My subtitle refers to a by now classical essay in the history of American Studies, written by Robert Sklar in 1970 and published in *American Quarterly* at a time when the dominance of the so-called Myth and Symbol School was waning and criticism of the approach was growing. The Myth and Symbol School, which was a combination of intellectual history with the formalist New Criticism practiced in literary studies, had defined the field of American Studies as the study of myths and symbols that had dominated American society and culture from its beginning. They were the ideas and ideals, American Studies scholars argued, which provided American society with a unique national identity. Myths and symbols thus played a key role in defining America and their study, whether in documents of cultural history or the so-called masterpieces of American literature, stood at the center of the field. Myths and symbols provided access to what made America exceptional.

The founding fathers of the field of American Studies, although most of them were left liberals, thus bequeathed a consciously nationalist agenda to the field. This has been the starting point for transnational studies, as it has emerged in the last decade: if we want to discuss the state of American Studies – and other fields in the humanities more generally – we have to address the concept of the national and find ways to go beyond it. However, as the term “Transnational American Studies” indicates, such a perspective is not the antidote to a focus on American society and culture. It is designed to reinterpret America by gaining a better understanding of the role of the United States in the world. Transnationalism is thus an important part of a post-exceptionalist American Studies agenda, but it cannot be the whole.

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1 In his essay “American Studies and the Realities of America” Sklar speaks of a “fusion of literary and intellectual history” (598), but, in order to be precise, one should add: a particular literary history shaped by formalism and a particular type of intellectual history shaped by consensus historians. The result is called “high cultural history” by Sklar: “High cultural history – and that considerable part of the American Studies movement with which it overlapped – asserted the primacy of mind as the central factor in culture, and the autonomy of the individual work of art. It did not necessarily turn its back on society. Rather high cultural history argued that American society could most perceptively be studied through works of intellect and imagination. America’s culture was peculiarly shaped by systems of myths and symbols that were most precisely expressed and deeply explored in the writings of novelists, poets and intellectuals” (599).
story, because not everything in the U.S. can be most meaningfully explained as the result of transnational flow and exchange. It is not enough, then, to deconstruct the national and replace it with the idea of the transnational. We have to continue to look at the U.S. itself and we have to continue to discuss the ways in which this can be done best.

II.

Let us enter this discussion by briefly going back to the essay by Robert Sklar. His essay was well received at the time of its publication as a long-overdue critique of the history of ideas-approach of the Myth and Symbol School. What Sklar had in mind as an alternative was a comprehensive cultural history that would no longer be restricted to the analysis of high culture. Instead, its object of analysis should be “the whole American culture” (602), including its popular culture and the variety of cultures that exist in America, “each one creating its separate institutions and forms, its alternative vision of reality” (601). In other words, for Sklar the realities of America lay in plain sight. One merely had to overcome the limited perspective of high cultural history, replace it by a more comprehensive “whole cultural history” and bolster it by “an intensified study of society and social structure” (600). An extension of the interpretive range of American Studies was needed to make the objects on which the field focused more representative, and the consideration of social structure was needed to explain why these new objects of study were relevant. However, the question of how to describe this social structure – for example, from the point of view of a conservative, liberal, or Marxist perspective – appears to have been of no concern for Sklar. He seems to have had no awareness of the fact that one and the same object can be interpreted differently, depending on the interpretive frame that one uses, and that the problem is therefore not primarily one of the range of subject-matter but of the interpretive frame that one uses for its analysis.²

