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“Amerika gibt es nicht” – On the Semiotics of Literary America in the Twentieth Century¹

Scenes of arrival in America: “So hoch!” Karl Roßmann says to himself upon glimpsing the “Statue der Freiheitsgöttin” while entering the harbor of “Newyork” (Kafka 7). She is the portal figure to an America Kafka described after reading a travelogue by Arthur Holitscher; the statue, the novel notes, was “längst beobachtet.” After Kafka’s description, his Goddess of Liberty will serve as a model for others.² Wolfgang Koeppen’s *Amerikafahrt* of 1959 begins with a chain of signs, a one-and-a-half-page sentence with signifiers like “Kaserne,” “Kreuzritter,” “Indianergesicht,” “Whiskeyreklame,” “Funksprüche aus dem Pentagon,” Tennessee Williams, and “Faulkners Genie,” and ultimately the melancholy commentary: “du bist schon angekommen, bevor du abgeflogen, so vieler Verführung ist nicht zu wierstehen.” (Koeppen 279-280). In his novel *The Church of John F. Kennedy* published in 1996, Thomas Meinecke first cites statistics about the German population in the American South. The first quotation of a travelogue from 1892 ensues shortly thereafter. Wenzel Assmann, the protagonist, is foremost a reader in local archives. Insertions from old newspapers, from letters of emigrants, from travels around America, and from a grammar of Pennsylvania Dutch permeate the entire text.³ Michael Roes’ novel *Haut des Südens*, which first appeared in 2000, begins not only by quoting Mark Twain, but also with the arrival of the narrator in the “renowned” Mark Twain capital, Hannibal, Missouri. After only a few pages he falls asleep on the threshold of the local “Tante Polly Buchladen” (Roes 10-11).

Scenes of arrival in America begin quite frequently with second-hand descriptions, with a quotation of another travelogue, with images seen long ago. For an America novel one must not travel the country, as Ingeborg Bachmann said of Kafka (Bachmann 94); America is a textual construction, a topos whose history is first and foremost literary in nature. Max Brod's editorial alterations of Kafka's manuscripts, the corrections of his idiosyncratic topography – in Kafka a bridge leads from New York to Boston; San Francisco is located in the East – were long ago retracted by Jost Schillemeit and his fellow editors for this very reason. America texts resist comparison with real settings, even when the occasional critic of contemporary novels still insists upon the authenticity of depictions of America.⁴ The referent America is a dubious one, and so it seems only logical that critics have commented upon America texts principally as utopias and dystopias, as a discourse of images and projections, as a social history and a history of mentalities of travelers from Europe. In descriptions of America, German hopes and ideas are reflected, be they attempts at self-determination by individual adventurers and emigrants or by an entire nation; even in recent times "America" enjoys increased currency, both in literature as well as in literary research, as the formidable anthology by Jochen Vogt shows.⁵

In the following reflections, the focus will nevertheless not be on replacing the dubious referent America with "images" and "representations"; America should not be read here yet again as a utopia or the negation thereof. Rather, the thesis remains that numerous America novels of German literary history deal very fundamentally with the loss of referentiality and are legible as a semiotic textual model: "Amerika gibt es nicht," writes Peter Bichsel in 1969 (Bichsel 37), "Amerika gibt es überhaupt nicht," Robert Müller writes already in 1913 (Müller 255). And thus, it might be added, America texts devise a peculiar system of signs. Whenever one speaks here of the topos 'America,' it is in a very literal way: America as the site of textual

negotiations; the journey to America as a narrative which is linked to other narratives of America; America as a model for signs, as a symbolic order which, for its part, has a history.⁶ Kafka's America is already composed of texts and readings, but how can this topos be defined in postwar literature, or in the novels of the '90s? What is narrated in the America texts when their scenes of arrival are mere repetitions of other texts, when the arrival in the textual construction "America" has already become a topos?

