What happened on September 11, 2001, that date which has inscribed itself on the global imagination as “9/11,” the first calendared stigma of the twenty-first century? Although few dispute what Don DeLillo has called the “raw event” – the Real horror of the devastation that killed nearly 3,000 people – to date there is no consensus on the meaning of that event. Did it constitute a criminal act, or was it rather a declaration of war, as George W. Bush maintained in his first address to the nation after the attacks? Was the event an expression of a Huntingtonesque “clash of civilizations,” of religious fundamentalism, or the result of worldwide socioeconomic inequities? Was it predictable, already acted out in countless Hollywood movies, or was it something unimaginable, “A Failure of the Imagination,” as Thomas Friedman wrote in his op-ed piece for The New York Times? And did it have a precedent? Did it make sense to compare it with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or was it more closely related to another world-historical September 11, the 1973 CIA-backed coup in Chile that put Augusto Pinochet into power? Was it unprovoked, or was it a case of “chickens coming home to roost”? Should it even be described as an “event,” with its connotations of change and rupture, or was it rather a “spectacle,” a media event perfectly executed and endlessly repeated on television? Did it represent “The End of Our Holiday From History,” as George Will wrote in The Washington Post the next day? Was it perhaps a great work of art, as Karl Heinz Stockhausen claimed to public uproar? Or did it actually mark the end of postmodern irony, as Roger Rosenblatt insisted.\footnote{See Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” Time, September 24, 2001.}
And what should we even call the attacks, because “[w]hen you say ‘September 11’ you are already citing,” as Derrida said, and this citation implies a retributive logic of its own which, if nothing else, the use of scrap metal from the ruins of the World Trade Center to build a warship (the \textit{U.S.S. New York}) has made unquestionably clear \footnote{See “Ship Built With WTC Steel Comes to Namesake City,” The New York Times, November 2, 2009.}\?\footnote{See “Ship Built With WTC Steel Comes to Namesake City,” The New York Times, November 2, 2009.}

The questions that “9/11” raises are rife with contention and loaded with inflammatory political significance. But if there can be no agreement over the signification of the event, then at least we might agree that few events demonstrate so well – and in view of the recent culture wars in the U.S., so \textit{dramatically} – the yawning gap between what happens and how we make sense of it. With the attacks now exactly a decade behind us, it is becoming increasingly easier to detach ourselves from the drama of interpretation that it precipitated. Still, while the dramatic reading of the event by the Bush...
administration by now has been vehemently dissected and denounced, the field of American Studies has been slower to gauge its own reactions to both the “raw event” itself and the official interpretation of it. Perhaps the time has come now to ask what motivated and conditioned the predominant response to “9/11” in our own field of study, what assumptions this response was based on, and what it entailed. As interesting as it is to learn what critics have to say about “9/11,” we must also ask what “9/11” has to say about critics. The objective of this essay is therefore not to shed more light on “9/11” – flooded as it already is with critical light – but to raise questions about the Americanist interpretation of it, which in turn raises serious questions about what Amy Kaplan in her 2003 presidential address to the American Studies Association described as the “method of exposure” in American Studies (3).

I.

Before we can address this methodological question, however, we must first recall the dominant interpretation in the U.S. of what happened on the morning of September 11, 2001. In both the Bush administration and mainstream media, and subsequently also in the general public once the immediate shock had waned, the attacks were not just interpreted in the symbolic order of language and meaning, where all such events must be made sense of, but also dramatically intercepted in the mythological order of the nation. Even more than just a horrendous breach of national security, a vindictive wakeup call to a country that had been lulled to sleep by a false sense of insulation, the attacks were considered an assault on something as abstract as “freedom” itself. Now the world was no longer the same but one “where freedom itself is under attack,” as Bush ominously claimed in his response to the attacks.3 It was consequently not only those killed or wounded in the attacks and their relatives who were affected by them, but also the narrative (in which “freedom” is a keyword) that makes people “American,” the glue that makes the imagined community of the nation cohere, which had come under attack. “All of America was touched,” Bush asserted, expressing a feeling that was reinforced by the ensuing spate of flag-waving and chest-thumping patriotism. The meaning of the attacks was trumpeted loud and clear by the administration and in the media. It was shed of ambiguity and uncertainty in public discourse, where calls for national unity drowned out every other voice, and “moral clarity” became the new watchword. If the intoxicating force of national mythology had slumbered through the booming 1990s, stupefied by the collapse of the Cold War paradigm, it had now reawakened with a vengeance.

