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Further Down the Spiral – Elizabeth Kovach’s *Novel Ontologies* or the Critical Geopolitics of Being in Post-9/11 American Literature

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Abstract:

In her pioneering work *Novel Ontologies After 9/11. The Politics of Being in Contemporary Theory and U.S.-American Narrative Fiction*, Elizabeth Kovach brings together literary investigation and the ontological turn in philosophy by critically approaching post-9/11 political realities mirrored in narrative fiction. The analysis of six recent U.S.-American novels oscillates around precarity rhetoric, neoliberal expansion, and surveillance ontologies. Those real-life concerns are demonstrated through a complex interplay between the narrative devices and “ontological dispositions” (p. 37) of the studied novels in concise argument. In her analyses, Kovach compares the degrees of convergence between current ontologies and the literary representations of the “state of grave concern” (p. 184) instilled in characters following neoliberal ravages.

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Kovach, Elizabeth: *Novel Ontologies After 9/11. The Politics of Being in Contemporary Theory and U.S.-American Narrative Fiction*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2016. 281 pages, 26.50 EUR. ISBN: 978-3868216929.

Abstract:

In her pioneering work *Novel Ontologies After 9/11. The Politics of Being in Contemporary Theory and U.S.-American Narrative Fiction*, Elizabeth Kovach brings together literary investigation and the ontological turn in philosophy by critically approaching post-9/11 political realities mirrored in narrative fiction. The analysis of six recent U.S.-American novels oscillates around precarity rhetoric, neoliberal expansion, and surveillance ontologies. Those real-life concerns are demonstrated through a complex interplay between the narrative devices and “ontological dispositions” (p. 37) of the studied novels in concise argument. In her analyses, Kovach compares the degrees of convergence between current ontologies and the literary representations of the “state of grave concern” (p.184) instilled in characters following neoliberal ravages.

In her intricate literary analysis (which is her doctoral dissertation, published as the ninth volume of a series called *Cultures in America in Transition*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier) of recent U.S.-American narrative fiction, Elizabeth Kovach engages three contemporary philosophical currents: Post-structuralism, Post-Marxism, and Post-humanism. Among their representatives are Judith Butler, Alain Badiou, and Bruno Latour, whose works deal with a duplicity of ontological fragility and the destructive potential of the neoliberal *status quo*. Underlying the frail ontologies are a precariousness of being, a struggle for social antagonism, and risks underlying human involvement with non-human networks (surveillance systems, social media, etc.). In *Novel Ontologies* Elizabeth Kovach examines a sharp break with celebrating both absurdity and trauma in postmodern and 9/11 literary dealings, relative to post 9/11 aesthetic, political, and economic reality. In accordance with that break, Kovach proclaims

post-9/11 novels (originally termed so by Georgiana Banita) – a narrative product of the contemporary empire. By positing its distinctive narrative aesthetics (e.g. “the aesthetic of precariousness” (p. 56) in Paul Auster’s and Siri Hustvedt’s novels), the author pioneers in applying ontological frameworks to research in literary studies. These seemingly remote realms, Kovach convincingly argues, share common fundamental premises.

In terms of placing her research in literary theory, Elizabeth Kovach opts for narratological tools applied to the study of culture. By synthesizing the trouble with phenomenological and hermeneutic reading, the author gives a truly novel hint on how to critically approach literature; since linear modes of interpretation no longer apply, a research should rather choose “calibration, orientation, mapping – and spiralling” (p. 28). In other words, Kovach situates her work in a post-foundational perspective, according to which there is no *final* ground, rather a certain dynamic, or “contingency” (p. 11). However, such a mode of analysis inevitably raises the question of the reader’s role in the narrative act of spiralling the senses. In order to clarify the reader’s position, Kovach reaches out to Jacques Rancière’s concept of books that self-interpret, with a reader functioning as a sort of midwife to the interpretation that spirals down from within the narrative. The novels that self-interpret possess a quality identified by the author as “ontological dispositions” (p. 37), that is, they set forth representations that encourage ontological reflection (thinking about being, becoming). Serving as evidence are three extensive analytical parts consisting of readings of ontological dispositions in, among other novels, Siri Hustvedt’s *Sorrows of an American* (2008) Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) or Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010).

Furthermore, in order to justify the duplicity of inter/intra world organizations, Kovach draws on a number of philosophers associated with the ontological turn. Her original contribution of a *being versus beyond* opposition refocuses her work on Nelson Goodman’s ways of world-making, applied to literary studies by Giessen narratologists, Vera and Ansgar Nünning (the latter supervised a scientific project of *Novel Ontologies*). Hence, in addition to discussing and applying various concepts, such as Lukacs’s “transcendental homelessness” (p. 37), or Badiou’s “disjunctive synthesis” (via Deleuze/Guattari; Kovach 2016, p. 92), cultural narratology is *Novel Ontologies’* ultimate guideline, quite in coherence with the author’s scholarly affiliation.

Finally, *Novel Ontologies* are an expression of a profound spleen tormenting the U.S. literary and philosophical contemporary condition. Admittedly, Richard Rorty’s pragmatic optimism is not a valid philosophical horizon. On the other hand, as Elizabeth Kovach argues, neither is a postmodern appetite for distraction. The author contends that the postmodern lassitude and celebration of freedom have ultimately come to echo authoritarian “conservative hegemony” (today emitting a “divided populace”

alarm worldwide; both p. 61).

The overlaps between political critique and the study of narrative devices is thus the crux of the spiral metaphor. We are indeed in the double helix of the literary and the meta-literary – the political, the philosophical, and the emotional – malaise, examined via a novel analytical *modus operandi*: pursuing ontological tropes set out to transcend the reality/literariness divide. Although it does seem like a jumbled setting, thanks to the author’s mastery of the subject and her intellectual discipline, *Novel Ontologies* is hardly ever a puzzling read. Quite on the contrary – it is a deeply engaging work. While the abundant means of structuring create a feeling of being on a rollercoaster ride, each time a reader’s head starts to spin, Elizabeth Kovach pulls yet another concept out of her theoretical hat, and the “weird world rolls on” (Paul Auster; Kovach 2016, p. 64), further down the spiral of post 9/11 U.S.-American narrative fiction.

German Abstract:

Further Down the Spiral – Elizabeth Kovachs *Novel Ontologies* oder die kritische Geopolitik des Seins in der amerikanischen Literatur nach 9/11

In ihrer Pionierarbeit *Novel Ontologies After 9/11. The Politics of Being in Contemporary Theory and U.S.-American Narrative Fiction* bringt Elizabeth Kovach literarische Untersuchungen mit dem ontologischen *turn* in der Philosophie zusammen, indem sie kritisch untersucht, wie sich post-9/11 politische Realitäten in der Literatur widerspiegeln. Die Analyse von sechs aktuellen U.S.-amerikanischen Romanen bewegt sich zwischen Themengebieten einer Prekaritäts-Rhetorik, neoliberalen Wachstums und Überwachungs-Ontologien. Diese realen Sorgen werden anhand eines komplexen Zusammenspiels zwischen erzählerischen Mitteln und „ontological dispositions“ (S. 37) der Romane gelungen aufgezeigt. In ihren Analysen vergleicht Kovach die Konvergenzen zwischen derzeitigen Ontologien und der literarischen Darstellungen eines „state of grave concern“ (S. 184), der durch die neoliberalen Verwüstungen in den Charakter_innen verankert sei.

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