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**Book Review: Alexandra Kingston-Reese, *Contemporary Novelists and the Aesthetics of Twenty-First Century American Life* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2020). ISBN 9781609386757, 190 pp. \$80.00 (pbk)**

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What does it mean, as Ben Lerner asks in *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), to have a ‘profound experience of art’? (9). Lerner’s protagonist and doppelgänger, Adam Gordon, worries that he might be incapable of such an experience, and is deeply suspicious of those who claim that poetry, music, or paintings have ‘changed their life’ (9). Gordon elaborates upon his own sense of detachment: ‘I was interested in the disconnect between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf; the closest I’d come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity’ (9). The reality of these everyday encounters with artworks simultaneously strives towards and resists the possibility of ‘profundity’, as this experience is both informed and clouded by a critical language that obscures just as much as it elucidates. Lerner echoes this sentiment in the book-length essay *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016): ‘You’re moved to write a poem, you feel called upon to sing, because of that transcendent impulse. But as soon as you move from that impulse to the actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms’ (13).

Alexandra Kingston-Reese’s monograph, *Contemporary Novelists and the Aesthetics of Twenty-First Century American Life* (2020), is a compelling study that takes Lerner’s claims to task, tracing how contemporary novels ‘stage and critique aesthetic experience’, while also engaging with a ‘particular kind of ethics for the contemporary aesthetic subject’ (5). *Contemporary Novelists* illuminates the affective sense through which we experience ‘the aesthetic’ in our post-millennial present – the particular tempos and rhythms that insinuate the experiences of art into everyday life and vice-versa. Kingston-Reese considers how these experiences are mediated through a series of ‘art-novels’, which reflect upon ways of seeing, reading, and feeling.

Across five chapters, *Contemporary Novelists* explores how aesthetic experiences are ‘enriched by a paradoxical concern with the ineffability and inexpressibility of personal and communal losses or disasters’, and how these losses are amplified in works that draw on the ‘anxious tone of postmillennial artistic production’ (18). The chapters are thematically led, covering novels by Zadie Smith, Teju Cole, Siri Hustvedt, Chris Kraus, Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Rachel Kushner, and Ottessa Moshfegh. All but one of the novels analysed fit into the bracket of post-millennial production. Even Kraus’ *I Love Dick* (1997), originally published by Semiotext(e), has enjoyed a twenty-first century renaissance through a series of new editions, and it functions as a precursor to post-millennial fixations with autofiction and its political efficacy.

A fundamental claim of *Contemporary Novelists* posits that ‘recent self-reflexive American novels from the last ten years exhibit a mode of aesthetic sincerity that

is less about parody and more about ethical authenticity' (xiv). One aspect of this sincerity stems from a drive for 'authentic experiences', struggling against the 'prevailing culture of anxiety about the direction of aesthetic experience in an era of hypercommodification' (xiv). Yet these aesthetic experiences do not result in a rejection of political engagements – a charge often levied against autofiction. Instead, Kingston-Reese suggests that 'depicting aesthetic experiences works to comfort and console, even when working in the shadow of the fresh wounds of global violence, environmental disaster, and personal suffering that provoke disturbances, both subtle and overt, to the novels' aesthetic worlds' (21). While not labelling these authors part of a 'new sincerity' (a term often used to describe a cultural shift to a post-ironic paradigm), Kingston-Reese explores how the self-reflective mode of transcription in novels by Kraus and Heti, 'undertakes the project of writing against the image of life, negotiating failure, in order to build authentic artistic and affective form' (113).

For example, *Contemporary Novelists* explores how a novel like *I Love Dick* undercuts presumptions about female narrators and performativity. Kingston-Reese often supplements close readings by quoting interviews; Kraus comments upon the preconception that 'there's a hard shell around the male narrator and a soft, gelatinous membrane around a female narrator. People love to pick at and prod and pierce this membrane, but they respect the male narrator's shell' (2016, 131). Kraus elaborates by disparaging the naivety that assumes 'speaking in the first person necessarily connotes any kind of truth, sincerity' (2004, 103). Just as Lerner's absence of profundity contains a sense of profundity, so does this absence of sincerity connote a kind of authentic subversion, destabilising a social code that dictates 'If a man makes fun of himself, it's a joke. If a woman does, it's a pathology and she needs therapy' (Kraus quoted in Blair, 2016). As readers and critics of *I Love Dick*, Kingston-Reese explores how we are made to confront our own desires for autobiographical truthfulness, and the complicity contained in willing such narratives into being.

Although these novels are in the process of negotiating the present, with a focus on forms of mass media and modern communication technologies, Kingston-Reese makes clear that she is not trying to theorise 'the contemporary' through these works. Instead she argues for a criticism that considers 'very contemporary authors with an eye to future formal and experiential developments' (25). *Contemporary Novelists* suggests these developments emerge through reflexive close readings: 'where reading the contemporary novel is often an analeptic process, flashing back to fixed points in time, reflexive reading is proleptic, anticipatory, hoping to catch a glimpse of the future' (25).

