

Franziska Quabeck

Art and Crime

- Claire Dederer, *Monsters. A Fan's Dilemma*. New York: Knopf 2023. 288 S. [Preis: EUR 18,45]. ISBN: 978-0-52565-511-4.

Claire Dederer's new book approaches an important turn in both literary criticism and theory by daring to ask how one may deal with morally reprehensible artists and their work. The book could not be more timely or welcome, since critics, theorists and literary scholars find themselves with increasing frequency in debates with students and peers about whether it be legitimate to 'still' teach, read, listen to or consume in other ways works of art, which have been tainted by their authors' reputation. Dederer's most prominent example in the book is Roman Polanski, whose films she considers absolute masterpieces. Polanski also seems to be the lever that made her approach her dilemma in this comprehensive book that seeks to address "contradictions that can't be solved by analysis." (6) The contradiction that hovers above almost all of her examples is that between the work and the artist, "the greatness of the art and the terribleness of the crime." (9) It is one of the many strengths of this book that when it comes to the crime, Dederer has no time for speculation or conjecture and works with almost exclusively well-documented and irrefutable criminal and morally reprehensible actions by artists such as Polanski, Miles Davis and Richard Wagner, among others. Those 'monsters,' according to the deliberately provocative term she chooses, and their works have become difficult to admire, to say the least, because of their actions as individuals, not artists. Dederer's book is in effect an attempt to test what she terms the "biographical fallacy." (36) Literary theory, "authority," (37) in her words, proclaimed the death of the author for many decades, comfortably disentangling artists from their work, so that one may judge a novel on its own merits and not commit the biographical fallacy. However, Dederer argues, authority has a history of siding "with the male maker, against the audience." (37) Given that the canon of literary theory as taught in universities all over the world is predominantly male, this may not come as a shock. As a critic, who has a background in literary studies and has found 'Theory', it seems, sometimes more obstructive than helpful, Dederer tries to answer what one should do with the uncomfortable truths about the people, who are behind the art we consume. Implicitly, she therefore takes seriously what is often derisively called 'cancel culture' by evoking the image of the 'stain' that is of no one's making but the artist's. She shifts the focus from the strategies so common on social media these days to the 'stain' that cannot be explained away by. The rejection of 'wokeness' as overly critical or even overly 'sensitive' is, after all, often used to explain the stain away: "The stain is simply something that happens. The stain is not a choice. The stain is not a decision we make." (44)

She identifies contemporary transparency as part of the problem by emphasising that the times when one might have been simply oblivious to the chequered past or present of 'great' artists are long gone: "Biography used to be something you sought out, yearned for, actively pursued. Now it falls on your head all day long." (47) It just so happens that, according to Dederer, we "live in a biographical moment, and if you look hard enough at anyone, you can probably find at least a little stain." (50) The crucial component in this matter is what Dederer terms "our feelings," since "we continue to love what we ought to hate" (9) when it comes to works of art. In this sense, her book plays well into the most common trend in literary studies and theory at the moment, for affect theory has proved its impact in recent years. Literary and cultural studies have been increasingly concerned with the dynamics of art and human emotion. Other than

many critics working in the field, however, Dederer points to a very important caveat: “Our feelings seem – they feel – sovereign, but they’re tethered to our moment and our circumstance; and the moments and past circumstances that came before. [...] We think of ourselves as ahistorical subjects, but that’s just not so.” (73) Consequently, our understanding of art is never objectively measurable and always emotional. This is why, it seems, she counters ‘authority’ very early on in the book and returns to this in her example of Pearl Cleage, who is famously caught in one of those impossibilities and expresses this most lucidly in *Mad at Miles*, her book on Miles Davis. Dederer points to Cleage as a critic, who fully understands what is at stake and whose subjective view in the matter is the strong point of her argument: “This kind of subjective response to the work would seem to make Cleage’s essay weaker, in terms of mounting a convincing argument. She shows her hand – shows that her own experience is shaping her response to the work – so that we know she’s not speaking from authority.” (252) It is at this point that one might possibly contest Dederer’s concept of ‘authority.’ Mostly, she seems to have in mind literary theory and theorists as taught on the curriculum of English departments, but in cases such as Cleage’s, one might well argue that a different notion of authority is very much in place. Dederer frequently counters authority with terms such as ‘experience’, ‘subjectivity’ or ‘feeling’, but her reference to Pear Cleage shows that the opposition is not diametrical. A published author such as Cleage – and Dederer herself, for that matter – speaks from authority whether they want to or not. Dederer herself insists, “[t]here is no authority and there should be no authority,” (242) but the very fact that both Cleage and Dederer, among others, are published authors in these matters make them part of that authority, even when they foreground their own subjectivity and are not currently on the syllabus in English literature classrooms – yet.

