Nordamerikastudien 34

Rereading the Machine in the Garden

Nature and Technology in American Culture

von
Laura Bieger, James Dorson, Winfried Fluck, Catrin Gersdorf, Christa Greve-Volpp, Susanne Hamscha, Katja Kanzler, Marlon Lieber, Dietmar Meinel, Klara-Stephanie Szlezák, Alan Trachtenberg, Kirsten Twelbeck, Eric Erbacher, Nicole Maruo-Schröder, Florian Sedlmeier

1. Auflage

campus Frankfurt am Main 2014

Verlag C.H. Beck im Internet:
www.beck.de
ISBN 978 3 593 50191 8

schnell und portofrei erhältlich bei beck-shop.de DIE FACHBUCHHANDLUNG

Leseprobe

Introduction: Rereading The Machine in the Garden

Eric Erbacher, Nicole Maruo-Schröder, Florian Sedlmeier

Marking an anniversary, such as the fiftieth of the publication of Leo Marx's The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (1964), one creates and singles out an event, suggesting a need to return to this event and to reassess its implications for past, present, and future conditions. In this sense, the notion of an anniversary carries the connotations of both a celebration and a re-envisioning. In and of itself, however, the marking of an anniversary does not necessitate a critical reexamination. After all, one could leave the respectful tone of the anniversary and easily dismiss Marx's study as a relic of bygone times, guilty of a range of inadequacies that subsequent critics have exposed in a plethora of articles and books. Similar to other representatives of what Bruce Kuklick (1972) labeled the "Myth and Symbol School," Marx has been charged with participating in the tale of American exceptionalism that continues to haunt American Studies, a tale grounded in the sermons of John Winthrop, the political rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson, and others; with rearticulating the belief in a holistic national ideal; with glossing over discourses of difference and with not systematically accounting for their effects on the societal fabric; and with foreclosing the possibilities of the recently fashionable and reactivated transnational approaches. These political objections are sometimes complemented by a critique of the philosophical underpinnings of Marx's argument, most notably of what Kuklick identified as its pervasive humanism and its supposed indebtedness to Cartesian thought, i.e. its marked separation of thought and the material. And they find their aesthetic equivalent in the critique of an understanding of the arts and literature that is regarded as suspicious because it positions the declared masterpieces of the American Renaissance and modernism as privileged objects of study and because it conceives of these texts as being structured according to a single master trope: the machine in the garden. In order to substantiate his claim, critics have argued, Marx not simply ignores a large number of texts (both popular and 'high literary' ones); John Lark Bryant criticizes him for deploying "extravagant argumentation" (1975, 68) in his readings of Renaissance masterpieces to position the machine in the garden as the one tropology that best describes America. The validity of many of these arguments depends, of course, on the degree and mode of historicizing them, i.e. on examining them for the ideologies they necessarily contain. And if we seek to legitimize this volume by marking not just The Machine in the Garden's anniversary but also its continuing significance, we inevitably engage in modes of historicizing as well.

The well-known charges just sketched are indicative of the narrative of a generational shift from Americanists to New Americanists, a term coined by Frederick Crews. This shift manifests itself, among others, in a changing understanding of the political function of scholarship, in a different conception of scholarly argumentation and writing, and in the emergence of theory. Against this backdrop, the present collection of essays reexamines The Machine in the Garden on two basic grounds. First, the volume, and this introductory essay in particular, aim at historicizing the study by redirecting the well-known and necessary critiques of the New Americanists, informed by cultural studies, gender studies, new historicism, ethnic studies, and poststructuralist theory. Such a task of historicizing is not least suggested by Marx himself, who, challenged by other scholars,

reevaluated his own and his generation's positions in the changing field of American Studies, defending, expanding, and refining his initial argument in a series of articles, some of which are included in his collection of essays The Pilot and the Passenger (1988). At stake in this project are shifting codifications of the arts and literature as well as culture, nature, and technology. Second, the contributions to this collection seek to retrieve the trope of the machine and its intrusion into the pastoral landscape as a vital configuration for a broad range of artistic, filmic, and literary texts, spanning from the early nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. While the trope, for various reasons, can certainly not account for the grand cultural and literary history Leo Marx had in mind, its significance in artistic productions from a U.S. context has to be acknowledged and construed. The present volume probes the unabated relevance of this cultural tropology for the analysis of representations of nature and technology in artistic, filmic, and literary texts. And in doing so, this introduction and the contributions also assess the lasting impact of Marx's method and rhetoric for the present condition of the field of inquiry named American Studies, looking for points of entry that The Machine in the Garden might retrospectively offer for current debates.

Institutional Concerns: American Studies as a Field of Inquiry

In a sense, the poles of Marx's dialectical trope are inscribed in three insti-tutions: Marx is a Harvard graduate, who received his PhD in History of American Civilization in 1950, and he held academic positions at the Uni-versity of Minnesota-hence in the upper part of the Midwest, that geo-graphical and cultural region most commonly associated with notions of the middle landscape and the heartland-and at the Massachusetts Insti-tute of Technology in Cambridge, where he was appointed Kenan Profes-sor of American Cultural History in 1976. The denominations and trajectories of these institutional appointments should make us aware of a key aspect of the project of American Studies: it was initially conceived as a field of inquiry geared toward identifying the possibilities and the struc-tures of a cultural history. As such, American Studies, in its inception, is not a discipline but a specific method; it is positioned against the empiri-cism and scientific rigor of the natural and social sciences, and it is devoid of the philological tradition that continues to inform European languages and literatures and its academic institutions. In effect, Marx, his teacher Henry Nash Smith and others repeatedly insisted on this peculiarity of the emerging field, not the least in order to legitimize its specific position in the departmental organization.

