

Philipp Schweighauser, *Beautiful Deceptions: European Aesthetics, the Early American Novel, and Illusionist Art* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2016), 264 pp.

In the preface to his *Bay Psalm Book* (1640), Richard Mather famously remarks that “God’s Altar needs not our pollishings” (13). Mather here defends his translation of the Psalms (he actually headed a team of about 30 ministers) against the prospective charge of inelegance by professing that the work was performed with attention to conscience rather than elegance. The overall subject of his preface is the correct manner of making the text accessible to congregations, both in terms of the translational methodology by which the text is produced and the communal practice by which it is used during services. Mather implicitly admits that while his version of the Book of Psalms is not aesthetically pleasing, it is at least true, in the sense that it accurately reflects the text’s original meaning as he and his coworkers perceived it. Mather could make this assertion with confidence because, in contemporary Protestant cosmology, the accurate transfer of God’s revelation through the ages was vouchsafed by the divine inspiration and personal piety of His chosen scribes. At the same time, Mather’s apologia reveals an anxiety about a perceived dichotomy between art and truth that he saw emerging in and through his work. Striking the correct balance between truth and artifice was key, for one, it seems, cannot be told without the other. Yet embellishing the text to make it more palatable for contemporary English speakers would be tantamount to deceiving his congregation and becoming untrue to his mission. Mather has been cited erroneously as denoting the dower suspicions of the stringent Puritan mind towards artistic flourishes of language. But beyond such clichés, his preface illustrates that anxieties about literary deception form a thematic touchstone of American literature.

Philipp Schweighauser’s *Beautiful Deceptions: European Aesthetics, the Early American Novel, and Illusionist Art* explores the legacy of these dichotomies and anxieties at the very moment when Mather’s premodern colonial America gives way to a modern experiment in American republicanism. One way in which we may comprehend this book would be to see it as an intellectual history of modern aesthetic philosophy by way of the Early American novel that carries within it perceptive literary analysis and a self-reflexive disciplinary history. Both truth and deception get applied to art either exclusively or concomitantly at different times during this period. The early American novel thus becomes characterized by a “paradoxical doubleness,” which Schweighauser elucidates by connecting transatlantic aesthetic theory and American artistic practice (34). He shows how Post-Enlightenment art and philosophy consistently wrestled with their own (self-)perception as purveyors of moral didacticism and disinterested beauty. Early American novels—specifically William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Charles Brockden Brown’s psychological gothic novels *Wieland* (1798) and *Arthur Mervyn* (1799–1800), Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s multi-volume narrative study *Modern Chivalry* (1792–1815), Royall Tyler’s pseudo-biographical *The Algerine Captive* (1797), and Tabitha Gilman Teneney’s meta-antifictional *Female Quixotism* (1801)—allow us to observe this liminal moment in cultural history and uncovers the fuzzy edges between premodernity to modernity. In each chapter, Schweighauser elucidates the multifarious strategies by which novelists created their own aesthetic theory of deception. He then expertly situates his findings in portions of a larger transatlantic history of ideas, all in clear, accessible language. Together, these points make up a highly enjoyable and readable academic exploration. Schweighauser

covers considerable ground in this study, even turning to oil paintings as well as to several prominent romantic novels in the end; however, the novels that appear at the turn of the century form the core corpus of his discussion. His book chronicles a major shift in aesthetic sensibilities, which is in itself a symptom of a larger set of cultural shifts in categories of reason, evidence, and belief.

Beautiful Deceptions makes an effective case for reconsidering aesthetics as an important epistemological lens through which we may examine more closely the cultural shifts that accompany the dawn of modernity. From this central premise radiate out diachronic discussions of Aesthetic Theory, of the Literary and Visual Arts, and of the philosophical controversies about the epistemology of art. Schweighauser presents a compelling history of ideas as well as a disciplinary history and a collection of excellent close readings of seminal canonical and non-canonical Early American novels. This first-rate scholarship is cloaked in accessible prose; however, the individual chapters could have benefitted from additional structural sign-posting and meta-text to situate readers. Such additions would also have helped incorporate the addition of oil-paintings in chapter four as well as the (very enjoyable) foray into the American Renaissance in the concluding chapter. Although excellent when seen in isolation, these additions at times threaten to derail the discussion. However, these editorial and structural gripes do not diminish the scholarly quality that is on offer here.