In Kafka's novel, not only is the Statue of Liberty an apparition seen long ago, but the arrival itself is likewise a repetition of a quintessential scene of the America novel gleaned from numerous sources. In Charles Sealsfield's adventure stories, for example, the arrival scene is repeated time and again, and it becomes recognizable simultaneously as a sequence whose aim appears less as a culmination of travel than merely as travel for its own sake. In Sealsfield's *Deutsch-amerikanische Wahlverwandtschaften* of 1839, the narrator survives countless trials between his departure from Europe and his arrival in America; his ship journey is a rite of passage, at the end of which await self-discovery and renewal.⁷ As such, maritime travel is a foundational structure in Sealsfield, one which the author employs repeatedly in other narratives. In *Das Kajütenbuch* the narrator reaches the Texan coast, having far from completed his arrival with his landing. The ship's voyage remains a narrative pattern even in subsequent scenes. Often lauded as authentic, Sealsfield's descriptions of the Texas prairie are depicted by the narrator as if he were still at sea:

Es lag so grandios vor mir, so ruhig, so ozeanartig mit seinen Hunderte von Meilen in jeder Richtung hinwogenden Gräsern, den schwankend-schwimmenden Inseln, die in den goldenen Strahlen der Nachmittagssonne wirklich schwebend und schwimmend erschienen, während wieder hinten und seitwärts wogende Blumenfelder, in den fernen Äther hinaufschwellend, Himmel und Erde in eine und dieselbe Glorie verschmolzen. [...] Ein unbeschreiblicher Anblick!
(Sealsfield 73-74)

It is as in every attempt at realistic description; the more precise the metaphors are to be, the more questionable they become. What Sealsfield's narrator describes as Texas prairie is a sea stretching before his eyes into infinity. The rider is still at sea, the prairie thus rather like a vestibule of America, the promise of a country not yet reached. Sealsfield's depictions of nature have been read primarily as allegory texts, as references to something invisible which nevertheless requires the signs it makes present through its absence: the prairie as a political allegory, for example, its appearance as a multivocal, pluralistic, and democratic form⁸ – images of America as projections, as a history of mentalities and ideas. In Sealsfield, this allegorical reading of America texts seems particularly manifest. His narrator has lost himself in the vastness of the prairie because he wanted to follow a run-away mustang whose invidious whinnying and wildness foreshadow the actual challenge the narrator must bear out (Sealsfield 51-54). The devilish mustang lures him into hell (54), causes "höllische Empfindungen" (70), leads him into a "bengalischen Feuersee" (62), but the Garden of Eden also makes an appearance; stands of trees appear to him "wie eine Schlange" (56). Enervated, the rider nevertheless also undergoes a reformation and ultimately recognizes "einen neuen, einen lebendigen Gott" who is stronger than the God of his native religion (76). The metaphors here are not to be overlooked. The ride through the prairie resembles a rite of passage of a pietistic sort – from temptation to sin to a conversion experience – and the mode of movement resembles that of a ship's passage which itself already has a Christian iconography; the sea voyage becomes a kind of genesis story. Sealsfield – born Karl Postl, a monk who had fled from a Prague monastery in 1823⁹ – mines the plot of his hero from a narrative taken unmistakably from German literary history. Here, the Texas prairie is merely the stage for a European tradition, the image of America a projection and mirror of a German history of ideas. If one indeed reads the

traces of the prairie description more literally and ignores the obvious connotations of the text, the signs are also significant in a semiotic sense. What fundamentally shapes the experience of the hero in Sealsfield's adventure novel may also shape the textual examples to come: the capaciousness of space which drags after it a nearly endless deferral of arrival and which in Sealsfield's text is interrupted only by a second moment: the horizontal lurching of the narrator is interrupted significantly only when his scanning gaze finds a point of repose in a tree, a vertical axis which inscribes into the infinite textual area another dimension and which the narrator imbues immediately with a metaphorical meaning. Put differently and more succinctly, this description bears witness to the contrary play of two axes of orientation, the horizontal and the vertical, both of which refer in their own way to different forms of signs: the nearly unending ride across the sea of prairie as metonymic displacement, the tree in the desert, on the other hand, as a semantic, metaphoric marker.¹⁰ Even from a distance the narrator sees a "Koloß," a "Hügel" or "Berg," calling it a "Schloß" in "sprachlosem Erstaunen" (Sealsfield 58), and again, these differences in register are inscriptions which help steady his image of the world: "Der Gott Moses, der aus dem glühenden Dornbusche sprach, ist ein Kindergott gegen den Gott, der hier allergreifend vor die Augen tritt, klar, greiflich aus dieser unermesslichen Wiesen-, Insel- und Baumwelt vor Augen tritt." (Sealsfield 73)