² For a brief period in the early 1970s it looked as if the approach of a “whole cultural history” could establish itself as a theoretically advanced alternative to the Myth and Symbol School. See, for example, the 8-volume American Culture Series (1970-73) in which renowned and at the time leading scholars like Gordon Wood, Alan Trachtenberg, Neil Harris, Robert Sklar, and Warren Susman edited single volumes that aimed at an interdisciplinary reconstruction of specific periods of American social and cultural history “as a whole.” In theory, the approach wanted to focus on those aspects of American culture that had been ignored by an emphasis on “high cultural history,” in practice this often led to a focus on popular and material culture without, however, providing a convincing explanation what we can learn from this material. Or, to put it differently: these and other examples of the approach (of which the best known and most influential was Warren Susman’s revisionist essay on “The Thirties”) remained very much on the surface of American culture. For a more detailed discussion of the approach and some of its different versions see my essay on “A Whole Cultural History: Zu einigen neueren Versuchen kulturwissenschaftlicher Synthese.”
The idea of a “whole cultural history” did not gain much traction in American Studies, because the assumption that the realities of America lie on the surface and can thus be grasped relatively easily ran against the views of other approaches in the field, including that of the Myth and Symbol School. We encounter at this point a central methodological problem, not only of American Studies, but of literary and cultural studies more generally, that of surface vs. symptomatic readings. Traditionally, for American Studies scholars the question from which they have taken their point of departure has been: how can we grasp the meaning of America when, as we claim, this meaning finds expression in and through American culture? Does the meaning lie on the surface, so that we only have to have the good will or courage to name it explicitly, or does the surface only hide what really constitutes America, so that we have to go to a deeper level to retrieve the realities of America?

The question of the relation between surface and deeper level of meaning has been a key question in the field of American Studies since its beginnings. In fact, the history of the field could be rewritten on the basis of how this question has been answered by different approaches at different times. For example, the programmatically most consistent theoretical statement of the Myth and Symbol School, an essay called “Literature and Covert Culture” by Leo Marx and two of his colleagues at the University of Minnesota, Bernard Bowron and Arnold Rose, begins with the statement: “By covert culture we refer to traits of culture rarely acknowledged by those who possess them. In any society men tend to ignore or repress certain commonly learned attitudes and behavior patterns, much as an individual may ignore or repress certain personal experiences or motives” (84). Americans may have hostile feelings toward machine technology but these feelings are hidden even from themselves, because America is considered the land of progress. It almost seems superfluous to mention that what we have here is the theoretical blueprint for Marx’s classical study *The Machine in the Garden*, probably the one book in American Studies to which critics have referred most often in discussions of the theory and method of the field.

How do we know that Americans held hostile feelings toward technology and how do we learn to recognize the textual manifestations of this hostility? The answer is: by learning to read the symptoms of this repression, that is, by a symptomatic reading: “How then is covert culture recognized? We may assume we are in the presence of covert culture when we note a recurrent pattern of inconsistent or seemingly illogical behavior” (84). Inconsistencies or lack of logic or excessive emotionality can be seen as symptoms of a deep-seated problem that cannot be openly admitted. America was supposed to be the land of progress and thus one could not possibly be against technology on a public level.

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3 Thus, Sklar encourages us not to be too timid: “There is no shame, no diminution of intellectual rigor or professional standards, in asking of American Studies scholarship that it be intellectually liberating, freeing our minds and those of our students to seek new worlds of knowledge and of being” (601).
On the other hand, since the hostility cannot be repressed completely, because strong emotions do not simply go away, this hostility finds expression in indirect forms like imagery or metaphor. This is where popular and great writing differ for the Myth and Symbol School. Popular writers can only reproduce the cultural symptoms more or less helplessly, whereas great writers are sensitive observers and therefore have deep insight into what is going on. That is why great literature can reveal “the presence of a ‘reality’ hidden beneath appearances” (88). In other words, popular literature can only indicate that there is another reality, but high literature can tell us what it is. Only great literature can thus reveal to us what the real realities of America are, because only art has access to a deep knowledge that goes beyond surface phenomena. Beneath the optimistic surface of American life lies an adversarial spirit, expressed in books like *Moby-Dick*, that undermines any naïve belief in progress and draws our attention to the existence of a culture of negation in American life.4

Like many myth and symbol critics, Leo Marx was a politically committed left liberal who believed in America but criticized the betrayal of its ideals.5 There is a famous anecdote told by Marx about the attempt of an American Studies scholar to explain to Richard Hoggart what distinguished American Studies from British Cultural Studies in which, after several unsuccessful attempts, the American Studies scholar finally cried out in despair: “But you don’t understand! I believe in America!” But the America he and scholars like Marx believed in was not always visible and not always easily accessible on the surface. This exceptional America had to be retrieved from the depths of texts like *Moby-Dick* or *Huckleberry Finn*. Thus, Marx needed symptomatic readings to get at a better America that seemed hidden. Once retrieved, this other America could provide a powerful antidote to an “official” optimism in American life that prevented Americans from acknowledging social problems created by industrialization.6

