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- 1 Heinz Ickstadt, *Aesthetic Innovation and the Democratic Principle* – Essays on Twentieth-Century American Poetry and Fiction. Edited by Susanne Rohr, Peter Schneck, Sabine Sielke.
- 2 Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016. Pp. 420. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6681-0

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Aesthetic Innovation and the Democratic Principle – Essays on Twentieth-Century American Poetry and Fiction compiles selected essays that renowned German American studies scholar Heinz Ickstadt published from 2003 onward. The volume is a tome of one of the most prominent and prolific figures of American literary studies and follows a previous edited volume, *Faces of Fiction* (2001), which had collected Ickstadt's earlier work. Both works showcase Ickstadt's wide-ranging scholarly interests; *Aesthetic Innovation* focuses primarily on novels and poetry from the Jacksonian period to postmodernity. Thoughtfully selected by editors Susanne Rohr, Peter Schneck, and Sabine Sielke, the newer essays explore the intermingling of tradition and innovation, whilst revisiting canonical texts of American literary history to pose questions of "the new" as democratic (and democratizing) principle. To briefly comment on structure, the editors organize the essays into four larger categories: After a theoretical conceptualization of pragmatist notions regarding aesthetic considerations of and communal experiences within and through innovation, the first section provides close readings of the works of William Dean Howells and Henry James; the book then turns to American modernism (architecture, poetry, fiction, with special attention to, among others, Hart Crane and the Stieglitz circle); contemporary American poetry and fiction (i.e., Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison,

Richard Powers); and lastly, the place of the aesthetic within the field of American studies.

Ickstadt's critical inquiry is embedded within a "loose conceptual frame" into which he places "different literary texts and their responses to the question of what literature can 'do' under the conceptual premises, but also the concrete historical conditions, of democracy" (13). To explore the dynamics between innovation and democracy, he heavily draws on John Dewey whose "aesthetic theory with its emphasis on process and open-endedness – of democracy and the work of art as unfinished and unfinishable projects" (8) Ickstadt finds to underscore the "pluralist as well as the communicative aspects of the aesthetic experience and the community-building function of the work of art" (11). Such communicative possibility and social function of art embedded within democracy emphasizes, according to Ickstadt, the *possibility* of reorganization, flexibility, and motion as structuring principles in American art and the American project per se. "The newness of the real is always already there but it has to be made visible and available through a remaking of the senses and a constant renewal of language. Even if the new cannot be considered as being exclusively American, the American real and the really American always connote the new" (77). Remarkably, flexibility, flux, and open-endedness are keywords associated with modernist writing and postmodernist playfulness, but Ickstadt demonstrates how such processes of innovation and democracy (and democracy as innovative force) have been resurfacing again and again in American literary history. It would have been very interesting to have a more pronounced investigation on the intermingling of economic factors and the arts. Ickstadt bypasses how the concept of the new has been turned into a predominant business practice in the twentieth century, as (mass-) production and consumption cycles have increasingly been based on planned obsolescence, replacement, and rapid overhauls. The new, it seems, inadvertently carries the old within it. Gesturing towards this Ickstadt writes that the new "frees the imagination from imposed conventions but also ties it to perception and everyday experience, as well as to its social and communicative functions; in short: to shared values of the 'ordinary' and the 'common'" (13). But it should be noted that the configuring of the new as not merely an aesthetizing practice but one of economic nature allows for contemporary visions and versions of the "new" to serve as a structuring principle of shared everyday experiences. Newness and innovation are rather to be understood as organizing principles to express the fluidity and re-organization of social life in late capitalism. The new of the twenty-first century might in fact unhinge the individual from a unified, collective experience (e.g., aesthetic, social) and rather replace such democratizing gestures with ruptures generated by second modernity in physical and imaginary spaces. Innovation as equally pleasurable *and* compulsive, as new *and* old, puts enormous pressure on the individual—notably, she is to dismiss "ordinary" and "common" experiences as trite and commonplace and is much rather invested in seeking out singular experiences in fashion, food, fun (see here Andreas Reckwitz's work on singularities). In this sense, we may recognize the re-conceptualization of ideas of the new and innovation within the innermost private spheres of life not only as democratic principle, as Ickstadt underlines, but one that renders socio-political life instable and in flux.

The work of art as unfinished and unfinishable project might be able to reroute notions of twenty-first century collective experiences as ones of strategic alliances and short-term bonds—which remain equally unfinishable and in flux. According to Ickstadt, "Dewey's aesthetic theory [is] connected to a substream of American writing that runs from

Whitman to the present” (13). Literature’s cultural function is, from this perspective, one of renewing and experience. We may wonder if it is no longer *art pour l’art*, but *innovation pour l’innovation*. What about American literature in the twenty-first century? One of Ickstadt’s essays on the “novel of manners” after ‘45 might help make gestures towards the manners of the novel today and what it “does.” Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014) can, for instance, offer points of resistance and conflation (see here Mitchum Huels’ *After Critique*); the novel reimagines a fictionalized version of Ben Lerner as Whitman-esque narrator who explores collective experiences in the never finished project that is New York. Recent academic interest in contemporary auto-fiction and the interest of fiction in theory unfold here, too. Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015) and Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* (2010) instantiate the ways how the “open, fluid, multiple (female) self is able to find voice and home in the very gaps and silences of the scattered text” (306). In innovative (but maybe not entirely new) forms, these contemporary novels examine the manner of the novel as one that enthusiastically flirts with transgression and compassion, making collective or individual experiences one of resisting and equally embracing the *new* as an ethos in political and cultural life.

As a minor note, to render Ickstadt’s intellectual vision in a more navigable fashion, the collection would have benefitted from the inclusion of an index to illustrate the entanglement of cultural, political, and literary figures from the nineteenth century onward. Similarly, the edited volume ends with three essays that confront challenges of literary criticism and what place the aesthetic holds in American Studies today. Verging into the twenty-first century (and thus rendering the title of the collection a bit misleading), Ickstadt also asks, to put it crudely, what the field of American studies can and should “do” in the twenty-first century. These essays, thought-provocative in themselves, read as a bit unhinged from the rest of the volume as addendum to the role and future of the field. But these are only minuscule issues and overall, the volume skillfully achieves what it seeks out to do: it pays tribute to the tremendous achievements of a life lived for the written word and poses timely questions, inviting new and invigorating perspectives on texts that one is quick to dismiss as dated.