At the latest since structuralism, one has grown accustomed to characterizing literary procedures with these two types of signs as constitutive parameters. They are in no way specific modes of writing of German America texts. And yet these dimensions are appropriate for more precisely defining the literary examples to be discussed. "So hoch," says Roßmann upon his entrance into the New York harbor, and even in the subsequent chronicles Kafka always circumscribes Roßmann's America as the experience of two dimensions. To investigate the

prehistory and semiotics of this procedure of description more closely, let us turn first to a contemporary of Sealsfield, whose description *per se* counts as the paradigm of a sociological study in which a European (hi)story is negotiated on the American continent. In Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the journey leads first not into the past and the culture of the indigenous peoples, but rather into the vision of a future which still awaits the European traveler by virtue of a theory of signs or prognosis of art, as Henning Ritter notes (Ritter I). Looking back, de Tocqueville characterizes his arrival in the New York Harbor in 1830 as a disappointment, specifically as regards the cache of mental images he brought with him from Europe:

When I reached New York for the first time, by that part of the Atlantic Ocean called the East River, I was surprised to observe along the bank some distance from the town a certain number of small palaces in white marble, several of which imitated a classical architectural style. The next day, on examining more closely the one which had especially drawn my attention, I discovered that its walls were of whitewashed brick and its columns of painted wood. The same went for all the monuments I had admired the day before. (de Tocqueville 541)

De Tocqueville's thesis is well known: in America things are not what they seem.¹¹ In this sense the preference for columns and classical façades is not, for example, compelled by building conventions, but is solely of a pragmatic nature. American façades seen by the arriving traveler are citations of form that make clear that signs function differently here. The columns along the East River have no symbolic content. They cannot function as signs of aristocratic provenance precisely because their material is not genuine; the columns are merely painted. They represent only what they are supposed to embody, thereby undermining the very symbolic power expected by the European observer. Already upon entering the New York Harbor, one can observe how the democratic society of America prefers the spurious to the genuine. If one views the façades as textual surfaces, then one sees a network of artificial signs whose materiality no longer

avouches any meaning; on American façades reproductions and imitations replace the original. In de Tocqueville's description, this emblematic replacement of the original bears the consequence that originality now becomes the most important category. The authentic must always be produced anew because there is no longer anything genuine. Because American signs are exchangeable, because they can be shifted and displaced, they lend themselves to the production of aesthetic semblance.

De Tocqueville's observations of the façades on the East River appear as a semiotic study *avant la lettre*, the façade with its artificial columns as a model of a sign with a broader scope than the aristocratic symbols of Europe. In de Tocqueville's text, the artificial columns embody a model of signs, a vertical, semantic axis with which de Tocqueville describes, so to speak, a reevaluation of meanings. In America, one can study not only the future of a political order, but also the accompanying loss of a symbolic texture. In democratic society signs are no longer constructed according to hierarchies, but instead become reproducible:

Thus, they transplant into the heart of democracy ideas and literary uses which are current in the aristocratic nation they take as their model. They paint with colors borrowed from foreign customs and are rarely popular in the country of their birth because they almost never represent it in its proper light. [...] Therefore, strictly speaking, the inhabitants of the United States have not yet gained a literature. (de Tocqueville 544)

In the aristocracy the arts are reserved for a certain class, in contrast to America, where the equality of all fosters the endeavors of the artist to distinguish himself from the masses. But the language of signs is also a different one. While portraits of the soul come into being in the aristocracy, the American artists concentrate on the body: "They turn aside from the painting of the soul in order to concentrate on the body; movement and sensation replace the depiction of feelings and ideas. In the end, the real ousts the ideal" (de Tocqueville 541).¹² De Tocqueville likely registers this because he at first still associated South America with sensuousness but saw

in North America the seat of the intellect. After his journey to America, however, the body takes the place of the mind. The signifieds, and the ideas associated with them, are replaced by a series of signifiers. De Tocqueville describes a paradigm shift in which the semantics of signs, the paradigm of their meaning, is less important than the signifier in its pure materiality.

Corresponding to the encounter with the column and the symbolic dimension of signs is de Tocqueville's journey into the West where he attempts, with wild Native Americans, to find the limits of American culture. The adventure and travel novel had been the model for de Tocqueville's travelogue. It is thus unsurprising that his expectations are also frustrated here. Instead of wild warriors or noble savages as he knew from reading Cooper and Chateaubriand; instead of the authentic indigenous peoples of America, de Tocqueville encounters native Americans donning European clothes. "It was evident that they had not been made for them and that they found themselves yet imprisoned in their folds. To European ornaments, they had added articles of barbaric luxury such as feathers, huge earrings, and shell necklaces" (876-877). The journey to the west does not lead back to the origins of culture as de Tocqueville the reader had gleaned from literature (880). The difference between American cities and the alleged wilderness does not exist, for in America, there exists only one society: "It may be rich or poor, modest or brilliant, engaged in commerce or farming, nevertheless, it consists everywhere of the same elements. The level of an egalitarian civilization had been laid upon it" (880).

