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Abstract

Review of Eugenio Claudio Di Stefano. *The Vanishing Frame: Latin American Culture and Theory in the Postdictatorial Era.* U of Texas P, 2018. 185 pp.

Keywords

Southern Cone, Latin America, human rights, aesthetics, post dictatorial literature, identity politics

Eugenio Claudio Di Stefano. *The Vanishing Frame: Latin American Culture and Theory in the Postdictatorial Era*. U of Texas P, 2018. 185 pp.

In its examination of postdictatorial literature and art, principally of the Southern Cone, Eugenio Claudio Di Stefano's *The Vanishing Frame* proposes that Latin American literary and cultural studies of the past forty years have aligned themselves with human rights discourse, which, despite progressive intentions, has resulted in a conservative political project. Di Stefano's argument is that criticism and literature have become invested in attending to and vindicating corporeal injustice against the tortured, disappeared, or excluded body, which has led to a disavowal of a broader anticapitalist commitment. He asserts that, during the transition to democracy, literature and scholarship, in line with human rights discourse, called attention to state-sponsored terror against the individual, which occurred at the expense of remembering the cause behind state violence, namely, victims' anticapitalist politics. According to Di Stefano, this silence surrounding the ideological disagreement between the liberal capitalist state and its opponents participates in and even completes the project of the dictatorships, given that it obscures challenges to neoliberalism.

The eponymous "frame" at the core of the book's analysis refers to the aesthetic proper—"the division between art and life" that "divides the textual witness and the reader or spectator" (3). Di Stefano argues that postdictatorial literary works and criticism did away with this frame, sacrificing aesthetic autonomy in order to "overcome the distance between the textual subject and the reader so that the experience of the victim and the reader can be blurred" (11). In a repudiation of much of Latin American literary criticism of the past four decades, he contends that literary genres and movements such as *testimonio* 'testimonial literature' and the neo-avant-garde, as well as theoretical frameworks from memory and trauma studies to affect theory and deconstruction, have emptied literature of the literary, have shorn art of the aesthetic. On his reading, despite good intentions, postdictatorial literature and cultural studies have focused on the narrow ethical questions of individual bodily harm and identity politics, which have eclipsed a robust and wide-reaching economic critique.

To make this claim, Di Stefano takes up a varied corpus, examining documentary and fictional films, *testimonio*, narrative fiction, paintings, and plays. The study progresses chronologically, beginning in the first chapter with Mario Benedetti's *Pedro y el Capitán* ('Pedro and the Captain'), published from exile in 1979. Benedetti's play becomes a touchstone in Di Stefano's study, as he returns to it in subsequent chapters to illustrate how later postdictatorial literature abandons the anticapitalist aesthetics of dictator-era publications.

The following two chapters seek to show how literature and criticism from the late-twentieth century became committed to the vanishing frame. Chapter

Two examines Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1990) and Diamela Eltit's *El padre mío* ('My Father') in terms of disability studies, positing that the treatment of the traumatized female body (in Dorfman) and the schizophrenic mind (in Eltit) reveals that "class critique is replaced by an idea of justice that imagines injustice principally as a form of exclusion from the market" (51). Di Stefano's comparative reading of the role of private property in Benedetti's and Dorfman's plays provides an instructive analysis of the shift in economic logic from the dictatorship period to the democratic transition. Chapter Three focuses on generational memory in Mauricio Rosencof's *Las cartas que no llegaron* (*The Letters that Never Came*) and Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* ('The Blonds') as symptomatic of a turn from collective politics of the (pre) dictatorship period to a preoccupation with identity and individual subject positions that, Di Stefano posits, participates in neoliberal rationality. These texts reemerge in subsequent chapters as comparison points.

The remaining chapters turn to recent texts in which the book observes a reemergence of the frame. For Di Stefano, works such as Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante* (*Distant Star*), Fernando Botero's *Abu Ghraib* series (2005), Alejandro Zambra's *Bonsái* (*Bonsai*), and Pablo Larraín's *No* (2012) reassert an autonomous aesthetic space that positions economic justice and a critique of neoliberalism at the center of their projects. Chapter Four identifies an "absorptive technique" in Botero's *Abu Ghraib* that, on Di Stefano's reading, insists on pictorial ambivalence toward the beholder. This aesthetic obstinance is then contrasted to *testimonio*, which invites the reader to identify with the witness-protagonist in order to catalyze political action. Chapter Six analyzes metafiction and narrative ambiguity in *Bonsái* as a turn away from postdictatorial literature. By identifying an insistence on aesthetic autonomy in Zambra's novel, Di Stefano reads *Bonsái* as a challenge to the theoretical project of affect studies, which he understands as reducing literature to "an object like any other" (129) with the potential to produce an affective response in the reader.

The discussion of Bolaño's *Estrella distante* in Chapter Five elaborates a solution of sorts to the problem of the vanishing frame. To do this, Di Stefano first addresses the issue of identity politics, whose origins he locates in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (109). According to this logic, by killing off the author, Barthes opened the door for a privileging of reader response and individual subject positions that Di Stefano associates with cultural studies writ large. In his advocacy for a return of the frame, Di Stefano proposes a surprising path for the resurgence of aesthetic autonomy: authorial intent. He interprets Carlos Wieder, the poet-assassin from *Estrella distante* whose aesthetic endeavors resemble CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte 'Art Actions Collective') artist Raúl Zurita's neo-avant-garde interventions, as an example of how one must

consider “intentionalism” in order to identify “aesthetic and political difference” (112) between fascist and anti-dictatorial poetics.

While *The Vanishing Frame* is an ambitious entry into debates on postdictatorial literature and neoliberal aesthetics, there are some missed opportunities for complicating the analysis and engaging with key interlocutors. The book would have benefitted from sustained dialogue with scholars such as Bruno Bosteels, Susana Draper, Alessandro Fornazzari, Héctor Hoyos, and Vinodh Venkatesh, whose monographs very much address the intersection of economics and culture in recent literature (Bosteels, Draper, and Fornazzari are briefly referenced, Fornazzari only in a footnote). Likewise, it would have been fruitful to engage with the rich debate regarding aesthetic excess and the literary aspects of *testimonio* among scholars such as Doris Sommer, Alberto Moreiras, and Abraham Acosta, as well as the conversation among Nelly Richard, Pablo Oyarzún, and Willy Thayer surrounding the *coup d'état*, neo-avant-garde aesthetics, and the logics of capitalism in Chile. Like Di Stefano, these scholars revisit the cultural production and criticism of the (post-) dictatorship period to problematize early critical responses to *testimonio* and the Chilean neo-avant-garde. Thinking alongside such works would have situated the book as part of relevant critical dialogues.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Vanishing Frame*’s thought-provoking approach to thinking through identity politics and human rights discourse will no doubt initiate rigorous and much-needed debate about the future of the Left in literary and cultural studies. This book will be of interest to scholars of Latin American literary studies, human rights, trauma and memory studies, neoliberalism and aesthetics, and affect theory.

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