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Close Readings are Always Helpful

Christer Petersen's new series on representations of war in literature, film, and the media debuts with this handsome and well-produced volume; a second, to cover ideologies and how representations of war manifest or confound them, is due out in late 2005. The series promises much in this first installment. Petersen and his contributors seek here to analyze how wars are represented, understood, and digested, and how wars become dramatized or produced for the world of viewers, readers, and media consumers. The cases examined here are mainly contemporary or recent representations of contemporary wars (Iraq I and Iraq II, Bosnia, Somalia, Vietnam, and a dose of World War I and World War II). Though Petersen's own work is mainly in film and media studies (his earlier work concentrates in part on the films of Peter Greenaway) he has cast a wide net in editing this volume, which contains studies of representations of war in oral history, fashion, poetry, high-brow literary works, travel literature, recent native American literature, as well as in film, TV dramas, and the television press.

Taken together, the eleven essays present a useful

mix of oral history, media criticism, and close readings of television and film, fashion and travel literature, and novels and poetry. The main objects of study all have somehow at their center questions of war, how war is represented, how it is understood, how it is medialized and commodified, how understood, how worked through and overcome. Mostly the authors of these varied essays would choose not to claim any understanding, working through, or overcoming of war by means of the novels, films, etc. they have studied. For the experience of war they all examine seems to confound generalization and reject ordered representation. No grand conclusions are drawn, then, about how war gets represented or whether war stories, broadly put, do anything good for the world. But the individual studies are generally excellent and all are informative, clear, and well researched.

Renate Eigenbrod's essay on stories by "native veterans" presents a fascinating subgenre of the war story: tales by indigenous Canadians about their experiences in war and in going to war. The concept "warrior" bears a lot of baggage in the Native American context and Eigenbrod looks closely at several novels and memoirs that

track the experiences of Native warriors in World War II. She uses the lens of postcolonial studies in a very productive way as she dissects the various codes of power and narrative control in the texts she reads: Jordan Wheeler's *Brothers in Arms*, Drew Hayden Taylor's *Fearless Warriors*, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, and other works by Rita Joe, Maria Clements, Basil Johnston, and Lee Maracle. The literature of natives in war concerns loss, dislocation, going away and returning home, and the inability to return home. Several of these war stories (in all the variations that term can embrace) clearly deserve a much wider audience and Eigenbrod's essay does a service in making readers aware of them.

"Where were you *während des Krieges*?" is Alexander Freund's oral history project. He has interviewed German migrants to North America, in the main those born between 1920 and 1940 who immigrated to the United States or Canada between the late forties and the early sixties. Some had direct war experiences (as POWs or *Volksdeutsche* expellees, for example); most others did not. He is interested specifically in the mediation of postwar German migrants' attitudes about the war through their stories. He finds that these Germans, as one would expect, allow to obtain "eine Art des selektiv-pragmatischen Erinnerens," just like other postwar, "Post-Holocaust" Germans. While the plentiful transcribed interview selections make for compelling reading, and Freund's analysis is straightforward and well grounded in a broader context of postwar German and German-Jewish migration and exile studies, there are no surprises and hardly any trends. Migrants' individual experiences differ too broadly to allow for any generalized conclusions beyond the commonplace: the trauma of war and displacement mainly causes people to avoid talking about the trauma of war and displacement.

The following six essays comprise the bulk of the book and center the volume in the field of media and film studies. Two address representations of war on television, three examine war in popular film, and one looks at clothing and costume in film as a way of understanding totalizing representations of power and gender. All are useful, well researched, and full of information, though none of the essays challenge what we already know about the representations of war. If anything, the essays at the heart of this volume tend toward overloading the reader with detail and extraneous information, all interesting to be sure, but not always necessary. Jamila Adobhani looks at CNN and Al-Jazeera television news coverage of the second Iraq war and asks questions about the criteria used to decide what got reported, what im-

ages were used, etc. She concludes with a truism: that "objective reporting" is impossible in times of crisis. But one should also add that "objective reporting" is a fiction to begin with. Hans Krah watches episodes of two German detective shows (*Tatort* and *Schimanski*) that thematize the war in Bosnia. The set narrative structure of the *Krimi* prohibits using war as much more than a backdrop for standard plots, and Krah shows that the backdrop is approached using standard clichés about war and specific ideas about the Balkans that already prevailed in Germany in the media. The two essays on television do not inspire trust in that medium as a means of representing war in a differentiated, critical manner.

