

only seen as apes. Cooper reads the Tarzan of today as no longer colored by race, but by political, social, economic and cultural implications. "Postmodern Tarzan" is more a product of our time with a splintered identity and part of a new class of cosmopolitans. It is this new Tarzan who seeks re-entrance into today's African jungle, a re-entrance that can only be negotiated by women. Moving on to Boyd's *Brazzaville Beach*, Cooper sees new male bodies or mutants who have to cope with more adventuresome females. Here she senses a solution to the white man's need for "the mythical advanced sexuality of the black man, the potency of the savage man to bring him back to speed" (157). In general, her study of the Tarzan novels leads her to the conclusion that "it is difficult to produce fiction free from the history of colonialism and the Tarzan myths linked to it, twinned with the ape story of evolution and the gender story of kidnaps and rescues" (158).

Cooper's reading of sexual colonial politics adopts a specifically gay focus. Drawing from Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* and Patrick Roscoe's *The Lost Oasis*, Cooper reads the representation of Africa as a colonial territory where white gay men prowl for sex. These writers have moved from the closeted representation of gay sexual urges and expression in Conrad and Forster to yet another representation of these same urges through the use of camp, the popular sign language of gay men. It is in this regard that Hollinghurst and Roscoe bring into their fiction the authors' forbidden desire. Finally, Cooper delves into an investigation of "the intriguing and elusive links between African Landscapes and quests and between that land, gender and rhetoric" (229). Her analysis moves to gay sons who, after having searched and discovered their sexual identities, turn to a search for landscapes of comfort. Reading Adam Thorpe's *Pieces of Light*, Cooper critiques the hybridization of both landscape and mind represented in the inherent crisis of identity.

In summary, Cooper affirms that these white male writers, who share "a critical affinity with the project of dismantling the Master Text of the quest of the powerful, colonizing white man," can make the fictional journey to Africa without "replicating the shameful history of representation."

ATHANASIUS AKO AYUK, *University of Burundi*

**NEL, PHILIP. *The Avant-Garde and American Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002. 224 pp. \$45.00.**

In *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Lautréamont famously describes the young and soon-to-be-murdered Mervyn as one "as fair...as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella" (177). Surrealist André Breton recognized the sexual implications of this surreal metaphor, enjoying, as he suggests in *Communicating Vessels Les Vases communicants*, how the seemingly incongruous images evoke connections that tap into our unconscious mind, tease out associations and cognitive states otherwise suppressed or unavailable to us (52-53). Sexuality is not a primary concern of Philip Nel's *The Avant-Garde and American Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks*, yet Surrealism is, and the metaphor that so intrigued Breton and his Surrealist cohorts aptly characterizes Nel's book: a fortuitous medley of seemingly unrelated texts and authors that, when brought together, is arresting and evocative. In six chapters, Nel's engaging study treats artists as diverse as Chris Van Allsburg, Laurie Anderson, Djuna Barnes, Donald Barthelme, Leonard Cohen, Don DeLillo, Dr. Seuss, and Nathanael West, showing the interrelationships between the postmodern novel, popular music, children's literature, and the historical avant-garde.

*Studies in the Novel*, Volume 36, number 4 (Winter 2004).

*Small Incisive Shocks* reiterates the thesis that the shift from modernism to postmodernism was a messy one, occurring not at some decisive moment in history, but, rather, over the course of years. The book's major contribution is its extension of Andreas Huyssen's suggestion that the historical avant-garde is the tie that binds modernism and postmodernism, a tie that illuminates the political and cultural work performed by the curious assortment of artists Nel has assembled. Undoubtedly, Nel, who is currently completing a biography of Crockett Johnson, is at his best writing literary history. A remarkable stylist, Nel demonstrates through impressive research and good story-telling the historical avant-garde's far-reaching influence, encouraging us to reexamine contemporary texts and to revisit their avant-garde antecedents. Another major contribution is the progressive manner in which the study blurs the sometimes stark lines between Literature with a capital L and that of the children's variety. Nel unapologetically discusses Dr. Seuss and Chris Van Allsburg alongside canonical heavy-hitters like DeLillo and Barthelme. Nel makes clear that children's texts often emerge from the same radical roots as texts by canonized adult authors, detailing with great acumen the complexities of seemingly simple works like *The Cat in the Hat* and *Just a Dream*.

The ambiguity inherent in the surreal image and how this ambiguity can be used to highlight and criticize the contradictions of everyday life provide the central focuses of the book, whose introduction clearly describes Surrealism's entrance into American culture in the 1930s. Nel argues that the peculiar juxtapositions common to Surreal texts struck a chord in Depression-era Americans, as they "became increasingly aware of the cleft between official reality and their experience of reality" (xiii). Nel acknowledges that part of Surrealism's attraction lay in its "exotic European decadence" (xiv), but a subtler reason is found in its tendency to reify the contradictions of daily life, contradictions similarly exposed in the photographs of Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke-White, notably *The Louisville Flood*, which depicts, as Nel writes, "African Americans in a breadline beneath a billboard that shouts 'THE WORLD'S HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING'" (4). America was ready for Surrealism.