But of course there was no “natural” reason for any of this. Clarity always comes at the price of reality, in which nothing is pregiven, every meaning constructed and contested. The sense of crisis and emergency, and the need

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for decisive action to deal with it, was not a necessary or inevitable result of the attacks. Rather, as Frank Kermode writes in *The Sense of an Ending*, “[c]risis is a way of thinking about one’s moment, and not inherent in the moment itself” (101). The attacks could therefore have been interpreted in a number of different ways that need not have involved national mythology at all. In order to perceive the rush of real events as having a bearing on a nation’s sense of itself, one must look through the right mythopoetic lenses. The government might have chosen a number of other interpretations that would not have struck such a chord in the national register. Seen through different lenses, the attacks might have been regarded as but another disaster in the ongoing tragedy of life. Or they could have been viewed in the context of the violent upheavals that shake the world on a regular basis in an era of global capitalism and alienating social change. While a crisis might certainly be prompted by historical events, it is only through our interpretation of them that events acquire the significance of a crisis. It is not the historical events themselves that precipitate a crisis but our narrative understanding of them that does. For Kermode, a crisis is a way of endowing reality with meaning that is closely related to the apocalyptic fictions of the past, a form of closure and emplotment that humanizes the horrors of purely successive time, something “which helps us to make sense of and to move in the world” (37). As the etymological meaning of crisis (from the Greek *krinein*) suggests, the description of a situation as a crisis is tantamount to passing judgment on that situation, and a far cry from a disinterested observation. As such, other judgments could have been passed on the September 11 attacks, ones that might have questioned the premises of liberalism, cast doubt on the legitimacy of global capitalism, or, as Judith Butler suggested, bring about “a transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture” (*Precarious Life* 40). For this reason, we should not limit ourselves to ask what a crisis implies – in the case of “9/11,” a resurgent nationalism and transformed ideological landscape – but also question and scrutinize the very construction of something as a crisis, and in particular the interests that motivate this construction.

For the two principle actors involved in the September 11 attacks and their interpretation – the perpetrators and the Bush administration – the answer to this question is fairly obvious. The true aim of terrorism is not the civilians it targets but the symbolic order that legitimates a given state. This was presumably the reason why al Qaeda directed their attacks explicitly at the symbols of the U.S. economic, political, and military power, respectively. Indeed, if an act of terrorism fails to inflict a wound on the symbolic order, it will not even be considered terrorism. This is why terrorism relies exclusively on the government and media, which provide it with significance beyond the immediate destruction that it occasions. In this way, it can be distinguished both from crime, which usually has no bearing on the symbolic order, and from war, in which the target is military and the objective is to overcome force with force. The rationale for terrorism is precisely that the opposition sees no hope for changing the system by peaceful means, and is too weak
to change it by military ones. As a character in the Palestinian film *Paradise Now* says, echoing a conversation in Gillo Pontecorvo’s acclaimed *The Battle of Algiers*: “If we had airplanes, we wouldn’t need martyrs.” In other words, terrorism is not a demonstration of force but an expression of powerlessness. It compensates for its lack of force by turning its wrath on the ideological system of the state in the anticipation that the state in retaliation will reveal its true colors, the repressive force that ultimately maintains a given order. If the state takes the terrorist bait – as did the Bush administration, hook, line, and sinker, with its declaration of a so-called “war on terror” – the dramatic exhibition of the force of law that normally is cloaked by the symbolic order will eventually corrode the legitimacy of the state in the face of its citizens. This is the crisis that terrorism seeks to provoke: effectively, it aims to break up the matrimonial relationship between nation and state, the imagined and the real of a given order.

If the force upholding the law and order of the state was visible in the first place, and not obscured by the mythological significations that justify it, then terrorism would be pointless. It seeks to win over the spectators for whom it stages its violent spectacles by forcing the state to overreact and thus become visible behind its ideological cover. This is the game of hide and seek that terrorism plays with state power. However, beyond the obvious ethical concerns that terrorism raises, it is also strategically flawed. Violence alone is not capable of breaking up the symbolic order of the liberal capitalist state, as Antonio Gramsci knew well when he made the famous distinction between the cultural “war of position” and the material “war of maneuver,” where the former is a precondition for the success of the latter. Terrorism may negate a position, but it does not suggest a counterposition. The recourse to terrorism by definition means that one has relinquished the possibility of a “war of position” in favor of pure eschatological negation. As such, terrorism is not only literally self-destructive (in the case of suicide attacks), but also in the sense that it destroys its own chances for success in the hegemonic contest of positions that inevitably follow in the wake of negation. Consequently, in the symbolic void that ensues, the ideological field is bound to be resutured by those with enough political and economic power to do so. The rupture that a terrorist attack precipitates is thus more than likely to benefit the dominant class, which in the midst of ideological turmoil may seize the opportunity to ram through desired changes. Moreover, the “wound” that terrorism inflicts in the symbolic order further authorizes the state to make security its new legitimizing fantasy. Because this allows the state to reassert its force in the protection of its subjects, terrorism in effect precipitates a death match between itself and the state at the cost of the general public. Instead of an

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4 This was in fact the scenario that unfolded in the aftermath of “9/11” when neoconservatives around the New Citizenship Project, a Republican think tank, saw their chance to implement their *Project for the New American Century*. 
auspice of new times to come, terrorism ultimately signifies an endgame, a sign that the desire for social change has been replaced with the desire for mutual destruction.