According to Hayden White, in the aristocracy there is a concentration upon the individual and his will; in a democracy, a concentration on superindividual powers. The aristocracy is oriented backwards while democracy focuses itself forward and discovers the future as a new dimension (204-205). De Tocqueville discovered America as an historical future. This inversion of the time axis was possible if only because the signs found by de Tocqueville

had lost their anchoring, no longer referring to anything authentic, only to signs. Not only is the European clothing of the Native Americans spurious, but even the feathers in their hair seem to de Tocqueville a “barbaric luxury.” They too have lost their originality; the United States thus loses its historical grounding and becomes instead the land of the future – here one might observe what is in store of Europe.¹³ As a matter of the history of discourse, this has the consequence that the ramifications of capitalism are more and more frequently sighted in the USA, that travelogues no longer draw the contours of a utopia; instead, they outline a threatening potential – especially for the identity of the subject.

More important still than the history of societies and ideas in this context, however, is the observation that one can locate, even in de Tocqueville, the two aforementioned sign dimensions, a horizontal and a vertical axis. While these two dimensions organize the implicit descriptive logic in the contemporaries de Tocqueville and Sealsfield – each in its own way – it is a hallmark of Kafka’s position at the beginning of the twentieth century that Kafka thematizes the vertical and the horizontal in and of themselves. His novel *Der Verschollene* is not about a description of America, but conversely about America as a descriptive model, as a poetological concept. “So hoch,” his Roßmann says about the Goddess of Liberty, who is also the portal figure to an America text that thematizes the system of symbols in a more explicit way. The axes of orientation for Kafka’s heroes are both vertical and horizontal, and along both dimensions the novel engages systematically in revaluations. The upward-looking gaze of Roßmann at the opening of the novel provides a direction in which he will orient himself thereafter; his view of Manhattan is reciprocated by the skyscrapers which seem to look at him – here one knew where one was, as the novel says (Kafka 20); and while still on board he sees “Schwimmkörper” in the water, a “Bewegung ohne Ende, eine Unruhe, übertragen von dem unruhigen Element auf die

hilflosen Menschen und ihre Werke” (Kafka 26-27). The vertical connection from top to bottom, for which Kafka always possessed a special sense, is put to the test in America.¹⁴ So, too, is the horizontal movement and its sense of orientation towards the west, the purposive movement and journey which, in Kafka, trails off at the end into fragments. From the lower deck of the ship, Roßmann disembarks onto land and, as promising as it may seem, begins his American career at the top, moving into the sixth story of his uncle’s house (54) from which he sees the surging traffic below.¹⁵ As a lift boy, Roßmann will ultimately learn to make deep bows (188). He has arrived in a capitalistic society which arranges its social structure hierarchically – albeit flexibly – with head chef and head porter. In contrast to de Tocqueville’s description of the European aristocratic society, in Kafka’s America of the 20th-century, the top can very quickly become the bottom and vice-versa. Whereas in the beginning of the novel liberty seems to be associated with height, in one of the last completed chapters, Roßmann is finally imprisoned on a high balcony with a panoramic view (296). Up and down are two terminals of a symbolic axis whose sense of meaning is, however, in no way secured – Kafka’s America thus deals with displacements and reversals of meaning. America is the altered augury of a system of symbols, which is not least shown in the fact that the orientation towards the *Bildungsroman* does not lead to self-discovery. At the end, Roßmann admittedly manages to travel further westward, but he fares as de Tocqueville; in the “Teater von Oklahama” (387) the authenticity of signs is even more dubious. In other words, the theater demonstrates what signs are – proxies which no longer refer to anything actual. Here, all are welcome, all can become actors or can assume another function because everyone already engages in role-play anyhow; no single, essential identity exists.¹⁶ Kafka’s America, as has been shown numerous times, is a secondary text based on readings of numerous sources.¹⁷ That Karl has peculiar ideas about America (Kafka 88), as the novel says,

that he once read about America in a book, that one should take care to avoid the Irishmen (133), are explicit references to the reading knowledge of the narrator. More decisive even than the motivic assimilations of other texts is that Kafka's novel can be systematically reconstructed along the aforementioned coordinates and, with its horizontal and vertical displacements, creates the dimensions according to which America's logic of signs develops.

