

Projecting American Studies

Essays on Theory,
Method,
and Practice

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FRANK KELLETER

DISCIPLINE COOL. Notes, Quotes, Tweets, and Facebook Posts
on the Study of American Self-Studies (LookingForward Remix)

Prediction: The future of American Studies will look a lot like its past: a field always worried about its future.



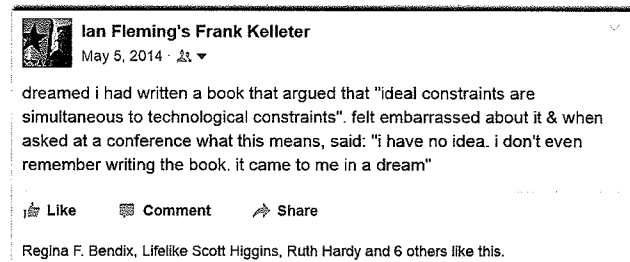
Frank Kelleter @fkelleter · 16. Mai 2014

auspicious strategy #74: try not to judge a field by its conferences but
then judge a field by its conferences

Professing American Studies: For most people who practice it, American Studies is a profession. Even amateur practitioners—say, students—are typically asked to speak and act like hypothetical professionals. If a student paper wants to succeed, it needs to engage (in some form) with stylistic conventions and epistemological assumptions which the field has recognized as its own. There is nothing special about this situation. But when we read or write “Americanist” texts, or when we attend conferences in American Studies or organize them, it’s a point worth remembering: *every process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction*. The conditions of producing Americanist knowledge are at the same time the conditions of reproducing an instituted field of knowledge, complete with journals, associations, schools, mentors, celebrations, centers and provinces, histories written and oral. Such constellations tend to produce strong commitments. For many people working in the field—if their words can be trusted—American Studies is a labor of love: love, however, not necessarily for their object of study (“America”) but for the things they do.

Thus, even and especially as a field with deep roots in various styles of critique, American Studies is an overtly *passionate* affair: one that requires initiatives, proclamations, protests, paradigm shifts, “turns,” fervent interventions, strategy meetings, expressions of resistance, solidarity addresses, and other acts based in deep conviction and heartfelt belief. Any ASA convention serves to illustrate this point. What Rita Felski says about “critique” in more general terms—that critical practice is itself a mode of attachment—is true for American Studies in a very special sense. But then

this thought should perhaps caution us against identifying critique with detachment in the first place. No matter if we love “literature” or the writings of Judith Butler, activist research or “post-critique,” American pragmatism or indictments of American exceptionalism: as professionals, we cannot help but perform our belonging to an instituted community of controversial distinctions that, for better or worse, are not reducible to a difference between *close* and *distant*, *superficial* and *deep*, *affirmation* and *suspicion*, or—the most misleading opposition of all—*positive* and *negative*. Any proximity is distant from something else; just as every love is bound to be suspicious of whatever might trouble its feelings.



Method Actors: In the beginning, there was a question that made impossible demands: can American Studies develop a method of its own, proving itself a “real” discipline? When Henry Nash Smith asked this question in 1957—not, properly speaking, at the beginning of the field’s history, but in order to advance an already ongoing process of institutionalization—he knew that a discipline that claimed to be about “the culture as a whole” needed to offer an innovative reading of the term *method* itself. So Smith did what at the time appeared to be the most reasonable thing to do: he proposed a “modest” method. If we need to be reminded of how old his text is, this little word will do the trick.

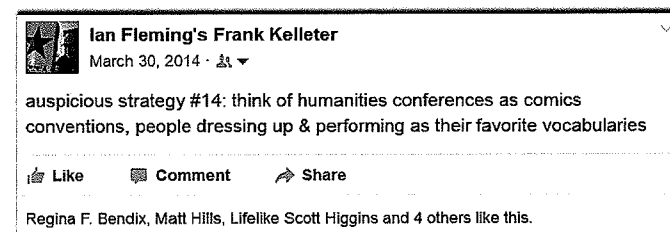
Smith explained that American Studies at this early stage of disciplinary emergence had no choice but to embrace the collaborative syncretism of interpretation, negotiating between sociology’s “facts” and literature’s “values.” Ironically, sixty years on, Smith’s modesty has become our own bravado—and not only in American Studies. Today, each single discipline identified by Smith as a natural contributor to American Studies—literature, sociology, history—has come to understand itself as an interdisciplinary field, hospitable to a plurality of methods and always transgressed by other modes of academic labor. Thus, Smith’s guarded move away from a methodology-bound notion of disciplinarity has morphed into a ruling humanistic attitude. Not infrequently, this development has served as a point of pride in and for American Studies. How often have we heard it said that

our field was practicing “interdisciplinarity” long before it became popular to do so? How often have we declared that American Studies pioneered the “cultural turn” in the humanities?

At its most basic—and which text could be more basic than Smith’s short, programmatic essay?—this claim relies on a model of cultural studies that understands *culture* as an overarching frame of meaning-making “in which” (as Smith wrote in 1957) individual works of art and other significant objects “occur.” Of course, this model is not original to American Studies. It is, among other things, indebted to the Warburg Institute, Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, cultural anthropology, and other intellectual sources and movements of the early twentieth century. But there can be little doubt that in our day, these disparate theories and scholarly practices have converged into a common-sense position for almost all humanistic disciplines, particularly philologies, with adaptive modifications and unique relays in each case.