But while terrorists may stage their attack in a way that optimizes its chances of being received in the symbolic order, its reception is finally beyond their control. Most have the resources to create a spectacle, but few have the resources needed to influence and direct its reception by the public. Perhaps only the state apparatus – and the corporate interests that increasingly manipulate it – has this power, to the degree that it is possible to disseminate and command a narrative in the first place. However, this makes little difference when the state (and those in the government who administer it) shares with terrorism the need to interpret events like the September 11 attacks in mythological terms. The mythological realm is where the state intercepts events in order to let them play out in the national imaginary instead of them having a direct impact on its institutions and activities. To view the attacks as directed against the principles of the state and not its actions means that those principles come up to revision and not the actions. In the case of the U.S., this meant defending the ideas of freedom and democracy instead of its worldwide military, political, and economic dominance. It is quite possible that a challenge to one’s principles may change one’s actions, but it is not necessarily so, nor is the change likely to take immediate effect. The nation-state thus always has a vested interest in shifting attention from the state to the nation. Indeed, if the Bush administration had not interpreted the attacks as a blow from the “enemies of freedom” – to use Bush’s convenient vocabulary again – it might well have been perceived as a blow from the “enemies of capitalism” or the “enemies of imperialism,” which of necessity would have sparked a completely different public debate, where the state may have been called upon to defend its interests in the Middle East or the disparity between rich and poor countries.

However, even as containing events within the boundaries of national mythology is crucial for the nation-state, the state also chooses to play the destructive game of terrorists because it cannot resist the temptation to assert its own force. The greater the perceived threat to a state is, the less it needs a mythological pretense to legitimize its use of force. What a state therefore loses in the realm of “right” from a terrorist attack it gains in the realm of “might.” Nothing illustrates this better than when journalist Ron Suskind reported an encounter with a senior Bush aide who told him: “‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.’” To create one’s own reality is the ultimate sovereign act, in which the gap between doing and done is closed. It suggests a quasi-ontological divine power that creates and

5 There is, of course, never an exact correspondence between what is said by one agent and what is heard, believed, experienced, or repeated by another. But if ideology is unable to work through a direct process of “interpellation” – as Louis Althusser is criticized for arguing – but instead is a question of how meaning is perpetually interpreted and negotiated, then one party is nevertheless bound to have the upper hand in this process of semantic negotiation.
controls, where questions of right and wrong are silenced by the supreme authority of state power. If the mythological order of the nation obscures the relationship between people and state, it also shields those people from the state’s full exertion of force, and as long as the state has to uphold its appearance of right, it needs to restrain its might. Since the force that the U.S. uses to secure its hegemonic position in the world is encumbered with the task of appearing legitimate (one of the upsides of liberalism), it is required to hold up the freedom torch with one hand even as it clobbers its enemies with the other. But when the September 11 attacks were perceived as a national security threat, the state had a unique opportunity to put the freedom torch aside and slacken the reins of its own ruling fantasies. In this way, the perceived threat brought about an emergency that greatly facilitated the creation of a new domestic and geopolitical “reality.”

II.

From the above discussion of what terrorists and the state each stood to gain from the construction of the September 11 attacks as a national crisis, we now turn to what stakes our own embattled discipline had in this interpretation. If there is a certain disconcerting irony in the knowledge that the liberal capitalist state and those who seek its destruction both had a strong interest in seeing the September 11 attacks as a rupture in the national order, one that struck at the heart of what Americans supposedly believe and value, the irony was not lessened by the fact that prominent Americanists too shared this interest. The reading of “9/11” in American Studies that the remainder and greater part of this essay will focus on is that demonstrated by the generation of “New Americanists,” who in the late 1980s usurped the myth-and-symbol paradigm in the field. Whereas the first Americanists in the Myth and Symbol School notoriously played a role in constructing a post-war mythology of national innocence and exceptionalism, New Americanists have spent much of their critical energy on tearing it down again. Although programmatically unprogrammatic, this group of scholars – whose methods and assumptions, it should be added, now dominate the field – has focused as much on national identity as its predecessors, only now with the valences reversed. Whereas the first Americanists searched for myths and symbols of national coherence, regardless of how misconceived or deceptive they considered them, New Americanists searched for fragmentation, for the cracks and fissures in the ideological edifice of the nation that would once

6 With the state’s force thus more visible, it is no wonder that notions like Michel Foucault’s conception of biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben’s resuscitation of Carl Schmitt’s idea of the “state of exception” have become academic buzzwords since “9/11.”

