

Caduff · Reulecke · Vedder (Hrsg.)

PASSIONEN



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# PASSIONEN

Objekte – Schauplätze – Denkstile

Wilhelm Fink

Umschlagabbildung:  
Blaue Passionsblume („Passiflora caerulea“), Blüte von oben  
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„Die Blätter schwefelgelb und violett, / Doch wilder Liebreiz in der Blume waltet. /  
Das Volk nennt sie die Blume der Passion.“ (Heinrich Heine)

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SAMUEL WEBER

## Bild und Leidenschaft

I would like to begin with a reminiscence. I was born and raised in New York City, at a time when television had not yet appeared on the everyday scene – i.e. in the 40s and early 50s. In some respects I don't care to think much about that time, since it dates me more than I would like. But I am also grateful to have experienced that period and only with the passing of time have I come to realize how important it was to have been grown up in a world before the advent of television as the dominant domestic medium. In short, my childhood was spent during those *Radio Days* that Woody Allen has immortalized in his film, and like his film, I experienced those days in a domestic setting. But for me they were not so much *Radio Days* as *Radio Nights*, since they tended to begin in the evening and last late into the night. They brought me my first experience of what at the time were called „serials“, where I encountered for the first time in the broadcast media the relationship between narrative, repetition and seriality, usually in the form of recurring figures such as „The Lone Ranger“ and his faithful ‚sidekick‘ „Tonto“. These after-dinner „serials“ – often sponsored by breakfast „cereals“ – were not quite the same as the „soap operas“ broadcast in the afternoon.

The latter dealt with the domestic problems of everyday life: marriage, love, heartache etc. These were directed to a primarily feminine audience, women who worked at home and who at the time were called „housewives“ as though they were married to their „houses“ rather than to their husbands, which may after all have been a more accurate description of their situation. But many of these „housewives“ had known a different fate during the Second World War, when they worked in factories and offices to replace the men who were fighting and dying abroad. After the war, however, with the return of their husbands, many of them were sent back home where they reassumed their traditional role of caring for the household, surely not without a certain melancholy. It was to this Emma-Bovary-type melancholy that the afternoon radio „soaps“ appealed with figures such as „Stella Dallas“, a radio adaptation of the 1937 film of King Vidor, starring Barbara Stanwick, about a working-class „girl from the midwest“ who married out of her social class, was subsequently divorced and then sought to fulfill her dreams through her daughter, Laurel.

But the world of the heroes that populated the after-dinner radio „serials“, as opposed to the „soaps“, was quite different. It was anything but everyday and domestic, and already anticipated what Hollywood, by virtue of the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the late 40s and early 50s was at the same time in the process of becoming: a factory for the production of a manichean worldview via films recounting the struggle and triumph of what today is known as the ‚good guys‘ over the ‚bad guys‘. This struggle between the forces of Good and Evil – significantly always

personified in individuals (hence the designation ‚guys‘) – took place in various settings: the Wild West of the „Lone Ranger“, the modern City of „Superman“ and „Batman and Robin“ (but also of „Wonder Woman“ just to give girls something to identify with) – all of whom in turn personified the self-consciousness of a country, the United States, that had recently led the triumph over the forces of Evil, again personified in the Axis powers, and that above all considered itself invulnerable, for never having lost a war. (It was only many years later that I learned that the Japanese shared exactly the same attitude prior to 1945.)

But the experience of growing up with such radio serials was premonitory not just in terms of the content – that of heroic individuals saving the world through their acts – but also through certain formal tensions that were specific to the medium itself. One of the most memorable serials was entitled „The Shadow“, a figure who fought criminals and invariably brought them to justice. Each program in this series began with the following announcement: „Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!“ Two points are interesting about this mantra. First, the notion that deep down, in the „hearts of men“ there lurks an evil so well hidden that it is difficult to discern, much less to combat. Second, the power that allowed „The Shadow“ to successfully triumph over such lurking evil: the power, namely, to become invisible and thereby to see without being seen. The situation of „The Shadow“ in retrospect seems to me to sum up the situation of the radio image as I experienced it in those years: it allowed one to see not just without being seen, but also without seeing. On the one hand, since these radio plays revolved around individual figures, they conformed to a sense of reality as consisting above all of a world of individuals. On the other hand, as „The Shadow“ knew, the hearts of those individuals concealed more than their figures revealed. And it was radio that allowed its listeners the sense of being able to see into those hearts, together with „The Shadow“, and thus possibly to overcome the threats they might contain. Like „The Shadow“, the radio listener had the power of seeing what never appeared but was only conveyed by sounds, while at the same time experiencing the power that such sound-images could produce and which often exceeded in its emotional intensity the visual images that appeared in the light of day.