As for American Studies, while Smith’s myth-and-symbol approach has long fallen out of fashion, nominally at least, some of its basic operations still organize the field’s institutional realities, especially in places where American Studies came into existence as a spin-off or subfield of English literature—that is, in most places. Here, the legacy of the myth-and-symbol school is still felt in (1) the profession’s lived conviction (in curricula, teaching styles, dissertation proposals, etc.) that *the study of American culture can be grounded in “readings” of literary works (plus, increasingly, works from other media)*, and (2) the profession’s tendency to practice such “reading” as a *specific mode of writing*, in which an object of analysis—usually a text or set of texts—is aligned with explanatory models derived from other texts not submitted to that same method.

It would be mistaken to limit the presence of these dispositions to “symptomatic readings”; many “post-critical” methods, hoping to treat aesthetics and politics as equal but separate “modes of being,” rely on similar operations (see the overt scholasticism of object-oriented ontology or any noncritical artwork interpretation of the type “reading x through the lens of y”). So here is my question: what does our awareness of this situation of the field enable us to do *within* the field?



Modest Proposal #2: I suggest that we look at the methods and habits of American Studies, along with the results they enable, as culture-making forces, or *agencies*. This implies two things. No. 1: Our methods are not neutral tools that we employ for preexisting research purposes, but they are really self-propelling practices that guide our research intentions and offer us scholarly identities. No. 2: While some field-specific habits might tempt us to enact such auto-reflection as, indeed, an exercise in symptomatic reading—say, exposing “underlying” ideologies in authorized “theories” (as if ideology was a conspiracy and theory a matter of deep vision)—there are other options. To name one of them, descriptions and performances of America, including those in the mode of “studies,” can be understood as empirical agents of cultural self-reproduction.

This is certainly not a charismatic position to take. Anyone who thinks about adopting it should consider its implications. To begin with, one would have to forgo the stylistic advantages of claiming to speak from some fixed place *outside* other people’s research. One would also be opting for a theoretical perspective that is reluctant to find itself, as its own result, in the chosen research material. At a time when we keep telling ourselves (but mostly our graduate students) how vital it is to “position” one’s work, we would aspire to a literally naïve approach that always tries to re-attune itself to the specific vicissitudes (praxeological, situational, historical, etc.) of any cultural moment it is studying.

In other words, this would be a work-intensive and time-consuming project: it would have us start from scratch with every new subject matter, because any research object comes with particular self-interpretations, and chances are that it will already have (been) swayed (by) the motion and direction of the philosophies, critiques, or “studies” that we mean to “apply” to it. So instead of bringing pre-positioned conceptual tool-kits *to* a text—usually in order to reveal core patterns and assumptions already known to us but never to the object under investigation—we would attempt to trace, each time anew, the special arrangement of communications that makes this text, this moment, this praxeological constellation, and so on, *culturally real*, i.e., capable of producing widespread follow-up actions. Just expect some clever observer to say, “Ah, but of course this technique of yours is *also* based on an anterior theory of culture! Clearly you have read this and that, so your own philosophy of history, of knowledge, of America, etc. will affect your results!” To which, if you’re into this kind of game, you might reply, “Yes, yes, quite so! But who would even find this remarkable? Perhaps only those who believe that valid explanations can exist outside the things they explain—or that our premises produce our conclusions—or someone, perhaps, who secretly aspires to an Olympic perspective after all, hoping to see as an individual that which groups of observers cannot see.” If you’re like me, you might also want to mention systems theory and actor-network theory (ANT) by name, formulate a few words on their pragmatic compatibility—

“On this view, to study culture means to investigate specific (historical) processes of assembling, not just the results of certain assemblages. It means to study structure as consolidated action, to re-describe as mobile what has established itself as settled, to examine networks as *work-nets* of agency. . . . A ‘text,’ [on this view], is not something that *is* but something that *does*: not a single outlook or structure waiting to be decoded or uncovered but an entanglement of textual practices. If network analysis is interested in specific acts of connection, not just their material outcome, the very specificity of these interactions encourages us to regard networks as empirically real, i.e., as consisting of plausibly traceable actions rather than random or interesting associations that can be established between, say, a television series and some philosophical perspective we happen to subscribe to. . . . With this thought in mind, I propose a methodological model that attempts to combine ANT’s microperspective with a systems-theoretical macroperspective. ANT stresses the mobility of actors and the domain-independent openness of their exchanges, while systems theory investigates the emergence of improbable stabilities and the self-generation of unlikely boundaries. Trying to do justice, respectively, to the reality of distinct spheres of social action and the existence of constant traffic between them, both perspectives are compatible when they describe culture as something that keeps *happening*—something that keeps ensuring the continuation of its own existence, enlisting for this purpose different players and products, ambitions and commitments, affiliations and identifications.”

—but then quickly add (because that’s the point), “Yet this is better shown than declared. Hence, I will hereafter refrain from addressing the ‘Theory’ part of these critical ensembles, actor-network theory and systems theory. My aim is neither to show that ANT makes sense to itself nor to refine systems theory’s scholastic self-references. My aim is merely to start an investigation that will be adjusted to the empirical movements of empirical actors. The plausibility of this move will not depend on its agreement or non-agreement with some Theory but should become obvious when it is performed.”