Lars Baumgart looks specifically at the aestheticization of combat and violence in recent war films (*Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Enemy at the Gates*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Windtalkers*, *Pearl Harbor*), with an eye toward the politics of the films, all viewed in the context of a useful pocket history of Hollywood war films. Eckhard Pabst's close study of *Black Hawk Down* follows, a careful, sympathetic reading of a film that shows how war, or this war in Somalia at least, does not, Clausewitz-like, continue politics by other means; rather "Der Krieg setzt nichts fort ... der Krieg etabliert sich, wo andere Systeme—z.B. Politik—nicht (mehr) etabliert sind" (p. 192). Christer Petersen turns to Vietnam, perhaps the only classic war film genre to have emerged from Hollywood that offers a broad sweep of perspectives, from affirming, government-supported propaganda (*The Green Berets*) to canonized critical mainstays of the academy (combat films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*; veterans movies like *Taxi Driver*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, *Born on the Fourth of July*). Petersen demonstrates convincingly that most all films about the Vietnam war transfigure rather than work through the collective experience ("eher verklärt als kritisch aufgearbeitet," [p. 225]), and that one common topos throughout is the anonymity of the Vietnamese, either as allies or enemies. The Vietnamese *other* remains constant, unexplored, and not understood.

The final film essay is Barbara Schrödl's fascinating piece on fashion, which surveys the use of the clothed body in several National Socialist films from the late 1930s and early 1940s. The symbolic role of dresses and uniforms, especially in popular NS film production, is not to be underestimated, given that entertainment films were the primary source for women's images of haute couture. Edgar Reitz makes this exaggerated point in *Heimat* when Zarah Leander's dress and hairstyle are mimicked by Pauline and Maria. Schrödl looks at *Befre-*

ite *HÄnde* and *Die große Liebe* and parses the progression of changes in dress and uniform through the films, which proves in each case, not surprisingly, to be ideologically consistent with the propagandistic messages of the films.

The final three essays address literary representations of war. Silke Brodersen reads two novels, Alfred Andersch's *Winterspelt* and Uwe Timm's *Morenga*, as more insightful and critical of the developments of war and fascism than others have, but then her essay does especially underline the role of fiction in organizing "experiences of irrationality and chaos" and setting these against a supposedly rational history. The language of literature can order the world, even the world of war. Charlotte Heymel's fascinating study of literary war tourism concentrates on World War I as a destination for Germans. The writers of these various diaries, letters, and reportages are, she shows, simply unable to see modern warfare for what it is, but tend to see instead what travelers have always seen: butterflies and flowers and sunsets. Immediate travel literature of the war tends toward what she calls anti-modern modes and themes, not unlike of course most of the literature of the war excepting the po-

etry of Expressionists like August Stramm. Heymel's service is that she uncovers several rarely studied texts that are as indicative now as in 1915 of our need to avoid the grim and garish reality of war, modern or not, through mythification, transfiguration, and aestheticization. Finally, Gundela Hachmann analyzes the sublime (*das Erhabene*), in a poem cycle by Raoul Schrott. The 1998 cycle "Über das Erhabene" takes as one of its themes observations of grave inscriptions in German and Italian military cemeteries at El Alamein. The rhetoric of war found in such inscriptions echoes in Schrott's poems but, says Hachmann, it is precisely through this aesthetic echoing and reflection that the words gain a critical dimension, and serve to comment on the impossibility of the sublime as a legitimate category for addressing war. She calls this the "Entleerung des erhabenen Raums," [p. 321]), which is at the same time a demonstration of the impossibility of ever having the myths about war hold fast under close scrutiny. But for Schrott it is myth that allows us to talk about anything. We can see with the help of the careful close readings this volume presents that the myths about war that we already know and recognize are alive and well.

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