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BOOK REVIEW

The Redemption of Things: Collecting and Dispersal in German Realism and Modernism

By Samuel Frederick, Cornell University Press. 2021. pp. 330. \$125 (hardcover), \$34.95 (paperback)

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“We live in a world littered with things” (31), writes Samuel Frederick in his 2021 monograph *The Redemption of Things: Collecting and Dispersal in German Realism and Modernism*. In such a world, collecting appears pointless, with obsolete and outdated things accumulating all around us, an abundance of clutter disgorged by the industrial age, and the mere and mute preponderance of matter as such. With the proliferation of things in the 19th and 20th centuries that inevitably carry along their fragility, emptiness, and dispersal, the commonplace conception of gathering and preservation as the dual aims of collecting has lost its persuasiveness and appeal.

It is this specifically modern constellation which emerges after the turn of the 19th century that Frederick chooses as his point of departure. Frederick’s second book presents a carefully arranged and brilliantly written collection of case studies, encompassing the works of canonical authors of German Realism (Adalbert Stifter, Jeramias Gotthelf, Gottfried Keller) as well as a fairly diverse set of 20th century writers and one filmmaker (Oskar Fischinger, Max Frisch, Friedrich Glauser). Their works share an engagement with ephemeral, material “stuff” that gathers without our doing and yet shows a stubborn tendency “to elude both our conceptual and tactile grasp” (25). Things that are small and marginal, displaced, dirty, dispensable and bereft of meaning make for highly anomalous and borderline uncollectable collectables: moss, sludge, refuse, debris, rubble, maculature and paper scraps, junk, dust and sand, scent, as well as, “least tangibly of all, the fugitive moment” (8).

The brisk yet well-founded introduction (1–30) is followed by a comprehensive first, theorizing chapter that develops the book’s conceptual framework, engaging with the thought of Vilém Flusser, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Aleida Assmann (31–65). Frederick also refers to literary scholar Ulrike Vedder and

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philosopher Dominik Finkelde as the most influential on his thinking on collecting; Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (Routledge, 1966) and Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (Duke UP, 2010) obviously have been pivotal as well.

Frederick neglects to explicitly integrate colonial constellations of collecting and plundering in his argument, which is really odd for a study largely centered on the 1900s, discussing European collecting as “a form of dislocation and destruction” (36). However, in his conclusion (291–303), he briefly engages with recent debates about the restitution of looted art by pointing to an exceptional case: *Porto M*, a museum established by artists and activists, located on the Italian island of Lampedusa, one of the primary ports of entry to Europe. Here, “[l]ocals have gathered the debris and detritus left behind by boats of migrants that continue to arrive on the island [...]. Such a refusal to restore expresses an acceptance of the state of things: there is no identifiable space to which these items might be returned because this ‘origin’ is itself not fixed or determinable. These scattered things belong to a people who have scattered, a people who have no ‘proper place’ or home,” that is if they have survived their encounter with this “port of entry” in the first place (295–297).

This example of an attempt at making museal paradoxes apparent and productive comes up very late in the study, but with it in mind it is easier to follow Frederick's idea of “nonrestorative collecting” (36). Frederick addresses the recent scholarly emphasis put on the futility and mania inherent in all collecting efforts (an “irrational passion”[6]), but tries to go one step further by insisting on the instantiating moment of what he calls a “modern,” “nonrestorative,” or “antapocatastatic” model of collecting (36–43). “Collecting in effect gathers, preserves, and presents the material world in *its fragmentariness and alienation*. It thus instantiates the condition of things in modernity: sans unity, sans stability, sans significance” (6). Those aspired fragile residuals of the “palpable”—a heavily used word in this study—stand at the vanishing point of Frederick's text analyses.

The six case studies are clustered in three sets that form the three main parts of the book: “Part I: Ephemera” explores Stifter's novella *Der Kuß von Sentze* (1866) and Fischinger's short film *München-Berlin Wanderung* (1927), “Part II Catastrophic Detritus” covers Gotthelf's *Die Wassernot im Emmental* (1838) and Frisch's *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (1979), and “Part III: Triviality” pertains to Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich* (1854/55) and Glauser's *Schlumpf Erwin Mord* and *Matto regiert* (both 1936). This pairing of “realist and modernist examples” (3), as well as the sub-summation of Glauser's detective novels, written in Austrian patois, under German modernism, demands explanation, as the author himself admits: “My hope is that precisely as such a ‘patchwork’ assemblage (Benjamin), the book provides a more authentic and detailed image of materiality in all its messiness and intractability across these two centuries” (64). Even more, the book can rely on the intelligent understanding of uncollectable collectables that it establishes early on (ephemera, detritus, and trivia)—a choice of perspective that proves to be as viable as it is invigorating in all six readings.