Although most of the radio serials I listened to as a child were organized around the adventures of heroes acting as individuals, there was a second type of radio serial that was not organized in that way, but rather around a genre, such as the then very popular one of „science fiction“. These programs tended to be aired once a week, instead of two or three times, as with the individual-hero-based serials. And precisely because of the absence of a single organizing figure, such programs often could reveal structures that were taken for granted or obscured by the more individualistic serials. One such radio program was called „Dimension X“, which adapted well-known „science fiction“ stories so that they could be told within the space of 30 minutes. Some of my most vivid memories from this period come from this program, which I listened to regularly at night, with only the small glimmer of light shining from a wooden radio into the darkness of the room. The story I recall most clearly was a dramatization of Robert Heinlein’s *The Green Hills of Earth*. In this story, Heinlein, who

was a well-known science fiction writer of this period, recounts the space travels of „Noisy Rhysling“, a song-writing engineer who had been blinded by radiation, a kind of American cross between the blind Greek oracle, Tiresias, and Odysseus dreaming of his return home, as the following refrain from probably his most famous song suggests: „We pray for one last landing / On the globe that gave us birth; / Let us rest our eyes on the fleecy skies / And the cool, green hills of Earth“.<sup>1</sup>

The story recounts a landing on a distant planet that resembles exactly the childhood world of the space travelers: it is vaguely reminiscent of the „Sirens“ episode in the *Odyssey*. The travelers are delighted to meet again the long-gone figures of their childhood, except that these figures turn out to be evil aliens intent on preventing those travelers from ever returning home to those „cool green hills of Earth“. What I remember most, however – and this is the reason I am telling this story here at all – is a small but significant detail in this story: the only indication that anything might not be quite right with these familiar figures, who resemble exactly the friends and relatives of childhood, is a greenish hue that they give off; it is this greenish color that will prevent many of the travelers from ever returning to „the green hills of earth“, thus suggesting that the reversal of time in space can only have a lethal outcome.

Why do I go into such detail here? Because this experience, listening to the radio version of „The Green Hills of Earth“ was the first form in which I encountered a problem that in the following years continued to haunt much of the work I have done ever since. This problem has a double aspect, since it involves both ‚the visibility of the invisible‘ and, inseparably linked to it, that of the ‚invisibility of the visible‘. Far from excluding each other, as opposites are commonly expected to do, ‚visibility‘ and ‚invisibility‘ seem here to be inextricably linked, although not simply the same. The prominence, in the story, of repetition and recurrence, indeed of doubling, suggests that another term should be introduced to describe this curious relationship of non-exclusive opposition, that of ‚divisibility‘. Visibility divides itself into what is visible and what is invisible. And given the fact that this is also a question of life and death, of living and dying, the process of divisibility can be said to produce not just appearances, but *apparitions* (which in English, unlike its ‚false friend‘ in French, signifies ‚ghosts‘ and not just appearances). Listening to the radio in that darkened bedroom, I think what I experienced was something like the apparition of such divisibility, by which the invisible seemed to become visible, but only by making the visible invisible.

Much later I learned that this was a phenomenon – if one can call it that – quite familiar to philosophers and aestheticians who generally tried to interpret it with the use of words such as „fantasy“ and „imagination“: what Kant, for example, in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* calls „productive“ as distinct from „reproductive imagination“, which does not merely reproduce what one sees but which produces representations of things that were never seen (and perhaps could never be seen). But I

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1 Robert A. Heinlein: „The Green Hills of Earth“, in: Id.: *The Green Hills of Earth*, New York 1951, p. 125-134, here p. 134.

never felt that such concepts were capable of accounting for the strange capacity of those invisible ‚images‘ to produce feelings whose intensity seemed in direct proportion to their indistinct and relatively indeterminate – non-objective – quality.