7 The disciplinary history of American Studies is complicated and rife with contention, as well as a perpetual source of metadiscourse. For a recent account and critique of the fundamental shift in American Studies from the Myth and Symbol School to the New Americanists, see Johannes Voelz’s Transcendental Resistance discussed later in this essay.
more make visible the antagonisms of race, gender, and class that the liberal Cold War consensus had swept under the carpet. Whereas earlier, the focus had been on national uniqueness, on how the U.S. was a historical aberration from the imperial and stratified societies of Europe, now the focus was on historical continuity with the empires of old, and especially on the *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, as a seminal 1993 volume of New Americanist criticism edited by Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan was titled. Neither the label “postnational,” which gained traction during the 1990s, culminating in a collection of essays suggestively called *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, nor the more recent “transnational turn” have managed to separate the focus in American Studies from its national namesake. As both of these concepts arose in reaction to the constraints and exclusions of the national fixation that dominated Cold War research in the field, they too are inherently tied up with the fate of the nation.⁸

Consequently, when the Bush administration interpreted the attacks on September 11 in mythological terms, New Americanists did not offer alternative readings but instead embraced such interpretations as a chance to deliver yet another blow to the Virgin Land Myth, which ever since Henry Nash Smith’s publication of *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* in 1950 had been a cornerstone in U.S. cultural understanding. Although a gross misrepresentation of the land – basically expressing the idea that the North American continent was uninhabited when Europeans reached its shores – the book nevertheless served as a ground for the belief in American Exceptionalism. However, as Donald Pease – the front-runner in the New Americanist charge against the myth-and-symbol model – argues in “The Global Homeland State: Bush’s Biopolitical Settlement,” the Virgin Land Myth was based on a historical sense of inviolability that made it unable to deal with the violation experienced during the September 11 attacks.⁹ Rather than criticizing the Bush administration for inserting the attacks into a mythological framework in the first place, thus precluding both local and global frameworks, Pease’s reading instead aimed to draw out the logical consequences of this interpretation. While Bush viewed the attacks as a “wound to our

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⁸ The label “postnational” became popular at a time when it began to seem plausible that the circumscribed space of the nation would be superseded in the near future by that of the global marketplace, as a range of economic, political, and technological developments were transferring power from the sovereign state onto an intangible network of global actors. As a concept, it was meant to performatively bring about what it named, a new era released from the clutches of nationalism. The idea of the “transnational,” on the other hand, is a result of the continuous search for positions that are not contained within the national one, as New Americanists consider such positions irredeemably tainted by national ideology. Winfried Fluck sums up this rationale in the following way: “Since power is so all-pervasive within the nation-state that it can easily interpel late individuals into subject positions, the only way left to evade this subjection is to go outside the nation-state” (2007: 25).

⁹ A slightly revised version of this article was later reprinted in Pease’s *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009).
country”\textsuperscript{10} that called for retaliation, Pease saw it as a deadly wound to the Virgin Land Myth, one which “precipitated a ‘reality’ that the national meta-narratives could neither comprehend nor master” (2).

This interpretation was consonant with how Richard Slotkin in the final volume of his revisionist trilogy of the American West conceived of a disruptive historical moment, where a “myth/ideological system” is faced with “historical contingencies” so severe or abrupt that they “produce a crisis that cannot be fully explained or controlled by invoking the received wisdom embodied in myth. At such moments of cognitive dissonance or ‘discontent,’ the identification of ideological principles with the narratives of myth may be disrupted and a more or less deliberate and systematic attempt may be made to analyze and revise the intellectual/moral content of the underlying ideology” (6). In \textit{The New American Exceptionalism}, Pease echoes this view of rupture and revision when he writes in his introduction that “traumatic events precipitate states of emergency that become the inaugural moments in a different symbolic order and take place on a scale that exceeds the grasp of the available representations from the national mythology” (5). Yet for Pease, the revisions that the traumatic shock on September 11 entailed did not attempt to reformulate a social compact between the state and its citizenry, as much as suspend that compact in what he variously refers to as “Bush’s Homeland Security State,” “Bush’s Biopolitical Settlement,” and “Bush’s State of Exception” (2009: 4, 173, 181).\textsuperscript{11} As troubling as a state of exception is, and as bleak as the Bush years were for American liberals, there was nevertheless cause for optimism on the Left. When the state unleashes the force of law without the law, as the Bush administration did at home and abroad, it cannot avoid the concomitant risk of demonstrating that the condition of law is nothing but force itself.

Accordingly, when the Bush administration was perceived to have made an exception to the liberal democratic rule that it promoted, it inadvertently called attention to the fact that this rule was predicated on the violent exception, and had been so from the first Indian genocides to the invasion of Iraq. Already in 1922, Carl Schmitt famously observed that “[t]he exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception” (15). It was this new visibility of the rule that provided encouragement to those critics who had sought to lift the veils of national ideology. In \textit{The Terror Dream}, Susan Faludi expresses this sense of optimism in her journalistic assessment of the political environment after “9/11.” Her otherwise bleak account ends on the following upbeat note: “We

\textsuperscript{10} “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People” delivered on September 20, 2001.