The individual chapters offer a lot more than the promised close readings (which are delivered meticulously nevertheless): they contain rich contextualization, draw connections to other works exploring similar constellations, and often open with a glance at science or media history or the epistemic setting of the respective text. The first chapter, titled “Moss (Stifter),” does not turn to its primary text until many pages into the chapter, but rather, chooses Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) as a starting point instead—and with this the beginning of modern biological classification, the practice of assigning objects to the right place in the sense of botanical and zoological taxonomy, that until today shapes how we order and name very special types of elusive things, that is, living things.

Linnaeus’s first-level subdivision of the plant kingdom distinguishes between plants whose “nuptials” are “Publicæ” and those whose are “Clandestonæ” (69–71), a division between public and clandestine sexuality also central to the plot of Stifter’s *Der Kuß von Sentze*. Frederick delves pretty deep into the biological details of the reproductive cycle of cryptogams: mosses are in fact known for their bewildering procreation strategy, being haploid and diploid, parasitic to themselves, and spending the majority of their life cycle as plants that have “in a sense not yet been fully born” (75). It is with great relish that Frederick shows how the reproductive peculiarities of moss offer a unique solution to the problem of preservation: moss does not follow the logic of flowering and decay, the very logic that threatens the genealogical continuity of the House of Sentze. Even collected moss, seemingly doomed to die, escapes mortality: it can be revitalized by a kiss, a drop of water. “Stifter is concerned with overcoming ephemerality, of finding a way to suspend the cycle of flowering and decay by introducing an alternative principle of preservation in which the fleeting nature of things is made enduring without it being undone as what is ephemeral” (73).

Stifter’s cryptogamic genealogy is paired with Fischinger’s short film that lies at the threshold between animation and live action and that, as Frederick shows, succeeds in performing the ephemerality of the fleeting moment (101–134). Stifter’s bryology not only corresponds with Fischinger, but one could argue that it is also complemented by Glauser’s take on the detective novel discussed in the very last chapter of the volume (255–290). It is by no means a coincidence that we find Linnaeus in the beginning and the detective novel in the end of Frederick’s *parcours*. Reflections on collecting and dispersal tend to show a strong affinity to genres that are by definition preoccupied with putting things in order: taxonomy detecting order within nature’s variety, the detective novel restoring a violated order by paying close attention to readable, revealing details.

In Glauser’s texts it is not the infamous cigarette ash, but dust and “its larger cousin” sand that lead the way for Sergeant Studer’s investigation (260). The field of criminology has been paradigm-shifting when it comes to dust: the most trivial of substances (Joseph Amato) played a crucial role in the development of new methods for gathering microscopic trace evidence (curiously enough Carlo Ginzburg’s *paradigma indiziaro* is not referred to at this point); Frederick even mentions a “taxonomy of types of dust” published by forensic expert Edmond Locard (258).

But while evidence ideally adds up to an epistemologically sound reconstruction of the crime that presents a “whole picture,” Glauser’s detective novels “incorporate[] modernist techniques” and “twist” the rules of their genre (260–262): one ends with dust failing its evidentiary function, the other one with the detective’s refusal to capture the culprit (287). This indicates once more the subterranean link between the non-collectable and the non-classifiable, and it should be noted briefly that this relation has been subject to recent literary reflections: Marion Poschmann’s *Kunst der Unterscheidung* (Suhrkamp, 2016) includes a poem on moss, “Moos, ein ready-made,” followed by remarks on Luke Howard’s taxonomy of clouds.

Dust, ultimately remaining a non-collectable, is a great last example for Frederick’s conception of collecting, which, from the very beginning, could not conceal at least some form of regret about “the tendency of all things to drift away and apart” (3). This is reflected in the book’s own orderly structure, its clean table of contents, its balance, and its sense of symmetry. Dust, however, in contrast to the borderline immortal moss, insists on the irreversibility of things—or people—scattered; think of *Porto M*: “The collection of evidence, itself only constituted of fragments, cannot restore the state of things prior to their dispersal” (261).

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