A reading process grounded in a sense of futurity informs a kind of critical going *against*, resisting the temptations to solve and name the present, and instead gesturing towards, what Lerner calls in *10:04*, ‘a future that had never arrived’ (2014: 24). This approach resonates with Peter Boxall’s recent work, which analyses the ways that contemporary novels ‘think against the grain of their own contemporaneity’, whilst twenty-first century authors, ‘prise the present open, so that we might achieve some glimpse into the naked, unthought futurity that our blurred and darkening present contains within it’ (18). Even if the vagaries of this kind of critical vocabulary of ‘glimpsed futures’ may frustrate some readers, I find the echoes of possibility that they gesture towards – which are crucially combined with ethical engagements, historiographical reflections, and proleptic close readings – to be a capacious and pliant critical model for approaching contemporary literature.

Although ‘American Life’ is listed in Kingston-Reese’s title, the concept of the ‘everyday’ takes on greater significance. The latter draws on Rita Felski’s definition that ‘aesthetic experience need not be severed from everyday life’ (17), and that ‘it makes more sense to think of the everyday as a way of experiencing the world rather than a circumscribed set of activities within the world’ (31). This fluid conception of the quotidian allows close readings to implicitly draw upon it, without relying on rigid polemics. As Kingston-Reese notes: ‘By offering a capacious mode of aesthetic experience that encompasses a broad spectrum of negative feelings, the contemporary novel doesn’t attempt to reconcile the anxiety and banality of contemporary living’ (170).

*Contemporary Novelists* draws on other prominent affect theorists, such as Heather Love and her notion of ‘feeling backwards’, which engages with the emotive states of ‘shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia’ (146). Kingston-Reese grounds her analysis through a similar sense of antagonistic and negative feelings, tracing the contours of absences, silences, and transgressions. She argues that ‘by considering a range of fraught affective states today, this book theorizes *against* as the unifying structure of contemporary aesthetic experience’ (7). She elaborates on this mode of opposition:

As a mood that encompasses a push-pull across formal ambition, novel style, and affective experiences of art, *against* refers to the proximal sense of ‘to be against’—next to, to run up against—as well as opposition—between the literary and the real, intense and weak feelings, excitement and boredom. (7)

This kind of aesthetic opposition, however, runs in tandem with the sense of ethical sincerity that Kingston-Reese traces throughout these works of literature, which prevents them from descending into monotonous works of contrariness or ineffability. While navigating recent novels that are often seen to be the epitome of literary artifice – *I Love Dick*, *10:04*, *How Should a Person Be?* – Kingston-Reese argues that these introspective works ‘reinvest artistic purpose in democratizing the space of the novel’ (18). *Contemporary Novelists* emphasises how ‘moving from critical detachment to affective attachment, from suspicious to sympathetic—allows us to view works of art not as fixed coordinates of political importance but as shifting constellations of feeling now’ (171).

One of these shifting constellations of feeling emerges through these novels’ engagement with intermediality, such as the ‘photographic aesthetic’ in Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011). It is a novel that (unlike much of Cole’s other work) contains no photographs. Instead the prose draws on photographic technique through its stylistic and tonal variations, emphasising ‘a negative relation – what is beneath, hidden, what is realizable rather than realized’ (61). As Cole writes himself, ‘All photography is a record of a lost past’ (2012). In one regard, *Open City*’s slow pace resembles the measured walk through an art gallery, as our gaze shifts across a tableau of photographs. However, Kingston-Reese also emphasises the ethical stakes of Cole’s photographic aesthetic, as a rape accusation late in the novel tonally shifts our understanding of the narrative we have just navigated:

The spectral hold this [accusatory] scene has on the novel’s subject implies an imaginary and unarticulated narrative that overlays the one that exists in the literal pages of *Open City* and which implies an alternative aesthetic mode to invisibility. (74)

This, Kingston-Reese suggests, crafts a ‘form of negative aesthetics that unsettles the senses’, whereby the narrator Julius’ ‘ethical failures revitalize the reader’s experience of the prose; failure is aestheticized and the reader’s view of the novel is rendered anew’, albeit in a deeply troubling fashion (74). The character Moji confronts the rapist Julius by asking: ‘But will you say something now? Will you say something?’ (245). Cole has remarked upon Moji’s accusation that ‘it’s absolutely true. I can’t imagine Julius’s story without it. [...] I’m attracted, in art, to things that trouble the complacency of the viewer or reader’ (Interview with Liu, 2011). Kingston-Reese’s critical approach addresses the affectively disturbing nuances contained in such complacency.

*Contemporary Novelists* maintains this focus on authors' own thoughts about their creative method and composition. The critical vocabularies drawn from author interviews and works of non-fiction (a tricky subject in itself with these authors), are crucial to the analysis of aesthetic experience in these novels. These authorial insights 'negotiate the ethical considerations that travel in counterpoint to moments of sheer perceptual experience' (19). The focus on 'autocritique' allows Kingston-Reese to combine her interpretive methods with a deft appreciation of artistic motivations. However, she is also aware of the trappings of over-relying on authorial sensibilities, and the danger of taking writers at their word. *Contemporary Novelists* anchors its close readings through a 'double consciousness' that neither disregards nor fully defers to the authority of the writer, instead treating these reflective mediations as another aesthetic layer to unpeel. This dual-approach allows Kingston-Reese to make another crucial distinction, considering these works as 'speculative fiction coming into being', rather than the more insular and self-aggrandising genre of 'metafiction commenting on the structure of its own status' (24). Drawing on another of Felski's ideas, that of 'reading postcritically', Kingston-Reese suggests that 'reflective reading is not, therefore, an author-centric reading, but rather one that occupies a space between the text and the author's critical and artistic sensibilities' (26).