So this is not an appeal for either actor-network theory or systems theory. Other micro/macro-combinations—or other combinations of *understanding* and *critique*, with other titles, other authorizations, other names, vocabularies, figures of speech—can yield results that are equally plausible or similarly valid. And when I say *understanding*, I mean object-centered empathy: an attempt to respect, articulate, and prolong the singularity of a text, oeuvre, creation, perspective, or situation that speaks to us. And when I say *critique*, I mean an external observer’s informed re-description of such matters, i.e., a description that doesn’t just duplicate singular self-descriptions. Hence the bringing into play of other objects, forces, agents, texts, etc. that can reasonably be shown to do their work *within* an object of

analysis, especially when that object chooses to forget, deny, or neutralize them. One disposition requires the other if it wants to be successful, that is, if understanding shall be something other than conversion and if the thing described is supposed to be able to recognize itself—potentially—in its re-description. What follows is always further text production; no single analysis can do it all.

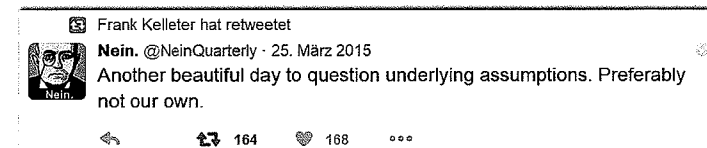
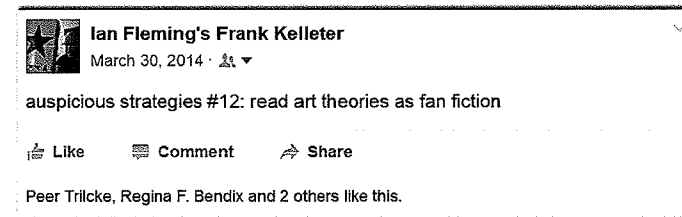
It seems to me that the vocabularies of actor-network theory and systems theory are—at present!—especially helpful for this task. But other collegial, topical, or institutional contexts might suggest other constellations . . . say, combining certain types of literary hermeneutics (with their insistence that a text knows something we don't, with their interest in formal choices, with their appreciation of the strangeness of cultural productions) with certain types of “thick description” or similar methods of historicizing (i.e., methods that regard *contextualization* not as the evocation of sovereign forces determining a text from the outside, but as the reconstruction of a text's most lively communications and absorptions). Ideally, these and similar approaches allow us to ask questions that don't reduce but always enlarge and animate the things we study—questions such as these: Which specific conversations are carried forward? Which controversies are present, which conventions are active? Which players and which careers exactly? Which publishers and audiences? Which styles and which circuits? Which brushstrokes, colors, sentence structures? Which channels, cameras, software? Which senses of beauty? Which trade-offs, profits, losses? Which ambitions and values? Which anxieties and horrors? Which filiations and customs?

More simply put, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. There is nothing embarrassing or surprising about the fact that we approach any given object with certain presuppositions already in place. How could it be otherwise? Let's not confuse a departure with an arrival, or provisional contributions with definitive proclamations. Claiming that the input explains the output denies scholarship the right to be driven by questions that aren't answers yet. So while it's always useful to make explicit what is implicit in other people's sentences, it's equally useful to remember that there are many ways in which something can “be” implicit: not just as an underlying idea or an unconscious motivation or an instigating structure but also as a moment of indecision—or a temporary wavering—or a makeshift experiment, etc. Once this is granted, the possibility of “understanding a text better than its author does” need not culminate in the performance of an even more authoritative disclosure.

Something similar can be said about writing, our most basic action: who but “deep” thinkers will refuse to formalize their assumptions in the form of straightforward hypotheses? As long as we're not looking for profundity anyway, we might as well spell out our premises as clearly as we can. Some

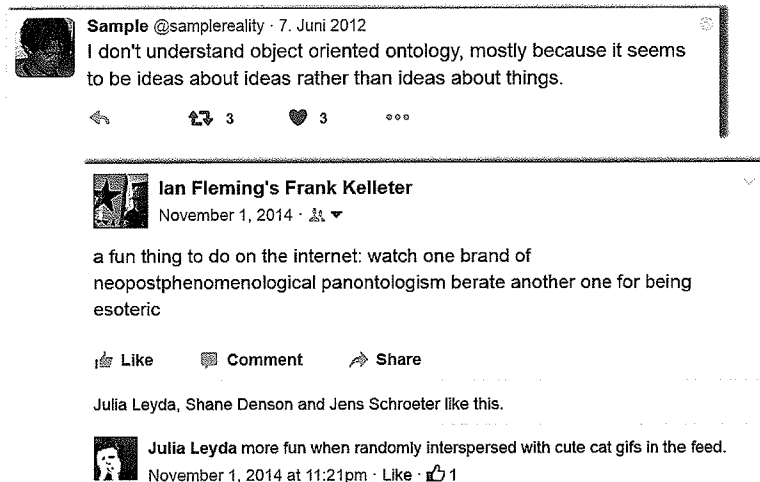
of our readers will then take care of the implicit parts if they're so inclined and if our work should manage to become a relevant actor in its field.

Strictly speaking, then, the plausible alternative to deep reading might not be surface reading but something outside the unity of the *depth/surface* distinction altogether. “Ideas,” even “underlying” ones, are semantic practices that can help us find a way through the archive of which they are a part, but it's the archival work—the explorative and respectful interaction with other players of the large cultural game of sense-making—that counts.