Smith poses the central institutional and methodological question that concerned early Americanists in the title of his influential essay: "Can American Studies Develop a Method?" (1957). Reading Mark Twain for his various prose styles and the social positions they represent, Smith calls for "a method of analysis that is at once literary […] and sociological" (201). Partly drawing on Matthew Arnold, he positions the conceptual metaphor of culture "to embrace 'society' and 'art'" (ibid., 206). Culture is presented as a third alternative that avoids the pitfalls of the social sciences, which hold that "all value is implicit in social experience, in group behavior, in institutions, in man as an average member of society," and which questions the assumption of New Criticism "that value lies outside society, in works of art which exist on a plane remote from […] our actual experience" (ibid., 206). The construction of culture as a third conceptual metaphor between these notions of the social sciences and 'purely' literary criticism allows Smith "to

conceive of American Studies as a collaboration among men working from within existing academic disciplines but attempting to widen the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry" (ibid., 207). Anchoring the field in "practice" rather than method, he means "to resolve the dilemma posed by the dualism which separates social facts from esthetic values" and suggests to explore the mental and symbolic structures, or "the image in our minds" (ibid., 207) in which both supposedly merge; the singular, of course, betrays the search for and the belief in a single, unifying "image." American Studies, for Smith, emerge from within the institutionalized disciplines, breach their methodologies, and put their lines of demarcation to a practical test. As such, the field is per definition envisioned as inter-disciplinary in the perhaps truest sense of the word: it is between the disciplines, from within the institutional confines of which it intervenes, without being and becoming a discipline of its own.

Smith's inquiry reverberates in Marx's writings. In effect, most of the articles he published after The Machine in the Garden are concerned with institutional and methodological questions, starting with "American Stud-ies: A Defense of an Unscientific Method" (1969). In "Reflections on American Studies, Minnesota, and the 1950s" from 1999, he reviews the project of his generation vis-à-vis both the institutionalized New Criticism and the shift toward cultural studies. He locates the beginnings of Ameri-can Studies "outside the academy in the work of independent, unaffiliated writers and intellectuals" (44), among whom he counts thinkers as diverse as W.E.B. Du Bois and Lewis Mumford. Explaining the subsequent insti-tutional divide in the English department at Minnesota between the con-textualism and historicism practiced by Americanists and the closed textu-alism of the New Critics as well as the reactionary parochialism of the Southern Agrarians, he argues that the actual impact of the divide was smoothened by the identification "of a common enemy: McCarthyism and other hyper-nationalistic expressions of paranoid anti-communism" (ibid., 42). The stakes in the emergence and institutionalization of American Studies were not least the values of intellectual independence in a political climate of censorship. And these values manifested themselves in the search for a meaningful structure of myths and symbols that might reclaim a national cohesion as a cultural one from the governmental and medial hijacking of the nation in paranoid nationalistic terms. The precariousness of this constellation accounts for a positioning such as "secular, left-liberal humanist values" that Leo Marx ascribes to Americanists of his generation, whom he deems "committed to the labor movement, to 'progressive' […] principles of social and economic justice" (ibid., 41). Against the backdrop of the 1950s, which betrayed the political legacy of the New Deal, Marx reclaims "the nation's distinctiveness" as grounded in "singular political innovations" (ibid., 43). Note the choice of vocabulary: it is about distinctiveness and singularity, not about exceptionality and uniqueness. Elaborating upon Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, he further contends: "the United States is a nation defined neither by its location nor its ethnic composition, but rather by a 'proposition'-a cosmopolitan, multicultural, potentially universalizable set of principles" (ibid., 43).

This intricate piece of rhetoric testifies to the conceptual struggles Marx faces in reexamining and retroactively legitimizing his project. The United States expresses an ideal and a promise, tied neither to a definition of the nation as based upon the geography of the nation-state, nor to an understanding of the nation that would be contingent upon ethnic difference. Rather, the idea of a

nation that Marx has in mind aspires both to a notion of intellectual cosmopolitanism, which might effectively recode the nation as a non-nationalist organism composed of a single community of citizens of the world, and to an understanding of multiculturalism that respects cultural variety without prioritizing ethnic difference as a category of analysis. This implies not to give up on aspirations to liberal consensus in the framework of a reactionary narrative of 1950s Cold War consensus: Marx reclaims a leftist liberalism from within and against the liberalisms of libertarian economics, consumer culture, and limited government. Consequently, he stresses two institutional and two societal motivations for the project of American Studies. Inside the university, Americanists strove for "the introduction of distinctively American subject matter in the study of history, literature, philosophy, and art" (ibid., 45) in order to defy "snobbish Anglophilia" (ibid., 46); this challenge to the elitist literary standards of English departments resulted in "a desire to circumvent barriers to in-terdisciplinarity" (ibid., 46). Outside departmental reform, Marx goes on to argue, Americanists were "essentially ideological" (ibid., 46) to the extent that they committed themselves to the complex retrieval of the foundational ideas just delineated. In doing so, they sought to apply "democratic standards of multicultural equity in recruiting faculty members," which during the 1950s meant an extension of the pool of WASP males "to candidates of Jewish, Irish, German, Polish, and other non-WASP white males" (ibid., 48).