"Amerika gibt es überhaupt nicht," Robert Müller wrote already in 1913. "Ach was," he continues, "Amerika liegt am Monde und es ist ein Mangel an Positivismus, sich darauf zu beziehen" (Müller 255). Quite positivistic, one might nevertheless argue further, are precisely those texts that describe America as a textual surface, which seek it out in literature and in its images, which make literary and fictional America their own. When Wolfgang Koeppen travels to America to produce a travel report, even he is seeking out a topos. As with Kafka, Koeppen's account is a reduction of readings: "Ich war in Amerika angekommen. Ich stand in New York. Ich hatte dies oft geträumt, und es war nun wie ein Traum. Der Traum, hier zu sein, hatte sich erfüllt, und wie im Traum gab es keine Fremde" (Koeppen 287). His American dream, to be sure, is just another repetition; Koeppen's narrator is well read, and Kafka is one of his favorite authors: "Franz Kafka, der Amerika nie erreichte, doch von Amerika den wahrsten Traum hatte" (284), he writes immediately after his arrival. Empirical America is, in and of itself, imaginary. A nightmare for Koeppen is 86th Street in Manhattan, where insignias of German culture are strung together arbitrarily and yet meaningfully: *Knödel*, Emperor Barbarossa, the soccer stars of Kaiserslautern, Dortmund, and Hamburg (315-316). Koeppen writes a secondary text, writes about images and signs, about – Klaus Scherpe argues – myths of the everyday and of literary history.¹⁸ "Gerstäcker, Karl May, Cooper und Sealsfield" traveled along with him when he boarded the Santa Fe Express (Koeppen 368). In America, he praises the ideal libraries, but even

his own account is a compendium of traces of readings that he forges into metonymic chains of signs. Even his critical, melancholy impressions of America are still prejudiced by the anti-Americanism in German literature. Nevertheless, Koeppen's narrator also articulates what, of the previous two authors, only de Tocqueville alluded to in a similar vein: America's world of signs is significant because it sets itself apart from European logic. Koeppen's narrator cannot travel the land without melancholic nostalgia for the European semiotic model. After arriving in New York, he describes the Paris of the eighteenth century first, ignoring the skyscrapers around him for now: "hier war ich Europäer, und ich wollte es bleiben" (281). The dichotomy between America and Europe is the expression of a differential which, as a structural moment, determines America's logic of signs. The permutation of semantic meanings – the metonymic displacements as described here in Sealsfield, Kafka, and Koeppen – are only possible because signs are not defined across fixed meanings, but because the meaning of these signs defines itself, very much in the structuralist sense, across variable differentials. Semantic differences thus become flexible, since signs can substitute for one another as long as they obey the same logic.

Perhaps for this reason America is one of the preferred descriptive surfaces in the structuralist decades of the twentieth century. Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Project for a Revolution in New York* and even Michel de Certeau's later criticism of structuralism, illustrated with an image of Manhattan, delineate their poeology using America as an example. Structural textual analysis can be compared with the view from the World Trade Center of the New York street grid, de Certeau argues (de Certeau 91). The structuralist forgets, he notes, that the individual can move freely about the grid; pedestrians interpret the map, each according to his needs, crossing the street and thereby also the textual structure in a literal sense (92-93). This illustration by de Certeau is noteworthy in this context because he chooses – of all things – the street map of

Manhattan as an emblem of French structuralism and thereby of the textual understanding of intellectuals who distanced themselves politically from America in the late 1960s. But it also becomes clear that there is, aside from the numerous social utopias and societal projections, a purely textual topos “America” which considers America as a model of signs.

One final French example which follows this logic and yet also, so to speak, brings it to its end is Jean Baudrillard’s emphatic American journey of 1986. His “America” resembles a road movie, a journey from the East to the West Coast, from New York to the Grand Canyon, Salt Lake City, and Las Vegas and on to Los Angeles, a route following American iconography and yet also without arrival. What Baudrillard describes is nothing more than a model of signs: “America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality” (Baudrillard 28); “The US is utopia achieved” (77). America is the counter-model to the European understanding of signs, for Europe’s sign, Baudrillard submits, is the metaphor, the signifier to be thought and which opens a semantic paradigm. Europe is the site of metaphysics, the exploration of meanings. In America, on the other hand, metaphors collapse; signs refer to signs, not to any semantic meaning. On his journey through the desert, Baudrillard cuts away the semantic content of metaphors; his journey becomes the emblem of a metonymic displacement. American signs have no referents outside of signs; they mean nothing more than themselves. This means, however, that Baudrillard’s America is no longer a sign which stands for something. Rather, it is the reverse. Baudrillard describes signs and illustrates them with images of America. His America text is thus a further and final recurrence of that which de Tocqueville already described in the 19th-century, a last form of the reflection of American signs. But even in Baudrillard, the logic of this American textual world is visible only because he writes from a European perspective and thus still

postulates an oppositional figure to Europe – a differential which severs Europe from America and which is simultaneously the precondition for American sign displacements.