The Real Contradiction: this. Acting as the salesperson for a method or perspective is not the same as putting that method or perspective into practice. Arranging ideas about agency is different from tracing empirical actions in the course of a research project—unless one treats these ideas as the cultural agents they are. Here's what I wish I would tell myself at the outset of each new project: if you want to study an object, study that object! Research its details and effects as thoroughly as you can, reconstruct what it knows and what is passing through it, but don't think your work is done when you have philosophized about the importance of studying objecthood. Complicating the notion of the empirical—a task always necessary but rarely difficult—will not get you out of this pragmatics. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Otherwise, theory is just a repertoire of argumentative shortcuts for time-pressed professionals, its attractiveness residing more in charisma (its performed depth and difficulty) and efficiency (its secure reproducibility, once mastered) than in eye-opening connectivity. There's nothing positivistic about re-describing theory as a practice in and on the world. We should only try to avoid a certain *type* of “network studies” or, say, “systems theory” or “object studies” or “attachment studies” or “eco-criticism” that validates itself by demonstrating how other texts—often

fictional ones—speak nicely about networks, systems, objects, attachments, nature and post-nature, etc.



Can American Studies Be the Study of American Self-Studies? Asking how certain interpretations of an object or a text, including scholarly descriptions, are *active within* that object's or text's cultural doings means, in our case, tracking how, and with what consequences, American Studies participates in the activities of its chosen material—and vice versa. Think of all the novels informed by academic programs or written with potential classroom use in mind. Expanding on a type of literary research advanced by Mark McGurl, Alexander Starre, and others, Americanists could investigate how artistic, academic, infrastructural, and other practices act as interdependent forces of a larger system of institutions and habits that calls itself—against all odds in these supposedly post-national times—“American culture.” (*Serial Agencies* was an attempt to do so.)

Research of this type might start from the assumption that *America* is a spacious and imprecise, yet efficient and (still) successful, term for a geographically vast, socially incongruous, but in no way continentally comprehensive configuration, historically bound to the institutional realities of the United States of America. Put differently, rather than to take the existence of America for granted—the way the culture itself, even in its most critical self-reflections, tends to take its existence for granted—I propose to approach America's reality as something improbable, in the systems-theoretical sense of the term. America *exists*, of course, but it does so as a perpetually unlikely entity. Consider that its institutional substrate, the

United States of America, was explicitly founded *as* an unlikely nation (which is not true in quite the same manner for other cases of national contingency). For a long time, US nationhood, similar in this respect to “American literature,” looked like a double conjuring act: making itself appear self-evident while giving reality to a political realm deeply indebted to and yet, in its own understanding of itself, oddly removed from the rest of the world.

In many ways, this situation persists: investigating American culture means investigating a culture that is different from others, not because of some unmistakable national character or some exceptional heritage and destiny, but because of its inescapable investment in this problematical term, *America*. Recursive to a degree so obvious it is easy to overlook, American culture has always been concerned with the conditions of its own possibility—including the power of words to create what they describe. Hence the central role played by literature in the project of American Studies. Within the strange communicative system that names itself *American culture*, narratives are crucial agents of continuity, but almost never in the simple form of consensual myths. Rather, narrative contestations, variations, and serializations create improbable coherence on a daily basis, paradoxically enabling the culture to continue by controversy: to achieve and maintain a *procedural* sense of its own existence and reality. (In other words: a quintessentially modern culture, well into its postmodern self-definitions.)

So how unlikely is it that the expansive name *America* came to denote, in the ordinary speech of most people in the world today, the United States? To an important extent, American Studies is about this unlikelihood: the discipline's defining concern is with the culture-making force of American self-descriptions and their procedures and technologies of performance. When we choose to look at this state of affairs from a perspective inspired to equal degrees by network-praxeologies and systemic considerations, two interesting consequences arise: (1) It becomes necessary to investigate American self-descriptions and self-performances *as* self-descriptions and self-performances (developing in evolutionary feedback with their own effects)—and not as anything else (“expressions” of national character; “symbols” of mythical structures; “representations” of a social life supposedly lived outside the realm of representation; “symptoms” of an ideological disease; “translations” of other, deeper narratives; or “examples” of universal conditions of experience, corporeality, creativity, existence, etc.). (2) Knowledge produced *by* American culture *about* American culture becomes a central research object *of* American Studies, especially if that knowledge reaches us, as it does so often, in the form of “critique.”

The problem posed by this state of affairs is not one of *mise-en-abyme* but one of adjusting epistemological perspectives. Naturally, one can never see one's own blind spots. That's why observations of observations are necessary for any cognitive act that is more than merely conceptual (or philosophical). Meanwhile, the claim that such meta-observation aspires to

a position of external objectivity probably tells us more about the epistemologies of those who bring it up than about the actual effects of collaborative research.

Speaking for scholarship that investigates *texts as practices*: it is a fact well known but worth repeating that textual scholars always do more than simply *read* texts. This is particularly true when they read texts in which a culture explicitly recognizes itself. Such readings are always also writings, and thus they tend to expand the controversies of cultural self-definition waged in and through these texts into multiple wider arenas of knowledge. This explains the importance of plausible contextualization: it's important to know *who* is writing/reading, *where*, *when*, *by which (technological) means*, and linked-up with *what other forces of (re)production*. It makes a difference, for example, if those who write/read operate within—and on—the same cultural environment as the texts they're writing/reading (continuing, canonizing, etc.). This is the case when, say, US-based media scholars examine US television series or when US-based historians produce knowledge about the American Revolution. Whatever else their goals and results, these types of studies are always also acts of cultural self-description, and they can be analyzed as such, to trace dependencies between a culture's knowledge and performance of itself, ideally from a perspective not directly contributing to such self-identifications. Thus, it makes sense to distinguish *pragmatically* between those "studies" of America that are institutionally bound to the actor-networks that reproduce what is being studied and "studies" of America that, in the main, are engaged in other reproductive activities. In terms of cultural agency, not all types of American Studies are—or need to be—American Self-Studies.



