partisan Expression in Contemporary American Literature and Culture* by Peter Swirski. Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 221 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7735-3765-1 hardcover; 978-0-7735-3766-8 paperback. $85 hardcover, $22.70, paperback.

Peter Swirski is a Canadian American Studies scholar who is currently Professor and Research Director at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki. Internationally recognized as the leading Stanislaw Lem scholar, he has a string of books to his name including *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (2005), *The Art and Science of Stanislaw Lem* (2006), *I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature* (2009) and *American Utopia and Social Engineering in Literature, Social Thought and Political History* (2011).

Swirki's recent *Ars Americana Ars Politica* has already received a great deal of positive critical attention, primarily on account of the writer's ability to combine content with style. *Ars Americana* takes five "no brow" unashamedly politically partisan texts, seeing them as reflecting their own time as well as offering biting criticism (both from the right and from the left) on the appalling state of the American body politic. The cover of the book shows the American apple pie crawling with flies—something is rotten in the state of America. Swirski's quintet takes us from the 60s to the 2000s. Irving Wallace's *The Man* (1964) puts a Black man in the White House and sees him attacked from both sides, black and white; Richard Condon's *Death of a Politician* (1978), a *roman à clef* set against the backcloth of the post-Watergate 70s, dissects the corrupt career of a Nixon lookalike, Walter Bodmor Slurrie; P. J. O'Rourke's *The Parliament of Whores* (1991) looks back on the 80s and "takes the whole American government to the cleaners"; Warren Beatty's film *Bulworth* (1998) sees a Demublican Senator transformed into a gangbanger rapper and devil-may-care Socialist, a direct attack on the silencing effect of big business and other interests on American politics; and Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* (2001) is, of course, a full-frontal attack on Bush II.

Swirski's originality as a cultural studies critic lies in his cross-over appeal. Most academic texts go for the safe, detached, learned style; Swirski has the chutzpah to write with the punch of journalism. Take, for example, his analysis of Condon's *Death of a Politician*:

> But if Condon was far from your average writer, *Death of a Politician* is far from an aveage thriller. Replete with Rabelaisian pith and wit, it is literate and experimental, changing narrative styles and points of view as often as Imelda Marcos changed shoes. (62)

This is a pretty fair example of "no brow" critical style, juggling the highbrow reference to Rabelais with the lowbrow dig about Imelda Marcos's shoe collection. Note, too, the colloquial "your average writer." With this critic the medium is the message. But you can only get away with this juggling act if you know your stuff, and Swirski has done his homework. His introductory debate about what is a political novel concisely sums up other approaches (e.g. Joseph Blotner's and Irving Howe's) and concludes that political art must include not only a political setting but also an activist approach to the content. The touchstone of "political" is *attitude*: muckraking, reformist, topical. A few pages later, the general notion that popular art has a way of changing the way we see the world is illustrated with a swift survey of key examples: Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Orwell's *1984*, and Heller's *Catch 22*. In Chapter two Swirski in passing places Wallace's *The Man* against the international backcloth of African independence, and writes that during the *annus mirabilis* of 1960 "no less than fifteen black nations gained post-colonial independence" (53). Intrigued, I did a quick Net search and came up with the figure of eighteen. I shot off an email to him, and by return he said his source was the UN, and declarations of independence do not always coincide with UN recognition. Yes, he had done his homework.

The question of the use (or misuse) of facts and figures in polemical writing is in fact raised in *Ars Americana*. Swirski's quintet of writers and filmmakers are all remarkable in the pains they take with researching their material, belying the stereotype that the popular author just skims the surface of the facts and moves on. Having said that, authors are not above slanting the facts. O'Rourke disavows credibility and writes: "The statistics presented here are for illustrative, not statistical purposes"; and Michael Moore has said: "All art ... every piece of journalism manipulates sequence and things." Emily Dickinson wrote: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," but Swirski challenges political writers to tell all the truth and tell it straight. Time and again he ferrets out the facts and weighs them in the balance. Thus, in chapter three Swirski pits right-wing P. J. "Republican Party reptile" O'Rourke against left-wing Marxist historian and activist Harold Zinn on the question of whether federal defense spending exceeded welfare spending. Zinn said it

did, O'Rourke said it didn't. Somewhat surprisingly, Swirski finds the score O'Rourke 1: Zinn 0. Federal outlays on welfare *did* exceed defense expenditure 1980-2005 (although *discretionary* spending is another matter, in which case military outlays were greater). So maybe it should be a draw.

Ars Americana is a valuable book for U.S. cultural studies for a number of reasons. It challenges the notion that the academy should be stuffy; it takes popular culture seriously; it seeks intersections between politics, history, and the arts; and it sugars the pill of cultural and political analysis without losing substance. And along the way, myths are exploded. According to Swirski, the Black Panthers (like the Hamas today) were more concerned with grass roots social reform (housing, education, justice, peace) than with the violent overthrow of the status quo. Right wingers, moreover, can be curiously left wing, and vice versa, and both right and left can be devastatingly critical of the powers-that-be. Take, for example, O'Rourke's pointed aphorism: "everyone prefers to give war a chance." Highbrow can meet lowbrow: parallels can be drawn between Swift, Twain and Michael Moore, and Rabelais and Imelda Marcos can share the same sentence. Or as Swirski puts it: "The largest cultural denominator ... need not be the lowest." And if the assumption that politics ruins art still holds in some quarters, *Ars Americana* asks us to think again.

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Approaches to Southern Literature

Matthew Sweney. *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today,* Jan Nordby Gretlund, ed., preface and introduction. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. 285 pages. ISBN: 978-1-57003-943-0, hardcover; paper ISBN: 978-1-57003-944-7, paperback. $59.95, hardcover; $29.95, paperback.

This is one of those rare sightings for academic book-watchers, an accidental migrant: a *useful* book, uncluttered with professional jargon, giving readers advice on what to read (or reread) and why. But there is more to it than that.

The title is meant to be its aim: a word-act on the part of the eighteen critic-contributors herein to write essays of praise in order to keep worthy, individual books of southern literature in print: specifically recent novels