The book arrives at a moment of renewed interest in aesthetics in the larger context of a turn to (new) formalism in Literary Studies and Critical Theory. His study is grounded in the disciplinary tradition of Early American Studies, founded by historians and critics of culture like Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Lawrence Buell, and expanded by theoreticians of aesthetics, like Wolfgang Iser. Specifically, he engages with critics who focus on the early American novel, such as Winfried Fluck, Oliver Scheiding, and Stephen Shapiro. Schweighauser responds to a research gap he sees opening up among recent political readings of the early American novel. To his mind, these readings neglect several crucial dimensions of novelists' "negotiation of deception," specifically their choice of deception as a subject matter, their thematic exploration of the connection between deception and delusion, and their self-reflexive discussions of art as a purveyor and vehicle of deception (74). He acknowledges the viability and importance of political readings but wants to extend those discussions by giving room to—and to some extent rehabilitate—the aesthetic as a viable analytical approach (34).

Schweighauser's chosen subject matter is pertinent for various reasons: in the context of Enlightenment rationalism—particularly the Scottish Common Sense variety, which exerted outsized influence on Anglo-American colonial culture—the ability of art to deceive sense perception illustrated controversial insights. Immanuel Kant usually gets credited for incorporating the notion that humans can have only limited recourse to reality into a theory of aesthetic judgment. That being said, what we often call the Western critical tradition has known critiques of the deceptive nature of art and its potentially harmful societal effects at least since Plato's *Republic*. Schweighauser, however, centers his theoretical discussion around the (less frequently invoked) originator of the term "aesthetics," Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and thereby anticipates recent revaluations of Kant's influence on the Western critical tradition and the (re-)discovery of other, competing aesthetic theories.

In his Introduction and Chapter 1, which form one prolonged introductory section, Schweighauser presents his approach to the aesthetics of deception in the early American novel and situates that discussion in both the disciplinary

history of Early American Studies as well as the History of Ideas on aesthetics in Europe and North America. His central argument is that works of art “do not merely reflect social and political strains in the society within which they are produced [...] but that they are primarily signs of a shift in the positioning of art within the social whole” (39–40). Schweighauser primarily discusses novels but also includes memoirs, letters, short stories, poems, and oil paintings. The book thus traces the efficacy of art through various media, periods, and genres at the turn of the century. Methodologically, he adopts Niklas Luhman’s systems theory, specifically his notion of functional differentiation within systems and subsystems (44). Doing so allows him to consider the efficacy of novels as actants within the contemporary discourse about the social functions of art (34). At the same time, the novel here also constitutes a cultural arena in which tensions between premodern and modern notions of aesthetics collide: “art as instructor and purveyor of truth” and a modern one, which holds that art “only obeys the laws it gives itself” (40). For example, Brackenridge navigates the contentious interstices between anti-fiction and utilitarian didactic conceptions of the novel to stake out a space for political and aesthetic commentary. Schweighauser seamlessly weaves in and out of close analytical readings and into philosophical historiography.

Chapter 2 explores the differences and continuities between (political) deception and delusion and the manner in which novelists negotiated their own as well as critical apprehensions about fiction writing. It is also here that Schweighauser most clearly articulates the research gap he responds to (71, 74). The discussion centers around Backenridge, Tenney, and Brockden Brown’s novels. The discussion of the ghost scene in Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* presents a compelling proof of concept. Schweighauser expertly elucidates how political readings, centered on race, class, and gender, intersect with a self-reflective meta-discourse on aesthetics (63 ff). One intriguing side aspect here is the possibility of self-deception of authors through their own work. This possibility stands in the greater context of Benjamin Franklin’s literary utilitarian call to industry in the service of social climbing and the “honeyed poison,” as Mercy Otis Warren phrased it in a letter to her son Winslow, of Lord Chesterfield’s etiquette books for young gentlemen (120).

Chapter 3 presents the flipside to these, often internal, contemplations of deception and delusion, by exploring the manner in which novelists start conceiving art as autotelic and articulate something like a right to free expression for the arts, apart from social and didactic utility. This concept is known by many adages, like Kant’s notion of disinterestedness or Gautier’s *l’art pour l’art*. Schweighauser identifies what he calls defense strategies that artists deploy to shield themselves from the moralistic antifiction critics of their time even as they carried with their own reservations about the ability of their work to deceive (113). One such strategy consists in incorporating charges of deception, which we may observe as early as Brown’s *Modern Chivalry*. Such antifiction novels, Schweighauser points out, constitute “performative contradiction” as they simultaneously condemn and perform the function of deception inherent in the novel (112). Stand-out sections here are the analyses on, again, Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* as well as on Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*. With the latter, Schweighauser intervenes in the subgenre of the so-called sentimental novel by elucidating the internal political economy that Rowson sets up in her novel. That economy, he contends, is framed by Rowson’s “affective guidance,” a strategic deployment of sentiment, or dissimulation, the politics of which get reflected and discussed in the novel (115–17).