Ian Fleming's Frank Kelleter

November 8, 2014 · 21

"Die Stabilisierung von Objekten (Identifikation, Wiedererkennbarkeit etc.) [könnte] möglicherweise viel mehr zur Festigung sozialer Beziehungen beitragen ... als der berühmte Gesellschaftsvertrag. ... Man kann also vermuten, daß Objekte ... mehr als irgendeine Art von Normen und Sanktionen dazu beitragen, soziale Systeme mit den nötigen Redundanzen zu versorgen. Das mag dann erst recht für eigens für diese Funktion erfundene Objekte gelten, zum Beispiel Könige oder Fußbälle." (Niklas Luhmann, 1995)

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The Transnational Paradox: Needless to say, in the case of American culture, many of the relevant arenas of its reproduction are not "national" at all, in any strict sense of the term. This is not simply a question of which writer or reader carries which passport. Think about how "Transnational American

Studies" has become our field's most self-evident description worldwide. But also think about how "Transnational American Studies," despite its apparent self-evidence, is simultaneously the field's most *coveted* identity, that is, its most difficult instantiation, especially in the United States.

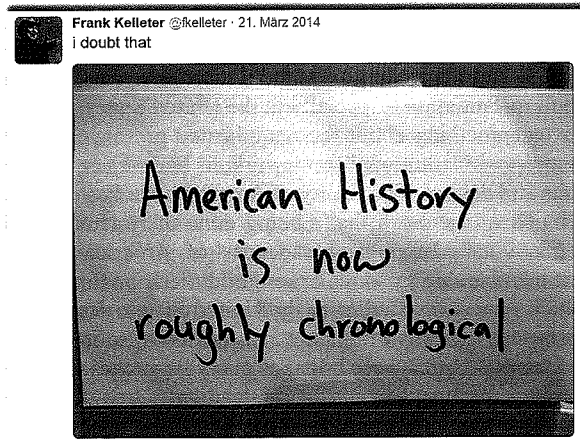
This paradox tells us something about the complicated presence of *the nation*—as idea, as empirical institutional framework, as bad object, etc.—in transnational circuits and desires. The reality of American Studies outside the US is such that much of the work that's being done there chooses to duplicate the concerns, vocabularies, and cadences of American Self-Studies, as if to assert membership in some larger guild. Perhaps this is the strongest sense in which American Studies in the United States, despite its blatant monolingualism, can be called transnational: not because it speaks many languages—it doesn't—but because it makes many languages want to sound perfectly American. Again, it would be misleading to see this as a symptom of scholarship's "complicity" with some perfidious ideological superstructure. The desire of many US-based scholars for a type of scholarship that counteracts nationally powerful notions of US exceptionalism is as serious as it is relevant. Both the professional desire and the professional work are inseparable from their practical environment, with all its improbabilities and feedback loops. Thus, it is not a sign of negligence or deficiency that American Studies in the United States produces particular epistemological styles and counter-styles (e.g., presently, "critique" vs. "post-critique") while sidelining or ignoring other descriptive options. Rather, this shows the participation of these types of research in the cultural activities of their material, that is, their status as American Self-Studies. As such, they are open to an American Studies analysis—or, if you will, to a field-intrinsic re-description of their own acts of description. Winfried Fluck may have had something similar in mind when he wrote in 2008 that "perhaps European American Studies will be able to develop a project of which US American Studies does not seem to be capable of at the present time," namely "a different emplotment of America."



Ian Fleming's Frank Kelleter

July 3, 2014 · 21

auspicious strategy #88: be suspicious of people who tell you you have to "position" your work. check their work. has it been improved by positioning? are the positioned parts the most admirable?



Post-What? Our Hot/Cold Continuum: How do these notes relate to current debates about symptomatic reading and post-critique? I begin with a confident assertion: if done well, investigations into the feedback dynamics of cultural self-knowledge will never “expose” scholarship’s “complicity” with this or that ideological hazard of its research material. Nor would such investigations set out to show that (US-American) scholarship simply repeats or inculcates “dominant” or “underlying” opinions that the culture magically holds about itself. Rather, they would trace how competing practices of affiliation and disaffiliation, institutionalized writing styles and counter-styles, competitive semantic habits, formal or generic or material agents, plus possibly other relevant forces of cultural reproduction *feed into each other*. Then we can ask what consequences or follow-up problems ensue for further cultural production.

Ultimately, all of this has little to do with the critical/post-critical divide that currently keeps so many of us busy and engaged, both in the United States and outside (an issue not exclusive to the US humanities but certainly distinct to them). Concerning this latest debate in a long series of self-promoting controversies, note how difficult it is to disentangle some of the debate’s central arguments from their institutional sites of articulation. Consider, for instance, that many of the most forceful objections against “critique” are not about the epistemological validity of certain cognitive practices, such as “critical detachment,” but about their numbing effect on professional discourse and rhetoric. Certain styles of writing have simply become boring, then annoying, within a specific communicative network and professional ecology.