America stands not only for the societal utopias and dystopias of Europe; images of America are not only legible as projections of a European history of mentalities. As the examples discussed here show, America also stands for a semiotic model, for poetologies which devise their program of signs as a continental order. And as the series of texts here demonstrates, recurrences of this poetological model can be seen on various levels. Sealsfield's citation of pietistic narratives and arrival scenes still serves to give voice to the experience of the Texas prairie. Kafka's images and symbols of America are seen long ago; they are quotations whose metaphorical dimensions he can invert. In Koeppen's travelogue, the repetitions begin to refer to themselves; his narrator repeats the observations of others, seeks out America in citations, in chains of signs which are primarily self-referential. His America text consists of texts about America. Consequently, one wonders, how Kafka, Koeppen, and Baudrillard and their repetitions still allow America to be narrated at all. How can one connect to a model of signs that has long since begun to refer to itself? The thesis of these closing considerations is that the America novels of Thomas Meinecke and Michael Roes offer strategies for narrating America differently – or even at all again – without returning to a model of referentiality.

Thomas Meinecke's travels take another direction: from the South to New York, his face always directed toward the homeland although the narrator never reaches his destination. He only ever reaches Dutch Country, or rather: Deutschland.¹⁹ Meinecke's *America Germanica* is a quest for traces of German immigrants in the southern states. His narrator combs archives, drives around in a Chevrolet jalopy from Boerne to Weimar and to other sites of a virtual German topography whose telling names have forfeited all symbolic power. They are actually

meaningless, and for this reason their connection is all the more significant. The city names forge a chain of associations that always refers to Germany. The inversion of his travel route, the journey to the East Coast, from which German emigrants and travelers had usually marked their point of departure, is programmatic. For Meinecke's strategy is to read German America texts and myths somewhat against the grain, and primarily to dissolve those national identities which had been assumed by the earlier tradition. As one can learn in Meinecke's *America*, American identity is just as much a hybrid form as German identity. In his *Chevy*, Wenzel Assmann has telephone books where German immigrants can look up their names and search for their relatives. As a reciprocal service, Assmann records their memories, but he even browses archives for documents and evidence of German emigrants. Assmann's own experiences limit themselves to road trips and ephemeral love trysts (with Barbara Kruse for example, a quarter Native-American with German ancestors). The deconstruction of the German image of America aims foremost at a revision of German leftist identity. In *America*, the *Vormärz* revolutionaries of the 19th-century struck roots in the "Sumpf des Südens" in order to trigger the budding of new "identitätsstiftende Blüten," as they say (Meinecke 54): "Hatte nicht der sogenannte Amerikanische Traum sein Aggressionspotenzial direkt aus germanischen Feuerköpfen bezogen?" (Meinecke 80-81)

That can likewise be asked of Wenzel Assmann. The novel takes place in the year of the *Wende*, about which Assmann receives news of political commotion again and again. The aim of his journey is to collect "antinationalistische Erkenntnisse" in the USA (Meinecke 48). When he encounters among German immigrants arrant national socialists, anti-Semites, racists, and a number of sects, Assmann is hardly irked. This juxtaposition is part of the picture. Born in 1958, Assmann has grown up with the German leftists and can observe in the USA how the Left is

itself a hybrid form. *The Church of John F. Kennedy* is a novel about Germany that takes place at a point in time when post-war identity begins to take off with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Boerne, Weimar, and the German *Vormärz* revolutionaries have lost their symbolic power in the southern states.