When several years later television began to appear in the homes of a few friends, and groups congregated around miniscule screens to view many of the same „serials“ that I had listened to on the radio, the shock of the TV image was strong enough to make me give up listening, much less viewing, such programs altogether. Upon seeing the TV image of the „masked rider“, aka „The Lone Ranger“, truly visible with his mask, his white horse and his „Tonto“, I remember being seized by a sensation of disgust at the *heaviness* of the images, whose *movements* were now visible on the tiny TV screen.<sup>2</sup> The bodies and movements of these figures seemed weighted down by their very visibility, in contrast with the ethereal quality of those invisible figures that had emanated for so many years from that tiny yellow radio-light-bulb shining in the dark.

Given that the invisible visibility of those radio images was conveyed by sounds that were not exclusively linguistic – they included music and non-linguistic sound-effects – but that nevertheless relied heavily on language, it is not entirely surprising that the question of the invisible image reemerged many years later when I began to read and reflect on texts of literature. In reading literary texts, I found something similar, although not identical, to my radio experience. The vividness of the descriptions those texts contained seemed often to be in direct proportion to the indeterminacy of the images involved. As a college student, I will never forget the passionate indignation of a much respected professor of American literature as he inveighed against the way in which Poe described the main gallery in *The Fall of the House of Usher*:

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.<sup>3</sup>

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2 The fact that the television image included not just figures but movements is of course decisive, even if I cannot dwell on it here. Many of the radio programs I listened to originated either in comic books, films or other illustrated publications. But the comic book image, for instance, never pretended to the level of ‚reality‘ that the television image could claim by virtue of its inclusion of movement. As to film, which developed concurrently with radio, it lacked the intimacy of media that could be consumed in the home, and in this sense also lacked the claim on ‚reality‘ that was associated with television and with its images.

3 Edgar Allan Poe: „The Fall of the House of Usher“, in: Id.: *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by James A. Harrison, New York 1965, vol. III, p. 273-297, here p. 277 f.



In response to this passage, the professor seemed extremely irate: „It won't diagram“, I remember him saying, although today I can't remember just how or why he should have wanted this particular description to „diagram“. Poe's point, expressed explicitly in his *Philosophy of Composition* and clearly put into practice in such passages, was that the *affective value* of such ostensibly descriptive passages has nothing to do with their *exactitude*. Moreover, in the passage quoted one of the points explicitly made by the narrator is that the space of the room being described precisely exceeds the eye's ability to see: despite the „encrimsoned light“ making its way through the stained glass windows into the room, „the eye, [...] struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling“. The ceiling is not just „vaulted“ but „fretted“ – like a human forehead wrinkles when its intention is frustrated or threatened. And if the upper reaches of the room are not just invisible, but are described as „fretting“, what they are fretting *about* is suggested by the phrase that follows, which emphasizes that the room is lacking not just in unity, coherence and transparency, but also in „vitality“; it is therefore not a scene to be seen, but an „atmosphere of sorrow“ to be „breathed“ in: „I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow“. <sup>4</sup> In such an „atmosphere“, however, it is not the breath of life that is suggested, but rather the expiration of death. This „atmosphere“ recalls the narrator's initial description of the House of Usher, as he approaches it from the outside:

[...] about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.

Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn. <sup>5</sup>

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4 Walter Benjamin's famous description of the „aura“ in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* also speaks of „breathing“ in the aura of something that remains distant, however closely one approaches it. The aura thus arises when the original can no longer be separated from the atmosphere (a word Benjamin does not use).

5 Poe: „The Fall of the House of Usher“ (note 3), p. 276 f.

The use of the word „atmosphere“ throughout this text redefines the nature of the description and the quality of its images; these are no longer simply the representation of defined and discernible objects, as one might expect from a traditional visual image, but rather entail something more like a relational network that encompasses not just objects but also the spectator-observer-narrator no less than the house itself and its inhabitants. The atmosphere is resolutely local, „peculiar“ to the „mansion [...] and its immediate vicinity“. Its walls, instead of clearly demarcating it from the vicinity, seem to have taken on a life of their own, although it is a parasitic life: „Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves.“ This „web-work“ suggests that the building may be dissolving into its environs, and it is this process that marks the „atmosphere“ as something both radically local and radically different from the „air of heaven“. It is this dissociation that explains why the „antiquity“ of the House should also be qualified as „excessive“. What is „excessive“ about this antiquity is that the atmosphere it takes place in is „unredeemable“. The whole seems intact, but underneath lurks the suspicion of „the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years“. Despite the absence of manifest „instability“ the description closes with a fatal „perhaps“: „*Perhaps* [Hvh. S.W.] the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.“