But the thing about boredom is that boredom can itself arise as an effect of power. To feel bored with professional routines . . . to feel annoyed with

the usual habits of doubt and detection that carry us from conference to conference, from grant proposal to grant proposal . . . don’t such affects ultimately give evidence of the exasperating futility of academic critique? (Obviously, it’s not enough to have a plausible theory about a problem in order to solve it. Not even science works this way, or global weather reports would look different.) This doesn’t mean that there are no good reasons to feel mistrust, disbelief, skepticism; it simply means that the change brought about by critical “interventions” often involves nothing but the evolution of the language of critique itself. Unable to produce decisive effects outside its own field of action, humanistic scholarship, always suspicious, is sooner or later bound to suspect its own baroque reproduction as a form of conformity. But while academic truth-claims cleverly critique themselves as boring, other things remain boringly true. Hence the tiresome need to address them again and again—and hence the profession’s frustration with such inconsequential repetitions (“what, *this* again? Capitalism . . . racism . . . sexism . . . you’re still talking about the same old deterministic constructs, and by such metaphysical names?”). Perhaps it’s time to contemplate the possibility that boredom with powerful abstractions is shaped by their own concrete power of dispersion, their ever-adaptive self-abstraction, shifting the burden of change from the sphere of injustice and exploitation to the sphere of its description. It’s a question worth asking: in how far is the scholarly desire for innovation and transformation, for turns and *post*-ness, motivated by the boring staying power of the things that so flexibly refuse to truly transform, to yield, to move *post*-themselves?

Let’s also note that the US-American reception of actor-network theory, which is a central relay for many ideas circulating in current debates about critique and post-critique, has quickly (perhaps characteristically?) veered off into the first-philosophy ambitions of phenomenological aestheticism and object-oriented ontology. Latour’s own *Enquête sur les modes d’existence* can be read as a long-winded attempt to redefine and reposition ANT under the impression of its Anglophone reception. Ironically, what Latour described earlier (in *Reassembling the Social*) as “the dramatic lesson” of “the transatlantic destiny of Michel Foucault” has now come to resemble Latour’s own—somewhat irresolute, or highly supple—struggle with his American successes and successors:

No one was more precise in his analytical decomposition of the tiny ingredients from which power is made [than Foucault] and no one was more critical of social explanations [which invoke ‘an invisible, unmovable, and homogeneous world of power’]. And yet, as soon as Foucault was translated, he was immediately turned into the one who had ‘revealed’ power relations *behind* every innocuous activity: madness, natural history, sex, administration, etc. . . . [E]ven the genius of Foucault could not prevent such a total inversion.

Genius or not, even Latour's refreshing plea for empirics without empiricism could not prevent his transformation into a philosopher of "being" within a rhetorical milieu perfectly receptive to such charisma.

So, how critical should we be? From the perspective proposed here, this is a misleading way of asking an important question, because in the end there is no good *concept* of critique anyway. However, there are better or worse *practices* of critiquing. This is not to claim that symptomatic reading, specifically, is inescapable, but that in our current ecology of humanistic writing and speaking—and we have no other—certain evolutionary results do exist as intellectual environment for whatever alternative practices *co-evolve* with them. Thus, defenders and detractors of critique will sometimes position themselves in a telling chiasmus: whoever espouses "critique" as a rallying cry for some preexisting cause risks coming across as the epitome of an uncritical reader, while those who set up "critique" as the position to be transcended arguably enact a key critical gesture (never mind the considerable rhetorical energy and conceptual sophistication that goes into explaining why this is not a "critique of critique"). So let's say that writers like Latour, Luhmann, Felski, and others have objected with good reason and much ecological intelligence to some particularly *widespread* (or, if you will, routine, lazy, predictably self-validating) habits of critical writing. Recognizing this, one will perhaps be less inclined to substitute critique—understood as an evolving practice of reliable description in a flawed world—with neo-ontological theologies of art.

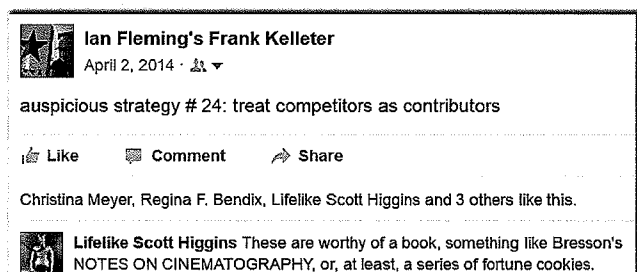
It's worth remembering that sooner or later all struggles about *concepts* follow the same path. If our professional realities have long been dominated by any one habit of thought at all, this is certainly not "detachment" but the desire for conceptual supersession. Among the dizzying swirl of self-proclaimed turns that have come to define the historiography of the humanities, there is not one that didn't legitimize itself by claiming to "leave behind" certain orthodoxies or to "move beyond" some ruling paradigm. By contrast, effective calls for better practice—say, more knowledgeable methods of contextualizing, more nuanced modes of critiquing, more integrative ways of theorizing, etc.—are in short supply. It is easier to declare generalities like *capitalism* and *ideology* obsolete than to produce more accurate accounts of the realities these words so sleepily refer to. In the current system of humanistic knowledge production, the conventional way of claiming relevance for one's argument or approach is to proclaim to do things excitingly differently. Like political contenders riding on anti-establishment promises of "change," new theories typically promise to upset their entire field (and then some) rather than to offer calibrated improvements of existing procedures. Within our energetic intellectual market for *post*-isms, theoretical innovations are passionate about all sorts of things, but chiefly about their own intellectual position, while the work that's being done tends to take on promotional functions.