Both Chapter 4 and the Conclusion reflect on the findings of the previous chapters by spinning them out into different artistic genres and literary periods respectively. Chapter 4 covers the *trompe l'oeil* paintings of Charles William Peale and his son Raphaelle Peale to explore the function of mimetic production outside the linguistic realm. Schweighauser sees in Charles Peale's *The Artist in His Museum* (1822) and *The Staircase Self-Portrait* (1795) instances of self-creation that are achieved, paradoxically, through the mastery of mimetic skill (158). In this sense, the Peales's paintings are the ultimate form of artistic deception and, simultaneously, self-creation. In his conclusion, Schweighauser turns to the sci- ons of this first generation of deceptive artists, whose works embrace deception as a *modus operandi* and even adopt a playful attitude in deceiving their readers. He convincingly shows how Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) build on the foundation of their predecessors and are thus able to drive their own meta-discussion of what fiction can be.

Beautiful Deceptions achieves its ambitious goal of elucidating a history of aesthetics by way of the early American novel. Schweighauser moves seamlessly between astute close readings, exposition of philosophical and critical positions, and philosophical as well as disciplinary historiography. With its magisterial scope, the discussions here could have easily trailed off into the arcane, a threat that is mitigated on the sentence level by lively prose. The book addresses itself to advanced graduate students or career academics who are either familiar with some or all of the novels covered here or have prior knowledge of the critical history of aesthetics. *Beautiful Deceptions* strikes that rare balance between presenting penetrating analyses and enthralling historiography. It offers complexity of subject matter, knowledgeable moderation between multiple theoretical perspectives, themes, and subjects as well as high-caliber criticism.

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Works Cited

- Mather, Richard. *Bay Psalm Book*. Cambridge: Stephen Daye, 1640. Print.
 Richards, Jeffrey H., and Sharon M. Harris. *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2009. Print.

Beautiful Deceptions: European Aesthetics, the Early American Novel, and Illusionist Art Hardcover â€“ Illustrated, September 2, 2016. by Philipp Schweighauser (Author).Â Schweighauser interprets motifs of deception and illusion in early American fiction and visual art as indices of the political transformation of the young republic from premodern to modern values. His interpretations of key novels by Brackenridge, Rowson, Brown, Tyler, and Tenney as well as artworks by Charles Willson Peale, Raphaelle Peale, and Patience Wright enrich our understanding of early national culture.Â Beautiful Deceptions is an enthralling book and a masterful narrative on how modernization and European aesthetic theory are played out in the artistic realm of postrevolutionary America. Philipp Schweighauser, Beautiful Deceptions: European Aesthetics, the Early American Novel, and Illusionist Art (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2016), 264 pp. Damien B. Schlarb. Published: 1 January 2021. by Universitatverlag WINTER Heidelberg. in Amerikastudien/American Studies. Amerikastudien/American Studies , Volume 65, pp 355-359; doi:10.33675/amst/2020/3/11. Publisher Website. Full-Text. Start reading Beautiful Deceptions for free online and get access to an unlimited library of academic and non-fiction books on Perlego.Â European Aesthetics, the Early American Novel, and Illusionist Art. Philipp Schweighauser. Start free trial. Share book. 264 pages. English. ePUB (mobile friendly). Beautiful Deceptions.Â Philipp Schweighauser. Book details. Table of contents. About This Book. This book explores the status of deception and delusion in mid-eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century European aesthetics and contemporaneous American literature, painting, and sculpture. Information. Publisher. University of Virginia Press. Year. 2016. ISBN. 9780813939049. Topic. Literature. Subtopic. Literary Criticism Theory. Find many great new & used options and get the best deals for Beautiful Deceptions: European Aesthetics, the Early American Novel, and Illusionist Art by Philipp Schweighauser (Hardback, 2016) at the best online prices at eBay! Free delivery for many products!Â This item doesn't belong on this page. Cancel. Thanks, we'll look into this. Beautiful Deceptions: European Aesthetics, the Early American Novel, and Illusionist Art by Philipp Schweighauser (Hardback, 2016). Be the first to write a reviewAbout this product. Brand new: Lowest price. 500 Philipp Schweighauser. Early American Studies Now: A Response to the Respondents. PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER. My three colleagues' highly welcome, spirited responses to "Early American Studies Now: A Polemic from Literary Studies" come with two surprises: first, they are more generous than I thought they would be; second, the most incisive critique is staged by the scholar from whom I expected least opposition.Â At least in part, I saw my own return to aesthetics-and thus to questions of artistic forms and their social functions-as a way of responding to Ed White and Michael Drexler's call for "reading practices attentive to the work's formal and generic elements, as counter to the tendency to read thematically."