This „dangerous perhaps“ (Nietzsche) will of course portend the fatal and final fall of the House of Usher. But what it presents as an image turns out to be rather a kind of counter – or negative image: for what it represents is not an object, but „a barely perceptible fissure“, which although it is the absence of anything positive is not at all static; the fissure moves, making „its way down the wall in a zigzag direction“ until it disappears, becomes „lost in the sullen waters of the tarn“.

It is hardly necessary to emphasize how very different this *literary* image is from the *radio* images that populated my youth: how different, and yet how related! Poe's nature is profoundly similar to that described by Walter Benjamin in his study of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*: that of a fallen nature that lacks any hope of salvation and that is therefore fully exposed to the destructive effects of time. It is the nature that first emerges in Europe massively in post-Reformation Germany (which is perhaps one of the reasons why so much of Poe's writing is situated in a „Gothic“ tradition, at home above all in Protestant countries and cultures). But it is also the nature that called forth the myth of the American Hero, struggling in magnificent individualistic isolation against the forces of Evil: Superman, to be sure, but one who is always haunted a congenital vulnerability, by an Achilles' heel in the form of „Kryptonite“, a greenish, extra-terrestrial element that, like Samson's Delilah, can at any time appear and rob him of his strength, rendering him vulnerable to destruction.<sup>6</sup>

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6 Does the existence of „Kryptonite“ cryptically conceal the slowly developing concern with those „elements“ that made radioactivity – itself invisible – possible and lethally dangerous?

This broader, religious-historical perspective allows us to interpret how a certain use of images could have come to assume a decisive but ambivalent role in American – and perhaps also more generally in ‚Western‘ – culture. On the one hand the image is called upon to protect that which it represents from the ravages of a temporal process that wears out and uses up all living beings qua individuals. But on the other hand, the image confirms the vulnerability of all individuals precisely to the ravages of time. Ever since the Reformation, and in particular for American culture, Luther’s doctrine of *sola fides* – of ‚faith alone‘ as the only path to salvation – has rendered the Christian promise of resurrection dependent not upon external institutions and their practices, nor even upon ‚good works‘ *per se*, but rather upon the less visible, more interior experience of ‚faith‘ as the medium through which the individual mortal has access to God. Hence, there emerges a tendency, very visible in Poe’s story, but also in many other American writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne (*Young Goodman Brown*), for external nature to appear as fallen, without hope for survival: the House of Usher, as well as its inhabitants, is one example of this. The atmosphere it exudes, and that the narrator „breathes“, consists of an „air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom“, whereby the emphasis, as already suggested, should fall on the word „irredeemable“. It is this impossibility of redemption that condemns mortals to decay and destruction, a fate already embodied in the external appearance of the House of Usher itself. The image that Poe’s story gives us of this house thus both preserves and confirms this fatal destiny: it resists the wear and tear of time while at the same time implementing it. It implements it not just by representing it, as in the final scene of Poe’s story, in which the „fall“ of the House of Usher anticipates the incessantly played images of the collapsing Twin Towers:

Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight – my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‚House of Usher‘.<sup>7</sup>

The fall of the House of Usher is not just the fall of individual living beings, but also of the „house“ that was constructed to protect them against the ravages of time and space – of an unredeemed nature. All that this fall leaves behind, however, is that „long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters“ as the

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And does its color, green, suggest the concern that this extraterrestrial element may not be entirely alien to the „green hills of earth“? Or more generally, that the „greening“ of „nature“ may not bring eternal life and rebirth, but rather death and destruction.

7 Poe: „The Fall of the House of Usher“ (note 3), p. 297.

building that houses them – that protects them from the outside – itself collapses and disappears. No call for help – no official or semi-official „9-1-1“ – will bring them back. The cries of individual voices merge with „the voice of a thousand waters“, which is to say, with the very nature that carries them away.