\textsuperscript{11} Pease accordingly sees the transformed national space as analogous to the “exceptional space that Justice Marshall had called a ‘domestic dependent nation’ in his 1831 ruling on the rights of the Cherokees,” where instead of “sharing sovereignty with the state, U.S. citizens were treated as denizens of a protectorate that the State of Exception defended rather than answered to” (\textit{The New American Exceptionalism} 169).
live at a moment of great possibility. By returning us to the original trauma that produced our national myth, the attacks on 9/11 present us with a historic watershed: faced with a replay of our formative experience, we have the opportunity to resolve the old story in a new way that honors the country and its citizens” (295-96). This was how the reading of the September 11 attacks as a national rupture could serve the New Americanist project, just as it served the aim of terrorism, although now with critique instead of violence as the means for disruption – of bringing about a new order, one no longer structured and constrained by a national frame of reference, but this time one that was postnational, transnational, or cosmopolitan.

In this spirit, Pease ends his essay on “9/11” with a vague suggestion of an “order to come,” where the people of the world will “play the part of articulating alternatives to the existing order” of the “Global Homeland” that has disenfranchised them (18). This new order will supposedly emerge once “the global state of emergency state is itself exposed as the cause of the traumas it purports to oppose” (18). In other words, when the ideological facade of the state is penetrated and the state is revealed for what it is – “the cause of the traumas it purports to oppose” – then we will see the emergence of a new democratic order. The rupture that “9/11” was presented a “watershed” for Faludi because it disclosed the violence from which the nation derived, thereby making it possible to redefine its founding premises. But if the rupture of “9/11” exposed the violence that the Virgin Land Myth disavowed, the task for Pease was now to expose the violence that the Global Homeland obscures and legitimates. The keyword in this logic of social change is visibility. The culture of imperialism in the U.S. works to sanction a reality that without the apologetics of this culture would of necessity be different. The September 11 attacks were a case in point because, according to Pease, they represented the uncanny return (to visibility) of the nation’s founding violence.12 There is a distinct messianic undertone to such arguments, a disruptive rationale of Benjaminian Jetztzeit and dialectical images, which Pease makes clear in The New American Exceptionalism when, for instance, he discusses the “revolutionary moment” of the Rodney King film as “images from an unacknowledged past [that] suddenly burst into the present as if rising from the wrongs suffered at the hands of dominant fantasy” (39). The violence of September 11 could then be seen as nothing but a dramatic manifestation of the abrupt and disruptive return of past injuries that revisionist historians like Slotkin and New Americanists like Pease had tried to produce all along.13

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12 As Pease claims, the September 11 “violation assumed the form of the forcible dislocation of a settled population,” which resembled “the violent removal of occupants from their site of residence,” and therefore “recalled the suppressed historical knowledge of the United States’ origins in the devastation of Native peoples’ homelands” (2003: 5).

13 Slotkin’s Regeneration Through Violence from 1973 was a landmark in revisionist histories of the U.S. that very effectively disclosed the violent realities of westward expansion that Smith’s Virgin Land had elided.
Yet if the new visibility of imperial violence was a cause for optimism, because it necessitated a revision of exceptionalist beliefs, it was also a cause for disconcertion. What did it mean that the visibility of empire was also embraced by the state (then controlled by neoconservatives), which now proudly displayed its imperial nature – in both “shock and awe” speech and action – instead of disguising it, and how could this disclosure so long desired by New Americanists possibly result in a “Global Homeland State” instead of the new democratic order that they had anticipated? As Amy Kaplan notes, this curious volte-face made her “wonder about the limits of my own approach, which we might call a method of exposure, one that reveals the repressed violence embedded in cultural productions or that recovers stories of violent oppression absent from prior master historical narratives” (3). In contrast to the first Americanists, who likewise criticized (if they also simultaneously constructed) national myths for obscuring the realities of modern capitalist society, New Americanists maintained that U.S. culture was permeated by imperialistic ideology, which consequently made the dominant New Critical approach to literature in the Myth and Symbol School untenable.

From what Lawrence Buell has called a “hermeneutics of empathy,” in which the critic discovered modes of resistance in the ambiguities and doubts that great writers expressed about their culture, New Americanists turned to a “hermeneutics of skepticism” that no longer considered the realm of culture as separate from that of power, but rather as part and parcel of a pervasive culture of imperialism, whose forms of complicity with the official ideology New Americanists strived to expose (35). But if the New Americanist objective was to make visible the realities of imperial power, what did the Bush administration’s embrace of this power tell us about this objective in the first place? And why did “exposure” not automatically entail a social revolution?

