



Klaus Benesch, Kerstin Schmidt, eds. *Space in America: Theory History Culture.* Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005. 588 pp. \$162.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-420-1876-1.



Reviewed by John Agnew (University of California, Los Angeles)

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No One Lives in the World in General?

The meaning and effects of terrestrial space on culture have become a major preoccupation of American (U.S.) Studies inside the country and abroad. This may reflect the influence of those, such as Fredric Jameson, who, in periodizing world history, represent the present, and the American part of it in particular, as quintessentially spatial. From this perspective, the postmodern epoch privileges the spatial in communication and aestheticizes physical form (buildings, landscapes, cities) to hide the social relations upon which that form necessarily depends. Of course, this stands against the tendency to see the present as a period when time conquers space in the sense of the shrinking significance of geographical space in the face of pressures from an emerging cyberspace that increasingly undermines the traditional sense of place. Both, though, share an “abstract attitude” in which anywhere today is seen as much the same as anywhere else. But there are also long-standing claims that American society has always had a powerful spatial logic associated with it that distinguishes it from societies elsewhere, particularly in Europe. In this understanding, the historical experience of a technologically innovative society ruthlessly invading and settling a “new” continent created a

specific model of spatiality which involved treating space as if it were always in a process of becoming rather than a settled condition of being. The quotation from Clifford Geertz (plus a question mark) that provides the title for this review signifies what is most at stake between these different views.

This collection of essays resulting from a conference held at the University of Bayreuth in Germany in autumn 2001 moves somewhat uneasily and contradictorily between the postmodern and historically emergent conceptions of American spatiality in relation to landscape, architecture, literature, and artistic performance. The introduction from Klaus Benesch neither sets up the opposition satisfactorily nor offers much by way of resolution. What is more consistent is the overall quality of the contributions, with each of the thirty chapters offering interesting, sometimes arresting, commentary on some aspect of the nexus between space and American culture. The authors range far and wide, from the focused methodological reflections of Lothar Häfner challenging some of the more far-fetched prophets of the end-of-space, through the rich empirical contributions of Ulfried

Reichardt on interior and exterior spaces in the American novel around 1900 and Ruth Mayer on “road novels,” to critical cultural studies of Los Angeles and the Chicago Exposition of 1893 and, my favorite chapter (as a California resident), Florian Dombois comparing the science fiction novel *Richter 10* (1996) to the Book of Revelation in a fascinating discussion of the uses of the earthquake trope in revealing much about the cultural crisis in contemporary American society.

Of the thirty chapters a number stand out either because of their originality or what they say about the general theme of American space and culture. Lothar Hännighausen provides the clearest statement of a postmodern perspective on space and a useful critique of the time-conquers-space genre, paying close attention specifically to the overstatements in the writings of the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and contrasting them to the richer understandings of the changing experience of place in the American fiction of Thomas Pynchon, William Gibson, and Don DeLillo. David Nye draws on his book *America as Second Creation* (2003) to give an eloquent exposition of the historically emergent view of American spatiality. He singles out “technological foundation narratives” as a fundamental part of the repertoire of stories that Americans tell themselves about their country and themselves. The way in which the American landscape, as we see it today, was laid out, was based on both a sense of space as an inscription on a blank surface and of overcoming space as an essential moment in the making of a society through a remaking of nature. This is an important chapter that repays close reading.

Several chapters reinforce the overall thrust of Nye’s arguments even as they venture onto different cultural terrain. Karsten Fitz, for example, offers a captivating discussion of the various mid-nineteenth-century paintings of George Washington crossing the Delaware River during the revolutionary war. Noting the importance of the image the best known of these paintings lodged in the collective national memory, she makes a strong case for how this visualization reconstructed the American Revolution by associating it—in Washington’s stance and gaze

in the boat in which he is crossing the river—with the spirit of Manifest Destiny that was in the air at the time the painting was done. The chapters by Berndt Ostendorf on Cajuns; Julia Kursell and Armin Schäfer on John Cage’s music; Florian Dombois on earthquakes in science fiction and the bible; Elisabeth Schäfer-Wänsche on the images of California in and around the California of T. C. Boyle’s novels, *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) and *A Friend of the Earth* (2000); and Ulfried Reichardt on dating the postmodern self back to 1900, are all richly suggestive of a peculiarly American experience of space, notwithstanding shifts in its character and effects over the years

The contemporaneity of the postmodern, though not always in concordance with Jameson’s views, is more the thrust of the chapters on Los Angeles by Hellmut Fröhlich, simulated safaris by Kirk A. Hope, on the meaning of September 11 by Sabine Sielke, and on the dynamism of architectural and literary space by Hanjo Berressem. My major regrets here are that sometimes writers with distinctive projects are bundled together as representatives of “schools” of thought, most egregiously Michael Dear and Mike Davis in Fröhlich’s chapter, or there is little or no historical evidence provided, for example on September 11 with respect to the relative importance of the end of the Cold War, to give the reader a better basis for evaluating their claims.

Whether space as experienced and expressed in the United States augurs a universal moment, as in the hubris of Los Angeles as the picture today of the world yet to come, or the historical experience of a territorial society now sweeping around the world because of its rise to global hegemony, cannot be decided from within the confines of a single book. What this book does do is lay out some of the theoretical arguments at stake in disputes over space in America by providing some exemplary case studies. If I find some more convincing than the others, it is partly because I came to the book with greater sympathy for the historically emergent than for the postmodern perspective. But it is also because I find that these chapters are, well, simply better argued theoretically and sounder empirically.

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