Even more important than the history of ideas and mentalities reflected in the novel is that Meinecke's text, too, contains a poetological procedure. While the America texts discussed previously, including Baudrillard's, gain their narrative strategy mostly from the dichotomy "Europe vs. USA," referring thus to a differential that simultaneously contains the structural model of the American signs they observe, Meinecke implodes the opposition. With the fall of the Wall, not only does a political line of demarcation between East and West become dubious, but the differential as a principle of identity formation likewise comes unhinged. What disappears from Meinecke's novel is the opposition of Europe and America. Consequently, however, Meinecke's America is a textual model that no longer wishes to actualize the differential of European and American signs; America is no longer spurious and artificial, Europe is no longer declared indirectly the site of authenticity, and the differential as a means of identity formation is disbanded. In Meinecke's more recent pop novels *Tomboy*, *Hellblau*, or *Musik*, the performative transgression of concepts of identity is still radicalized, and even here America remains a topos in which these strategies of signs are to be rehearsed and where the theoretical prerequisites of the poetics of the performative are formulated – for example, Judith Butler's criticism of the binary model in gender theories (that she, for her part, seeks to outbid with a performative gender concept) becomes the narrative model in *Tomboy*.²⁰

Michael Roes' *Haut des Südens*, here the final and most recent example of an America text, pursues a hybridization of its own kind. Its first-person narrator carries America texts with

him, but also Lichtenberg and other German texts. In local archives he researches further sources of national history. Even this narrator is first and foremost a reader. He travels to Hannibal, the city of Mark Twain, searches for neighborhoods in which blacks live, reconstructs the history of this and other cities – an ethnographic exploration of literary myths and motives (Roes 29). Ultimately he undertakes a journey on the Mississippi with a paddle steamer known from Mark Twain or even from Peter Handke's *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*. Precisely this comparison with Handke's novel may illustrate wherein the signifying practices of Roes and the novel of the 1970s differ. Handke's text, too, is full of citations,²¹ his first-person narrator likewise finds himself on a poetological journey and continually ascertains that in America one finds "nicht die üblichen Zeichensysteme" (Handke 70). The signal of the steamboat "Mark Twain" is a special example of this in Handke's novel, for its sound is no simple tone. Rather, the narrator has the impression that the smokestack resounds as a giant flute "an deren Mundloch man sich ein ganzes Volk vorstellen mußte"; "So gewaltig war das Signal, daß ich, während es dröhnte, auseinanderschreckend sekundenlang einen Traum von einem Amerika empfand, von dem man mir bis jetzt nur erzählt hatte. Es war der Augenblick einer routinierten Auferstehung" (121). Handke's narrator has yet another epiphany in which the utopian power of America continues to have an effect. The signal of the paddle steamer "Mark Twain" is a symbol with which Handke's narrator immediately associates the entire history of the Mississippi and its "Negersklaven," but the narrator also remarks that his sensitivity to symbols is entirely European. The American figures in Handke's depictions do not have epiphanies of this sort. Roes' narrator, however, traverses America differently. He has no sightings of symbols as he marches mostly on foot through the American cities of today. Scenes of contact with American culture are of primary importance, and this is demonstrated in the novel in a particularly literal

way; the narrator has a skin disease which becomes ever more irritated under the sun of the South. Pustules and blisters form first, then larger tumors. Not the epidermis, but the layer of skin below it, the dermis, is inflamed. At the end he begins to peel: “Schau, die Pusteln beginnen sich zu schälen. Darunter schimmert schon neue zarte Haut” (Roes 260). Skin is a *leitmotiv* of this novel, and as intimated, the narrator’s Mississippi travels are also a journey into the history of racial discrimination since Mark Twain, a history of a topography of the surface and its colorations. Melville’s *Moby Dick* gives him occasion to reflect upon the color white, and at the end of the novel he finds a black friend who accompanies him on his pilgrimage. This, too, is of interest; in the America texts of German literature, racial history plays little or no perceptible role. The ethnographic novel of Roes, however, takes up the play of color in racial history and undermines it immediately. At the end of the novel, the narrator will experience a kind of molting which still bears a poetological meaning; the novel strips off layers of text that it cites. Each chapter of the novel experiments with another poetic textual form. On the heels of the prose descriptions of Mark Twain’s city, Hannibal, and Hermann Melville’s city, St. Louis, follows a long poem notated in epic form about the Memphis of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a film scenario from William Faulkner’s Oxford, Mississippi, and a series of dialogues about New Orleans. Roes writes in prose, in verse, and in scenes, changes genre from chapter to chapter, while the individual chapter titles are taken from a dermatological lexicon: macule, papule, phyma, cicatrix, and atrophica. The moltings have a textual meaning; Roes’ novel is a poetological journey which, from a narratological standpoint, may operate awkwardly and may not always be successful. But his attempt to identify himself with these kinds of texts and then strip them away as so many layers of skin is nevertheless remarkable with regard to the discourse of America described here. Roes’ novel is about gaining back a narrative, about making America