Such passion for positioning comes with professional commitment, both in critical and post-critical scholarship. While the detachments of the former are always dependent on particular attachments and identifications (as Rita Felski teaches us), the latter's attachments and identifications rely profitably on conceptual abstraction and perspectival distancing (as the *writing* of Felski, Latour, and others can teach us). In the case of American Studies, then, the *critical/post-critical* distinction doesn't seem to get us very far—unless, of course, we choose to investigate it as the most recent episode in the field's controversial historiography. If so, a re-description of this latest self-description becomes possible, and such a re-description might want to exchange the *critical/post-critical* distinction for a scalar model, for instance by identifying shades of involvement on a hot/cold continuum. According to this model, US-based studies of America would always likely be hot, whether they're critical or not. Both their attempts at critical distance and their acts of empathy would tend to show, in some way or other, their own investment in the (epistemological) culture they're studying, negatively or positively. In fact, the very idea that critical distance is a sign of "negativity," whereas deep emotional attachment to an object is a "positive" disposition, would have to be abandoned (and quickly: any serious study of fan practices in contemporary popular culture will reach this insight, but it's no less relevant for the social realm of art).

By contrast, non-US-based studies of America could choose to involve themselves differently. And I don't mean that they should conjure up supposedly foreign—or from their perspective, native—styles of "thinking" (like Heideggerianism: remember how the jargon of existence is already a forceful player in US-based knowledge ecologies; compare the American reception of ANT or the ontologization of formerly radical styles of social protest). What I mean is that non-US-based studies of America, while inevitably drawing on a shared (truly transnational) rhetorical repertoire, need not be involved in the business of American self-critique, self-performance, self-transcendence, etc. That they nevertheless tend to duplicate both the emotional and intellectual investments of US scholarship is an interesting and important feature of our field. At this point, let me simply say that they *could* also work in a cooler fashion. To name some random examples, their American Studies *are not obliged* to take at face value the communicative follow-up problems resulting from specifically US-American usages of terms such as *participation*, *elitism*, *identity*, *community*, and others, but they *could* also investigate these results and necessities *as* communicative follow-up problems.

Certainly this mode of *taking seriously* a culture's communicative work-nets is difficult to communicate within the culture's own framework of available (rhetorical, political, moral, etc.) positions. But then, American Studies—in the widest sense of the term—would not *have to* accept and reproduce US-American understandings of terms such as *conservative*,

liberal, progressive, etc., but it *could also* analyze the generative dynamics at work in these distinctions, perhaps perceiving similarities between actors that the culture itself will always tend to position as diametric opposites. And so on. The result might be an “emplotment of America” that is not only “different” from the standard self-descriptive (“hot”) versions of America, but in an important sense epistemologically compatible with them, offering systemic re-descriptions from somewhere down our heat spectrum of cultural and professional reproduction.

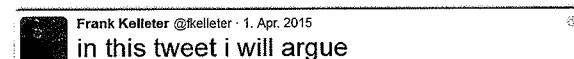


ART! But what about art? What if our interest isn't America's improbable reproduction but aesthetic experience, enabled by American artworks? Isn't art a “mode of being” all by itself—one that should not be “reduced” to political meanings, social conditions, etc.? Yes and yes. And yet: I think everyone who's looked into available models of domain differentiation will come away from the kind of ontological catholicism espoused in, say, Latour's *Enquête* with a certain degree of skepticism. Less visibly strategic—certainly less mystical—models are at hand, including but not restricted to Luhmann's theory of social systems and their “structural couplings.” At any rate, consider the following suggestions, derived from Latourian styles of thought but inflected by systems-theoretical proposals.

Each observation of art is confronted with the problem that art observes itself in the act of being observed. The concept of *self-reference* seems too weak to capture this state of affairs, because *self-reference* could be taken to suggest the existence of a finished and sovereign object which can then be “read” from the safety of a separate onlooker's position. But what we call readings in a professional sense of the term are—in all their pragmatic and tangible reality—acts of writing. In general, it can be said that receptions are always productions: of texts, images, data, topoi, emotional states, etc. Thus, readings and receptions always feed back into the chains of actions that allow for the coming into existence of artworks in the first place. In other words, institutional practices never exist “outside” artworks—as their determining backgrounds or, conversely, as mere epiphenomena of their true aesthetic

“being”—but they are active *within* even their slightest formal features and doings. And if the term *institutional* bothers you, because it seems to suggest some “sociology” of knowledge, let's rephrase this in more literary terms and say that interpretations do not simply *come after* the things interpreted, but that interpretations are deeply involved in the way art assesses and instantiates itself. Descriptions of artworks are part of the production of artworks, both in the mode of artistic self-reference and in the mode of retrospective exegesis. (How many readings go into an act of writing?)

This view distinguishes a cultural analytics from a work-based analytics. The latter typically operates in the service of aesthetic self-reproduction, not least by accepting the existence of the work of art *as* a work of art. For the enjoyment of art—as well as for its institutional continuation—this is a helpful disposition. It is also a disposition that will almost intuitively conceive of aesthetic experience along phenomenological lines as an encounter between one human subject and some more or less singular object of transcendence. As it happens, this is also the model of aesthetic experience that motivates many an attempt at “post-critical” object encounters. Whether the metaphysics inherent in this scenario is compatible with an ecological (network-sensitive and feedback-interested) understanding of culture is an open question.