The answer is suggested by Winfried Fluck in his essay on “The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism,” in which he argues that the radicalism assumed by New Americanists (and in the humanities in the U.S. today in general) is by definition cultural, in contrast to earlier forms of political radicalism which, for instance, dominated the intellectual atmosphere of the Progressive Era or the 1960s student movements. This shift towards “cultural radicalism” was occasioned by “a redefinition of power as exerted not by agents or institutions of the state but by the system’s cunning ways of constituting ‘subjects’ or ascribing ‘identities’ through cultural forms,” where domination therefore was “no longer attributed to the level of political institutions and economic structures, but to culture” (55f.). While the myth-and-symbol critics had regarded culture as separate from politics, in New Americanist criticism it became the key battlefield, since this was where the insidious effects of power and domination were most radically felt, not just in social terms but in terms of subjectivity and the psyche itself. Although the final aim of New Americans presumably is political and social – although they rarely flesh this out – their immediate purpose is cultural, to “change the hegemonic self-representation of the United States’ culture,” as Pease defined it in “New Americanists: Re-
visionist Interventions into the Canon” (1990: 32). Because culture is politics and vice versa, radical cultural transformations are supposed to be tantamount to radical transformations in politics, and since a political revolution is impossible as long as the internalized structures of domination remain intact – what Fluck calls the “all-pervasive, underlying systemic element that constitutes the system’s power in an ‘invisible’ but highly effective way” – the objective must first and foremost be to expose and disrupt the dominant culture (1998: 56f).

In order to reach this goal, New Americanists have strived to replace what myth-and-symbol critic Leo Marx retrospectively has called the “doctrine of doubleness” that was at the heart of his school’s critical approach (2005: 130). This method allowed the first Americanists to appropriate mid-nineteenth century literature and set it against their own cultural environment as a critical continuum in American society. It favored the “ideal” over the “real,” which for Pease was precisely the problem with Lionel Trilling’s Liberal Imagination. Because Trilling disconnected the cultural and the political sphere, meaning that “an otherwise politically engaged liberal subject can experience the disconnection between what commits him and the place where commitment can be realized,” it was possible to experience a “surrogate fulfillment” of political ideals in the cultural realm while remaining passive in the political one (1990: 8). In contrast, New Americanists aimed to burst the autonomous bubble within which myth-and-symbol scholarship was understood to operate. According to Pease, “New Americanists separate their discipline from the liberal consensus” when their work “continues the struggles taking place outside the academy or realizes the connection between their disciplinary practices and oppositional political movements,” (1990: 19) However, with the theoretical refusal of the separation of spheres, where cultural struggle becomes equivalent to political struggle, in practice, this separation has ironically returned through the backdoor of the “cultural radicalism” of New Americanist scholarship.

While there can be no question about the interrelationship between culture and politics, many questions can be raised as to the nature of this relationship. Cultural radicalism is based on the assumption that interventions in culture are interventions in politics. But is this truly the case? Pierre Bourdieu describes the academic or public intellectual as a “demolisher of social illusions.” Yet this complement is more than balanced out when in the same breath he likens “the modern intellectual” to “the character of the fool,” who is allowed “transgression without consequences” (165). According to Bourdieu’s cultural sociology, the academic field can be seen to occupy “a dominated position in the dominant class” (164). That is to say, academics are critics of power and not producers of it, no matter how much we like to invoke Percy Shelley’s famous line that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (which happens to be the epigraph to The New American Exceptionalism). In this way, the influence of cultural producers on the social sphere is essentially circumscribed by the field of power without there being a direct correlation between the two. Breaks and ruptures in the one field are
therefore not necessarily breaks and ruptures in the other, but may in fact be subsumed and accommodated by the field of power, or even–more troubling yet–may be utilized for other purposes. If nothing else, the embrace of the cultural but not the political radicalism of the 1960s by the free market ideology of the past four decades has proved that it is possible to be culturally radical while at the same time supporting the political and economic status quo.\footnote{Walter Benn Michaels even takes the step further to assert that the identity politics that came out of the student movements actually works for the neoliberal agenda of breaking down the borders and limits of capital. See his controversial \textit{The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality} (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).}

Moreover, the shift away from the analysis of power as embedded in political institutions to pervading the culture itself also feeds into the market logic of perpetual differentiation that drives the field of academic production. As Fluck observes: “If power resides in hitherto unacknowledged aspects of language, discourse, or the symbolic order, then there is literally no limit to ever new and more radical discoveries of power effects” (1998: 56). Because scholarship, in order to legitimate itself, needs continuously to produce new research which reassesses what had come before, scholarship more often than not leaves popular discourse lagging far behind in scope and vision. It is therefore not difficult to discern a need for “distinction” at work in the transformative zest of the New Americanists. As Bourdieu states, the university is “a universe in which to exist is to differ.” Academics “must assert their difference […] by endeavoring to impose new modes of thought and expression, out of key with the prevailing modes of thought and with the doxa, and [are] therefore bound to disconcert the orthodox by their ‘obscurity’ and ‘pointlessness.’” New labels of self-identification such as “New Americanist” or “Transnational American Studies” can thus be read as “position-takings” that distinguish one emerging group of scholars from another that is already established (1993: 58).