These commentaries proliferate as many of the authors double as critics, in a role epitomised by a writer like Zadie Smith. Smith's essay collection titles – *Changing My Mind*, *Feeling Free*, and *Intimations* – explicitly signpost a set of aesthetic concerns that can be traced throughout her novels. Writing in the preface to *Feel Free*, Smith states that her 'evidence—such as it is—is always intimate' (xi). Kingston-Reese sees this intimacy as a fundamental aspect of the critical-creative process. She notes, 'not only for Smith herself, but for the novelist-critic more widely, it is vital to make the intimacy of writing about personal aesthetic and embodied experiences of looking, viewing, reading, listening, a part of the everyday, ordinary, quotidian', concluding, 'rather than altogether sublime, such experiences are made accessible, democratic, and urgently necessary' (28).

The focus on (the English) Smith is justified by considering *On Beauty* (2005), a novel which dwells on American life, as Smith's work often has since she moved to New York. Kingston-Reese lingers on an innocuous scene where a university student called Katie richly contemplates Rembrandt's painting *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, and then his etching *Seated Nude*. Katie is ultimately indifferent to the heavy-handed

biblical imagery of the former but feels profoundly moved by the latter, which depicts a ‘misshapen woman, naked, with tubby little breasts and a huge distended belly’ (251). She is struck by ‘all the exterior, human information, not explicitly *in* the frame but implied by what we see here’, and touched by ‘the crenulated marks of absent stockings on her legs, the muscles in her arms suggestive of manual labour. That loose belly that has known many babies, that still fresh face that has lured men in the past and may yet lure more’ (251). Katie ‘can even see her own body contained in this body [...] this is what a woman is: unadorned, after children and work and age, and experience—*these are the marks of living*’ (251–252). Kingston-Reese, following the perspectival rhythms of this emotively charged scene, concludes that ‘*Seated Nude* makes Katie *feel*’ (47). Significantly, for Kingston-Reese’s central thesis, it is a feeling borne of exteriority, of absence giving way to an affective presence.

Yet unlike the neurotic self-consciousness of Lerner’s Adam Gordon, or *On Beauty*’s Howard Belsey, whose perspective is dulled by years of teaching the same old materials, Katie’s profound experience is not tempered by ‘the slow erosion of affective exhaustion caused by repeated encounters with art’ (44). However, as an undergraduate too nervous to articulate her feelings under the stuffy critical lights of the seminar room, Katie does embody *On Beauty*’s ‘uncertainty with the affective language of aesthetic judgment’ (44). Kingston-Reese proposes that Smith’s form of ekphrastic writing in *On Beauty* ‘invites us to break out of habit and see the art object anew’ (45). Under Smith’s own critical terms from her essay ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, this is lyrical realism that ‘retains the wound’ (79). As Kingston-Reese concludes, ‘Smith argues for literary style that reflects the authenticity of the self: avoid clichés, get rid of the baggage, and make it strange [...] as *On Beauty* and her criticism tell us, make it *feel*’ (52). One of the many qualities of *Contemporary Novelists*, is that its criticism manages to acutely capture the affective states of its subjects, such as this close reading from *On Beauty*, in ways that similarly and surprisingly also make us *feel* about the works that Kingston-Reese is analysing. This critical framework draws upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of ‘reparative reading’, which strives towards ‘the restoration of a dynamic aesthetic vision’ – something that the illuminating and multifaceted style of *Contemporary Novelists* also manages to achieve (49).

Kingston-Reese concludes her study by considering Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), as the novel’s protagonist stands too close to a painting at the Met:

The notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn't exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with stillness, trying to capture something—a thought, I guess—as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings—that time could be contained, held captive. I didn't know what was true. So I did not step back. Instead, I put my hand out. I touched the frame of the painting. And then I placed my whole palm on the dry, rumbling surface of the canvas, simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just things. (286–87)

Although ending on such a muted tautology might appear to deflate any profound experience of art, Kingston-Reese ultimately makes a convincing case for the democratising capabilities of these moments and novels, and how they can make aesthetic experience feel ordinary, in the most generous sense of the word. She advocates that we ignore the guard who yells at us to 'stand back!', and reassess 'what our own aesthetic experiences mean to us'. By considering the 'contemporary period's many aesthetic, formal, and political mutual exclusions' – the absences and silences – we can engage with 'this multioperational, multidirectional mode of *against*', of critical resistance 'that encompasses a multifaceted way of feeling that many of us have felt but haven't put into words yet' (171). In *Contemporary Novelists*, we gain more than a glimpse of what these words might feel like.

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## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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