into a corporeal experience. His narrator resists textual layers, urging instead a new present and immediacy; his novel is simultaneously a hybrid form of an America text. Thus, his attempts at adaptation are to be read as a counter-movement to those America texts I described initially, as attempts to permeate the textual layers of America in other, performative ways, as attempts to hybridize them. His travels do not seize upon metaphors or metonymies but rather engage themselves in a mimetic adaptation. While Franz Kafka describes America as a poetological concept in which the authenticity of the sign is permanently questioned, while he deals with displacements of meaning and signifiers which no longer refer to something real, Michael Roes seems to long for a more intimate experience of America. But in no way does the ethnographer Roes restore talk of a referent, of a real existing America. His experiences *in situ* cannot be separated from his readings, and even Roes' dense descriptions refer to a text which consists of descriptions, even the reality of his America is a textual reality. And so it remains: "Amerika gibt es überhaupt nicht."

¹ I wish to thank Daniel Bowles for his translation of this essay.

² See Vogt.

³ See Meinecke, *The Church of John F. Kennedy*.

⁴ It is noteworthy that numerous analyses of German America texts continue to choose the authenticity of the accounts as a criterion. The travel novel of Michael Roes, for example, was judged by the authenticity of its imagery: "A good travel book must preserve delicate balances: between the subjectivity of a learned eye and the objectivity of what there is to see; [. . .] The local research into Mark Twain delivers lexicon knowledge that is packed directly into the speech of the indigenous people – Roes did not have to go to such lengths for this" (Burkhard Müller 23).

⁵ Among the countless studies on images of America see Durzak, Schwaabe, Otto, Brenner, Rentschler, Erhart, and Leggewie. For Americanism vs. anti-Americanism see also Vogt and Stephan, Brueggemann, Osterle, Kriegleder, and Göktürk. The work cited here already betrays the fact that a great majority of these publications argue from a socio-historical perspective and in logic of representation, question the images and motives of America in German texts.

⁶ For an example of such a reading see Scherpe, 2005.

⁷ See Alexander Ritter.

⁸ See Weiss.

⁹ See Kriegleder 409.

¹⁰ On the shift in Sealsfield's perception of America from a promised land of agrarian culture to a capitalistic slave society see Kriegleder.

¹¹ See Henning Ritter.

¹² See Adorno/Horkheimer, 141: "The analysis given a hundred years ago by Tocqueville has in the interim become truth. Under the private cultural monopoly, in fact, 'tyranny releases the body and goes immediately after the soul [. . .]'"

¹³ See Henning Ritter, I. The reading in Tocqueville's account were understandably always ambivalent; his report on democracy and its ramifications was interpreted as a warning. See also Brenner 350.

¹⁴ Kafka emphasizes the vertical perception in many of his texts. On August 29th, 1913 he writes to Max Brod: "was oben und unten ist, weiß man in Babel gar nicht," thus associating the loss of the vertical hierarchy to a language crisis. See Kafka, *Briefe* 119.

¹⁵ "[. . .] der von oben gesehn sich als eine aus immer neuen Anfängen ineinandergestreute Mischung von verzerrten menschlichen Figuren und von Dächern der Fuhrwerke aller Art

darstellte, von der aus sich noch eine neue vervielfältigte wildere Mischung von Lärm, Staub und Gerüchen erhob, und alles dieses wurde erfaßt und durchdrungen von einem mächtigen Licht, das immer wieder von der Menge der Gegenstände zerstreut, fortgetragen und wieder eifrig herbeigebracht wurde und das dem betörten Auge so körperlich erschien, als werde über dieser Straße eine alles bedeckende Glasscheibe jeden Augenblick immer wieder mit aller Kraft zerschlagen.” (Kafka 55).

¹⁶ See Avital Ronell’s reading of Nietzsche, for whom America likewise stands for role play.

¹⁷ See Heimböckel.

¹⁸ See Scherpe. On Koeppen’s America as a literary text, see also Schuchalter.

¹⁹ On Meinecke, see Mazenauer.

²⁰ For another text for comparison, see Meißner. On Meinecke, see Dunker.

²¹ The narrator carries with him Gottfried Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich*, and a theater troupe performs Schiller’s *Don Carlos*. Raymond Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* are likewise mentioned. On this topic, see Fickert.

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