All that is ‚left‘ is for the reader, who implicitly follows the trajectory of the narrator to try, like the narrator, to escape, at least temporarily, the consequences of the disaster. The reader, like the narrator, does this by fleeing – as did the spectators of the fall of the Twin Towers, which, however, caught up with many of the survivors, especially those trying to help, years later in the form of respiratory illnesses, having breathed in too much of the atmosphere left by the collapse of the towers – an atmosphere certified by powers that be at the time to be harmless. In view of such official policies, the suspicion of institutions deriving at least from the Reformation leaves individuals only one alternative: to seek safety in isolation. Much of this can be read in the narrator’s final description of the scene, or rather of his terrified response to it: „From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast“. <sup>8</sup> Flight here however is not just motoric movement: it involves placing an *image* between one’s own threatened position and the danger from which one is fleeing. Only such an image renders survival thinkable – which is to say, imaginable.

But as already suggested, the price for such a survival strategy is high, for the image that protects also binds the spectator to the threat, so that protection through images is never reliable. „Homeland Security“ – watchword of the United States in the aftermath of „9-11“ – can never be definitively „secured“ as the intrinsically endless notion of a „War Against Terror“ only confirms. Such a war is by nature never-ending, because its object is not simply external but also and above all internal. „Terror“ in English at least, is not essentially an external phenomenon, but an internal ‚feeling‘ or ‚affect‘. To be sure, one of the functions of the image is to define that enemy in such a way that it can be objectified, located and above all, left behind through flight, as Poe’s narrator tries to do in fleeing the Fall of the House of Usher.

But „terror“ – the „War Against Terror“ – cannot be reduced to the object of an image: a person, for instance, a ‚terrorist‘. President Bush was very clear about this in his famous National Security Statement of 2001, when he declared that „shadowy networks of terrorists“ endangered the safety of the United States and that precisely because of their shadowy appearance, required new measures, such as pre-emptive strikes and preventive wars. Terror, like anxiety, and unlike fear, cannot be tied to an object: it is precisely defined as the result of the absence of object, and therefore the absence of a certain type of image: that which represents objects, for instance, persons or things, clearly individuated and defined.

Such objectification and subjectification, and the world-view associated with them, have however been largely promoted by the American commercial media, including the Hollywood film industry, long before the destruction of the Twin

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8 Ibid.

Towers in 2001, and increasingly since then. The image as used by these media functions largely – there are of course always exceptions – to encapsulate, to isolate, to concentrate and focus one's attention, and thereby to promote a sense of reality as deriving from individual self-contained objects and subjects. The result is that time and space, as media of alteration and change, can be regarded as merely the condition of possibility for individuals to take action and individual, isolated events to ‚take place‘. This use of the image, which is neither exclusive nor prescribed by the technical character of the audiovisual media, serves largely to *position* persons, things and events, and thereby to *exclude* everything that might cause one to look elsewhere – to read and to think „outside the box“ as a current and particularly apt American expression goes. But such thinking outside the box is subordinated by two other expressions, which are even more widely used, and which I believe could only have emerged in the United States: first, the expression „that's history!“ which has come to mean that something is history when it is past, and when it is past it is „over and done with“. Second, „thinking outside the box“ is subordinated to the injunction to „move forward“. This has been the most widespread ethical imperative in the discourse of business and of politics, with the implication, of course, that to „move forward“ it is helpful not to spend too much time „looking back“.

In terms of the medial practice of isolated, self-contained imagery, however, to „move forward“ is really an injunction not to dwell on alternatives, which might have been excluded or neglected in the past, but which remain as thinkable options for the future. The „move forward“ implies a clear-cut break between past, present and future, but also a privileging of the present as self-contained and meaningful. Hence the fascination with „breaking news“ or the „news break“ – which breaks with the routine of the same in order to produce more of the same.

That however no ‚image‘ can in this sense be ‚self-contained‘ or self-sufficient is one of the lessons I learned from those early radio plays, whose images were powerful precisely in proportion to a certain indeterminacy – which is to say in their relationship to what could not be seen or even imagined. Such indeterminacy is not just a negative, however, any more than the „that fine tangled web-work (hanging) from the eves“ of the House of Usher. It can be the source of a „passion“ that exceeds anything that visible images can evoke.