Each chapter centers on one or two artists, exploring how they employ the tropes of the historical avant-garde in their work. This organizational strategy can become a little repetitive, for, in essence, the same thesis is applied to each of the various authors we encounter. Chapter One links Barnes and West historically and formally to the French Surrealist movement, illustrating with select readings from *Day of the Locust* and *Nightwood* their use of Surrealist techniques, tropes, and image. The chapter's main thrust, however, is that the work of Barnes and West problematize the "worn out binaries of the modern-postmodern discussion," for, as Nel argues, their work fits the "conventional definitions of postmodernism" while "us[ing] surreal techniques in support of a materialist critique" (40).

The second and best chapter explores Seuss's avant-garde roots. Lamenting the "posthumous hypercommercialization of Dr. Seuss," Nel argues that Seuss's oeuvre embodies "an oppositional postmodernism," and, in so doing, Nel reiterates a primary thesis of the book: "It is the radical politics of the avant-garde, suppressed in definitions of high modernism, to which postmodernists return in order to counteract the effects of affirmative culture" (69). Dr. Seuss is a uniquely appropriate illustration of this thesis, as his work straddles the modern/postmodern divide. Of course, one can debate just how ambiguous the end of *The Cat in the Hat* ultimately is (as a child, I read the question closing the book as rhetorical: "What would you do / If your mother asked YOU?"), but, as in the case of Barnes and West, Seuss's debt to the historical avant-garde is unquestionable, even to the coincidental creation of the image of Horton sitting atop an egg. Nel quotes Seuss: "[A] sketch of an elephant ... happened to fall on top of a sketch of a tree.... An elephant in a tree! What's he doing here?" (47). Adoring, as he

did, coincidence, André Breton would have certainly approved of this method of textual generation.

The remaining chapters continue this pattern, carefully limning the avant-garde foundations of Barthelme, DeLillo, Van Allsburg, and finally Anderson and Cohen. Because of its compare and contrast structure (and wonderful subject), the Anderson and Cohen chapter provides a refreshing finish to the book. The cultural studies model Nel employs makes for an engaging read, his gaze turning from novels, to comics, to children's literature, to film, to popular music, to culture at large.

One might argue that Nel is too free with his use of *surrealist*. In *The Rise of Surrealism* (2002), Willard Bohn makes the convincing case that we use the term too loosely. Collage itself is not enough to warrant the label, nor is arresting imagistic juxtaposition, two traits Nel discusses throughout the book. What is crucial, Bohn argues, is "a concealed analogic link" (150) between an image's primary terms (sewing machine and woman; umbrella and man; operating table and bed). Ambiguity, a central focus of Nel's book, was less important to the Surrealists than analogic and symbolic correspondences, one of the reasons they so admired Rimbaud and Baudelaire. However, such definitional quibbling undermines the importance of Nel's book. Though one might disagree with his free use of the appellation *Surrealist*, his impressive biographical and historical research traces the undeniable influence the historic avant-garde has had on the various writers he treats. These writers may not employ surrealist images in the technical sense, but the examination of their works through lenses provided by the historical avant-garde clearly illuminates the texts at hand and deftly refutes Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodern literature as ahistorical and politically impotent.

This refutation is a major theme of *Small Incisive Shocks*. However, just as Walter Benjamin was famously ambivalent regarding the loss of the aura, Nel seems ambivalent regarding the absence of direct social critique in the works he discusses, especially in regard to DeLillo and Barthelme. After a compelling reading of the Rockettes passage in *Underworld*, Nel writes, "What this passage suggests is that DeLillo's novel can offer—at best—sneak attacks on the dominant culture,' a 'small incisive shock,' if not a sustained (and possibly dogmatic) critique" (101). Noting the scene's montage-like elements, Nel makes clear his ambivalence: "Though the ambiguity of the montage technique may produce imperfect results, DeLillo keeps returning to the ambiguous legacy of the avant-garde as a way of imagining a resistance to the forces in which his characters find themselves enmeshed" (102). It is the "imperfect" of this sentence that I find troubling, for it suggests that a "perfect" result would be an unambiguous critique, one that would certainly be "sustained" as well as "possibly dogmatic." Nel's thesis throughout is that these "small incisive shocks" are productive, open, and multivalent; that they are historicized and contingent critiques that provide the occasion for more questions than answers, provoke rather than reassure, forbid our "pinning down the author's subject position" and thus "suggest radical ideas indirectly" (86). Yet Nel, perhaps rightly, seems hesitant to fully endorse these strategies, for, as he writes of Barthelme, "[his] investment in surreal forms has conflicting effects, both aestheticizing politics by distancing the text from the world and politicizing aesthetics by posing a challenge to the reader" (83).

It is appropriate that Nel seems conflicted between ambiguous and unambiguous political critique, for, as David Harvey writes in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, "The exploration of contradictions always lies at the heart of original thought" (345). Nel's book itself is such an exploration, one that urges us to consider merits of both direct, clear, and straightforward ideological critiques and the more ambiguous critiques that offer fewer answers while providing more questions.

Copyright of Studies in the Novel is the property of University of North Texas and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.