This does not mean that the positions taken are not warranted or legitimate in their own right. Many of the revisions undertaken by New Americanists were certainly called for. It does however mean that the rupture demanded and supposedly performed by New Americanists has been more of a rupture within the academic field itself than within the field of power where social formations are made and broken. The problem is that the rhetorical assurance that a rupture in fact has occurred gives a sense of premature accomplishment, with the result that New Americanist research often responds more to its own theoretical achievements – and the latest academic turn – than to actual social reality, which continues to be plagued by the effects of globalization and imperial violence. As such, the sometimes overblown rhetoric of New Americanists often appears to lay claim to what speech act theory calls an illocutionary performative power, where the immediate effect of language is backed by the sovereign power of the state, when in fact the only speech that academics (in their “dominated-dominant”
position) have access to is perlocutionary, which may or may not entail any consequences over time, and rarely those consequences that were intended.\textsuperscript{15} As Butler writes in \textit{Excitable Speech}, “the one who is invested with legitimate power makes language act; the one who is not invested may recite the same formula, but produces no effect” (146). In this sense, the overstated performative power of New Americanists can be seen to enact its own “surrogate fulfillment,” now only in a radical imagination instead of a liberal one, where actual social change – transforming the power structures that generate social and economic inequality – is just as illusive as it was for the first Americanists.

III.

What lessons about the relationship between social change and cultural production does this allow us to draw? In \textit{Transcendental Resistance}, Johannes Voelz makes a point similar to the one I have made here about the limitations of the transformative power of New Americanist methods. He writes about the aim of changing the hegemonic culture that “both its potential and its dangers may be missed if all hope is placed in some form of radical resistance – what Gramsci calls a ‘definitive forward march’ – that promises greater gains than can be achieved from the back-and-forth of entrenched fighting” (49).\textsuperscript{16} Drawing on Fluck’s critique of New Americanists, Voelz blames this deceptive blitzkrieg method on how “critics of empire have rendered absolute the claim that culture is imperial, thereby constructing a view of culture as monolithic” (188). But as he demonstrates well in his reading of Emerson, this uncompromising approach ultimately misrepresents the nature of cultural criticism, which “necessarily involves a degree of complicity” (4). Without some form of affirmation there can be no negation. The tension between the two is the irresolvable inner struggle of art, which must be addressed lest we slip into false reductions of artworks as either purely conservative or purely radical. This is the idea behind “immanent critique,” which myth-and-symbol critics practiced (even if their critique often turned into celebra-

\textsuperscript{15} Referring to J. L. Austin’s speech act theory in which “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” speech acts were first distinguished from each other, Judith Butler writes that “the former are speech acts that, in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying; the latter are speech acts that produce certain effects as their consequence; by saying something, a certain effect follows” (\textit{Excitable Speech} 3). Although Butler upholds this distinction, she makes the important observation that speech in fact “is always in some ways out of our control” (15).

\textsuperscript{16} Pease explicitly puts the aim of New Americanists in Gramscian terms, for instance when he talks about the New Americanists’ construction of “an oppositional common sense to form a community of justice in their war of position with the post-cold war state” (2006: 80).
tion), and which Voelz defends against what he considers to be the “idealist totalization” that New Americanists have succumbed to in their “either-or” conception of culture and resistance (10, 3).

But while Voelz’s argument is an indictment of the late 1980s New Americanist turn, criticizing it for not living up to its own Gramscian terms, in one significant way it is also an indication of it: there is practically no mention of capitalism. This is partly due to his focus on “empire criticism,” and his purpose of compelling the field toward new ways “of conceptualizing the relationship between culture and imperialism,” including a comprehensive “retheorization of power” (Voelz 189, 203). Yet his categorical rejection of “totalization” – as based on the Foucauldian/Althusserian belief in the “all-pervasive scope of cultural power” – does not take account of the one domain where precisely such a conception of totality seems warranted, namely the ubiquitous system of capitalist production and consumption (3). While culture and ideology may not be a question of “either-or,” an economic system is. An economy cannot be capitalist and communist at the same time. Even the social-democratic Third Way is unarguably capitalist, because like all capitalist economies it ultimately relies, for better or worse, on profit and growth. Either an economy is based on growth or it is not, and even when important parts of it are autonomous from the profit motive, they will nevertheless be subordinated to the overarching goal of economic growth, without which, at some point, the capitalist system must eventually either collapse or cease to be capitalist.