Three Lazy Questions for the Q&A:

Ian Fleming's Frank Kelleter
October 12, 2014 · 🗨️

lazy strategies for the q&a:
never address the subject of a talk but move immediately to the conceptual level, utilizing one of the following arguments: (1) this thing [x] that everyone is talking about doesn't really exist ("i don't know what you mean by 'genre'. as jean-claude simoneau has shown, there has never been such a thing as 'genre'"), (2) all [y] are really trans-[y] ("could you specify your idea of ecology? georgia maclusita says that all ecology is trans-ecological"), (3) so far, everyone who ever wrote about [z] got it all wrong ("well, but according to hans-werner slojvec, the real question of technological ontology hasn't even appeared as a question yet")

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Material in the Mix: "Every process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction": Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, MEW 23 (Berlin: Dietz, 1962), 591. – Critique as attachment: Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2015). – Henry Nash Smith, "Can American Studies Develop a Method?", *American Quarterly* 9 (1957): 197-208. – "Symptomatic reading": Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Rancière, *Lire le capital* (Paris: Maspero, 1965); critique of symptomatic reading: Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ed. *The Way We Read Now*, Spec. issue of *Representations* 108.1 (2009). – Art and politics as "modes of being": Bruno Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d'existence: une anthropologie des modernes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012). – Systems theory & actor-network-theory, pragmatic compatibility: Kelleter, *Serial Agencies: The Wire and Its Readers* (Washington: Zero Books, 2014), 4. – "But this is better shown than declared": *Serial Agencies*, 4-5. – "self-descriptions": Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 866-1149. – "One disposition requires the other": cf. "so wie es keine gültige Kritik geben kann, die sich nicht auf ein Verständnis stützt, so ist jedes gültige (deshalb nie end-gültige) Verständnis immer kritisch": Kelleter, *Die Moderne und der Tod* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1997), 153. – "No single analysis can do it all": Jason Mittell, conversation. – "The proof of the pudding is in the eating": cf. Kelleter, "A Tale of Two Natures: Worried Reflections on the Study of Literature and Culture in an Age of Neuroscience and Neo-Darwinism," *Journal of Literary Theory* 1 (2007): 153-89. – "repertoire of argumentative short-cuts": *Serial Agencies*, 51. – "understanding a text better than its author does": Otto Friedrich

Bollnow, "Was heißt, einen Schriftsteller besser verstehen als er sich selbst verstanden hat?", *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 18 (1940): 117-38. – "Object theory" finding itself in texts that "speak nicely" about objects: Alexander Starre, conversation. – Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009). – Alexander Starre, *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization* (Iowa City: U Iowa P, 2015). – "making itself appear self-evident": Kelleter, "1776: John Adams Disclaims Authorship of *Common Sense* But Helps Declare Independence," *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009), 98-103. – "infrastructural": John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015). – "larger cultural system of institutions and habits": *Serial Agencies*, 32. – "America" as "spacious and imprecise yet efficient and successful term": *Serial Agencies*, 62. – "explicitly founded as an unlikely nation": cf. Kelleter, *Amerikanische Aufklärung: Sprachen der Rationalität im Zeitalter der Revolution* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002). – American literature as "double conjuring act," entire paragraph down to "power of words to create what they describe": Kelleter, "Early American Literature," *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Martin Middeke et al. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2012), 101-110, 101. – "crucial agents of continuity": *Serial Agencies*, 62. – "procedural sense of reality and existence": cf. *Amerikanische Aufklärung & "Trust and Sprawl: Seriality, Radio, and the First Fireside Chat," Media Economies: Perspectives on American Cultural Practices*, ed. Marcel Hartwig, Evelyn Keitel, and Gunter Süß (Trier: WVT, 2014), 43-61. – "how unlikely is it?", "American Studies is about this unlikelihood": "Early American Literature," 101. – "It is a fact well known but worth repeating," entire paragraph down to "contributing to such self-identifications": *Serial Agencies*, 32-33. – "Die Stabilisierung von Objekten": Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 81. – "not a sign of deficiency or negligence," etc.: *Serial Agencies*, 61. – "European American Studies," their "different emplotment of America": Winfried Fluck, "American Studies and the Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals" (2008), *Romance with America?*, ed. Laura Bieger and Johannes Voelz (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), 87-104, 102. – American History roughly chronological: bookstore in Seattle, Washington. – "not expose scholarship's 'complicity'": *Serial Agencies*, 32. – "affects": no, not Massumi, Deleuze, Spinoza. – Latour's *Enquête* and first-philosophy ambitions: cf. Kelleter, "Diplomatist statt Systemtheorie," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (14. Feb. 2013): 30. – "transatlantic destiny of Michel Foucault": Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 86. – "critique as practice of reliable description in an imperfect world," "neo-ontological theologies of art": Kelleter, "Five

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Ian Fleming's Frank Kelleter
December 9, 2014 · 🌐 · 📄

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"today's humanities students prefer subjects no older than themselves" (Stephen Greenblatt/Joseph Leo Koerner) -- today's humanities students prefer suspects no richer than themselves -- today's animality buddhists prefer blankets no sleeper than themselves -- yesterday's botany movements prefer leaders more radical than their elves -- yesterday's bank robbers confer assets to rabid doubles of myself

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Frank Kelleter @kelleter · 20. Dez. 2014

is coming to the conclusion now