

## 2018 AFEA CONFERENCE

### Magnifying America : the poetics and politics of details

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In *Paterson*, Jim Jarmusch's latest opus, poetry springs from the contemplation of a box of matches, in close up, bearing a logo in the shape of a megaphone. William Carlos Williams, who inspired the film, made a red wheelbarrow the receptacle of some general order of things – unless it be language, depending on how you read the tiny operator, « much », that opens the first line. Walt Whitman wrote his American epic leaf after leaf, in a collection that expanded with each new edition much like the calamus which provided it with the title of one of its sections. It is as though in the vast territory of a nation gradually stretching from ocean to ocean, the tiniest of details provided some form of salutary anchorage, a point of reference against emptiness as much as excess, for the singular to locate itself. « To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee / One clover, and a bee, And revery », Emily Dickinson writes, phrasing in her own, much more constricted way, the question of the relation between the minuscule and the infinite. The patient piecing together involved in patchwork is another illustration of the same, in an art that narrates the intimate one needlepoint at a time -- a marginal, folksy artform, it would seem, which however claimed political and national significance when in 1987 the « Aids Memorial Quilt » was unfolded on the Washington Mall, or when a gigantic patchwork bearing the names of the victims was hung in the National 9/11 Memorial in New York. Such a dialectics of the tiny vs the gigantic, the singular vs the multiple, the detail vs the whole picture, seems to animate a large portion of American creation and reflection, from the letter delicately embroidered on Hester Prynne's bosom to Stan Brakhage and Leighton Pierce's experiments in film, by way of Georgia O'Keeffe's gigantic close-ups, or the wire which David Simon uses as a central metaphor to unravel his political allegory of American contemporary society in his eponymous show.

The American flag captures and symbolizes just such a tension: one star for each of the states, one stripe for each of the 13 original colonies. What it represents is a political economy of the singular within the whole, seeking a balance that will not have the many overbear the few. Even though it may mean that in the last presidential elections the winner came about 3 million votes short of his unlucky opponent, and that the vote of a county may prove more decisive than that of a whole state. Tensions between the local and the national, in politics as in other fields, characterize the history of the United States, with the spirit of the place constantly balancing the national picture. Can it be any wonder, then, that in such a context the United States devised an ethnography of the everyday, beginning with W.E. B. Du Bois' pioneer work on the sociological cartography of a Philadelphia black neighborhood? Major works like those of Howard Becker or Erving Goffman showed how sociology could analyze human relations by looking at apparently insignificant details of everyday life with great theoretical impact. In the early days of the twentieth century, sociologists from the University of Chicago with Robert E. Park saw social sciences as the continuation of investigative journalism, making observation central for the analyst who had to go out in the field and gather what details made sense for Americans new and old, whose life cycles needed to be traced and deciphered.

Similarly, in the last 50 years, bottom up methodologies radically modified how history was written in the United States, moving away from the *grand narrative* in favor of an attention redirected towards singular lives. So much so that some, with Thomas Bender, worried that synthesis may no longer be possible, regretting that historians driven towards some form of hyperspecialisation had lost themselves in details and could no longer embrace the American society as a whole. The recent interest in reflections on Americanism (Kazin and McCartin), assimilation (Alba and Nee) and exceptionalism (Bell, Tyrell or Shafer), shows that the attention placed in the making of *mainstream* America is not incompatible with considering the « small differences that matter », to paraphrase a study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research on job markets in Canada and the United States.

Attention to detail brings back to *the big picture* then. It also draws attention to what the *big picture* tended to leave aside, and which both history and culture would rather ignore still. One may think of Ida B. Wells,

a woman, and an African American, who painstakingly compiled in 1892 a detailed list of what lynchings had taken place in the South, drawing by the addition of isolated events the scathing portrait of a horrifying world and culture. And what of all the invisible black men and women of American cinema, reduced to positions of servile entertainment as exoticized tokens in a culture which James Baldwin showed, in Raoul Peck's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, still fails to build itself outside of a white, male, heterosexual gaze? It also begs the question of all the others identities which the documentary leaves unaddressed, forgotten « details » whose cultural and political status remains marginalized, outsiders to the spectrum of gender or sexual normativity. Thus, looking at details in American culture should serve as an entry point to much larger questions animating American historical and cultural debates, a way to investigate issues of focus and scale without restrictions or boundaries.

From an epistemological perspective, addressing the notion of detail involves probing the relationship it entertains with knowledge: doesn't detailing a work of art entail tearing it apart before recomposing it as a whole so as to attain an ideal knowledge in a way reminiscent of "tacit positivism" (G. Didi-Huberman)? A more phenomenological approach will emphasize the notion of scale and envisage the link between close and distant vision in terms of disjunction. A number of writers have discussed their conception of detail, alternately viewing it as object of *jouissance* (Nabokov), as the locus of truth (Auster) or as a way to suspend one's fall (Chuck Palahniuk). In the field of contemporary studies, one might focus on the resurgence of maximalism with its overuse of details, which undermines the hermeneutic urge by revealing the pathetic quality of the reader's expectations. Similarly, the naturalistic fantasy of exhaustion of such prolific writers as David Foster Wallace or Nicholson Baker may entail further explorations on those American writers who, in this "post" era, are forever trying to test our vigilance, our tenacity and our capacity to deal with an increasing amount of information to the point of challenging the position of the reader's desire in texts which favor the display of details on the surface.

Paying attention to detail thus involves examining the tension between the singular and the multiple, the minute and the huge – a specifically American tension, it would seem, or so we would like the symposium to consider. This theme will allow for a great variety of approaches – semiotic, symbolic, literary, cinematographic, pictorial, musical, political, historical or sociological, through the varied disciplines that take American society and culture as their object, and such like – opening many perspectives for the symposium.