Today it is neither culture nor ideology that is “all-pervasive” but capital. “Capital alone appears perpetual and absolute, increasingly unaccountable and primordial, the source of all commands, yet beyond the reach of the nomos,” Wendy Brown observes (64). “Capital creates the conditions (or their absence) for all sentient life while being fully accountable to no political sovereign” (64-65). This is not to totalize the culture of capitalism – which like any culture is a question of give and take – but to recognize that at the present moment in history the practice of capitalism is the only system there

17 Although Transcendental Resistance maintains the New Americanist critique of the myth-and-symbol generation’s backhanded nationalism, Voelz nevertheless tends to embrace the first Americanists’ method of distinguishing in the texts they canonized a productive dialectic between the “ideal” and the “real,” particularly in his key concept of “fractured idealism.” He writes of Emerson’s idealism that “while he called for the realization of the ideal, such realization could be no more than glimpsed; it remained a motivating impossibility, which in turn necessitated the continuing renewal of the call for realization” (181). This reading bears a strong resemblance to Leo Marx’s understanding of “complex pastoralism in which the ideal is inseparably yoked to its opposite” (1967: 318), and even suggests Richard Chase’s conception of the American romance-novel in his influential The American Novel and Its Tradition (1957). Indeed, there is perhaps nothing more crucial to the Myth and Symbol School’s national ideal than what Voelz describes as a “motivating impossibility,” which necessitates “the continuing renewal of the call for realization.” Was this not the whole point of the Virgin Land Myth, that the ideal could never be consummated and that fulfillment was always postponed to the indefinite future?
Neither the “cultural radicalism” in the humanities of the past four decades nor the rupture that “9/11” has been interpreted as has changed this fact. In this sense, the September 11 attacks did not indicate a break with a pervasive totality but actually expressed such a totality. It demonstrated that even if a transnational “outside” perspective on U.S. mythology is possible, there is no “outside” of the global capitalist economy, as even the “medievalism” that was ascribed to al Qaeda was no more than the simulated effect of a paradigmatic late capitalist network. Although the New Americanist use of the rhetoric of rupture is a performative strategy meant to produce a crisis, to bring about what it names, its effect on state and corporate power is at best marginal and indirect. At worst, this rhetoric functions as a distraction from questions of distribution and equality, or even, as Walter Benn Michaels claims, works hand in glove with neoliberal interests. Behind the constant ruptures and breaks in the mythological order of the nation, the power and structure of the liberal capitalist state appear to be unaffected. So what does a perceived rupture or crisis mean when the interconnected economic and geopolitical purpose and practice of the state is left intact? And, crucially, what does a new postnational, transnational, or cosmopolitan order mean if that order continues to be tied to the law and order of liberal capitalism?

Quoting the theologian Rudolf Bultmann, Kermode writes that “in every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awake it” (25). In terms of national mythology, this has always been the purpose of the New Americanist rhetoric of rupture. But like the terrorists of “9/11,” they have failed to see beyond the apocalypse. They have privileged the messianic moment over the drawn-out hegemonic struggle, where by far most of the work in the field of cultural production takes place. Art and criticism might suggest what moment to awaken, but since they have no direct impact on the field of power they cannot decide when to awaken it. Susan Sontag argued that the great artwork has the power to modify “our consciousness and sensibility, changing the composition, however slightly, of the humus that nourishes all specific ideas and sentiments” (300). This is surely no insignificant power to have, even if it fades in comparison with the lurid fireworks of revolution. However, to argue that artists and critics are not frontline revolutionaries, as Voelz does, is not grounds enough for completely dismissing the possibility of “resistance leading to the emergence of new orders that transcend the old limitations of the given” (202). It is only to say that the revolution, to paraphrase the late Gil Scott-Heron, will not first be published in journals of art and criticism. That social change through art and critique is not as dramatic as we would like does not mean that we can draw the same conclusion about social change through activism and politics, and thus categorically reject revolution in favor of reform. If revolutions do

18 Although Voelz’s book is a polemic against “totalization,” he is nevertheless guilty of one himself when he insists that “the way in which New Americanists have appropriated the idea of identity construction from Althusserian theory has led them to make implicit, normative claims that are themselves ultimately liberal” (107-8). If ideology is not “all-pervasive,” it would seem, according to Voelz, that liberalism is.
not begin at academic conferences we cannot therefore conclude that they do not begin at all – in fact, doing so is once more to confuse the fields of cultural production and political power. For art and criticism instead to totalize capitalism – through whatever aesthetic and critical means we have at our disposal – is not to naively believe that our academic work may rupture this totality at any given moment and replace it with a utopia of our fancy. But neither is it necessarily to accept the “limitations of the given,” especially when the very structures underlying and conditioning the given are considered unjust.

If nothing else, the decades of “cultural radicalism” in our field, which has come up with a multitude of ways for challenging what is perceived to be the totality of ideology, has shown how extremely productive a sense of totality can be. What would it mean today if we were to rethink this sense of totality in terms of capitalism itself – its premises, structures, and consequences – instead of its many-faced ideology? And would we be able to combine such a sense of totality with the awareness that in the arts and humanities, resistance always comes at the price of at least a minimum of complicity?
Works Cited