Dederer’s book is not a book about literature per se, let alone a book about literary theory, but it addresses pressing issues that have also become very important for the teacher of English literature and literary theory. Many students find a strict understanding of the death of the author unhelpful these days, since they feel the need to re-evaluate what they are being taught. Dederer’s emphasis on any recipients’ ‘feelings’ is therefore certainly timely, because students are beginning to insist on their right not to be confronted with art or literature they find distressing. They might simply refuse to read *Jane Eyre*, because of its portrayal of what they now consider a ‘toxic’ relationship or they may take issue with Henry Fielding’s treatment of women in *Tom Jones* and all with good reason. Now, such issues are slightly beside the mark of Dederer’s book, because we do not associate the monstrous with Charlotte Brontë and Henry Fielding seems to have been, for all intents and purposes, a fairly conventional eighteenth-century man. The issues that offend people in these cases are more of thematic than of biographical nature. This does not mean, however, that only morally upright authors are taught in English literature courses, which is perfectly clear in Dederer’s own example of Ernest Hemingway. It is at these points that her book, as great as it is as a semi-biographical treatise on art alone, proves helpful for theoretical considerations of literature. She may not solve the dilemma, as she fully admits, but her insistence that one cannot be morally obliged not to consume something one loves, because of the stain, has practical impact. One might think of *Shakespeare in Love* at this point, for instance. Harvey Weinstein’s involvement not just through Miramax but also in his personal conduct towards both Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Fiennes, among others, which both actors have openly addressed, certainly taints the film. In every respect, it seems, the production behind the film is driven by one of the worst ‘monsters’ of our times, and yet, the wonderful script by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard alone would make it immensely difficult to argue that the film should not be taught. I presume, Dederer would suggest that the argument against the film does not necessarily have to be made. There is a difference, of course, between arguing for a highly personal choice regarding the ‘stain’

and an institutional decision, yet her incredibly complex and intricate treatment of the subject is enough to introduce her authority into teaching literary theory – with one caveat, perhaps.

For Dederer, it seems, beauty is the be-all and end-all of art, but when it comes to teaching literature, not creative writing, one must keep in mind that there is a slippery slope that brought us here in the first place. Beauty requires subjectivity; subjectivity garners preferences; and preferences make literary criticism very, very tricky, for one does not want to find oneself in the spot of twentieth-century literary criticism. Leavis was not wrong about what he *included* in *The Great Tradition*, for example, but he and many others were wrong about what they *excluded* from the canon in their often idiosyncratic and now infamous ways of deciding what makes a great author. Their ideas on what should or should not be read in academia derived from personal preference too, and to this day, too many English literature classrooms do not reconsider that which has been formerly excluded. The history of teaching English as a university subject has not at all recovered yet from such politics of exclusion. In this sense, one should always be wary of personal preferences under the cover of institutional strategies, but to be fair, this is not Dederer’s issue or concern. It is simply a caveat to keep in mind when choosing to refer to her well-balanced thoughts in discussions of what is so often derogatively called ‘cancel culture.’ It is certainly a fact that these discussions must take place in the lecture theatre, for banning such issues would be untimely and insensitive towards a new generation. Luckily, Dederer’s book is one of the first to fundamentally strengthen the potential for a more objective treatment of the ‘stain.’ Most helpfully, she reminds us that the image of a person behind the art we’re discussing is highly misleading:

Condemnation of the canceled celebrity affirms the idea that there is some positive celebrity who does not have the stain of the canceled celebrity. The bad celebrity, once again, reinforces the idea of the good celebrity, a thing that doesn’t exist, because celebrities are not agents of morality, they’re reproducible images. (241)

It is at this point that any reader of the book with a background in literary theory is hopefully inspired to integrate these matters in their discussion of the difference between an author and their works, regardless of whether we speak of Hemingway or Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath.

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