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4 As Leo Marx puts it in the afterword to a recent re-edition of *The Machine in the Garden*: “Nevertheless, *The Machine in the Garden* emphasizes a fundamental divide in American culture and society. It separates the popular affirmation of industrial progress disseminated by spokesmen for the dominant economic and political elites, and the disaffected, often adversarial viewpoint of a minority of political radicals, writers, artists, clergymen, and independent intellectuals” (“Afterword,” 383).

5 The same holds true for other major scholars in the beginning of American Studies, as Sklar points out: “On the other hand, the American Studies movement also attracted many liberal and radical scholars – Miller and Matthiessen were good examples of one and the other – who found in high cultural history and literary criticism opportunities to explore the shortcomings of American culture, the conflict of ideals and actions, of rhetoric and reality” (600). Just as there exist two types of literature for the Myth and Symbol School – formulaic and artistic, affirmative and adversarial –, the U.S. consists of two Americas in the view of these critics, and American literary history, by emphasizing America’s adversarial tradition, is supposed to strengthen a better, “covert” America that is in danger of being pushed aside by a shallow Americanism.

6 Elaine Tyler May provides a useful reminder: “And although most of the myth and symbol scholars accepted the existence of a national consensus, they remained profoundly critical of it. (...) Contrary to the common view, most of the myth and symbol
D.H. Lawrence had paved the way for this type of argument when, in his book *Studies in Classic American Literature*, he had argued that American literature of the nineteenth-century, with its many Leatherstocking-type heroes and sea adventures, looked like juvenile literature on the surface but that this surface only hid a deeper truth about America: “Where is this new bird called the true American? (...) Well, we still don’t get him. So the only thing to do is to have a look for him under the American bushes” (vii). This may be a somewhat unorthodox description of a hermeneutics of depth, but an unmistakable one nevertheless.

Lawrence saw two national literatures that struck him as particularly modern, Russian and American literature. However, there was a crucial difference between the two: “The great difference between the extreme Russians and the extreme Americans lies in the fact that the Russians are explicit and hate eloquence and symbols, seeing in these only subterfuge, whereas the Americans refuse everything explicit and always put up a sort of double meaning. They revel in subterfuge. They prefer their truth safely swaddled away in an arc of bulrushes, and deposited among the reeds until some friendly Egyptian princess comes to rescue the babe” (viii). For Lawrence, American literature is grounded in duplicity. What others had considered a weakness turns out to be a unique strength: the cunning construction of a double meaning that allows writers to smuggle in the truth about what really constitutes America.

How can we gain access to this subtext? As I have argued in a different context, in Lawrence’s argument “a psychoanalytical model of doubleness as a configuration of repression is replaced by an expressionist image of skinning, conceptualizing the subtext as a level of meaning which breaks through and reveals itself in the reader’s encounter with the text.” This provides the double structure of the text with a different function: while a double-decker model of above and below is useful in supporting the idea of repression, “the skinning metaphor can serve as welcome analogy for a myth of cultural or individual self-renewal and self-regeneration” (“Double Structures,” 119-20). In other words: the classic American writers were modernists *avant la lettre*. Structures of doubleness can thus have different functions. But in both cases, practitioners were not writing a celebratory scholarship. In fact, in the work of scholars of the frontier like Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, the agrarian myth is cast in an extremely negative light” (May 187). It is cast in an extremely negative light because it prevents Americans from having a hard look at the realities of industrialization (and, by implication, capitalism).

7 Another influential critic in the early stages of American Studies who was a strong admirer of Lawrence was Leslie Fiedler: “Of all the literary critics who have written about American books, the one who has seemed to me closest to the truth, even at those points where I finally disagree with him, and who has brought to his subject an appropriate passion and style, is, of course, D.H. Lawrence. His *Studies in Classic American Literature* attempted for the first time the kind of explication which does not betray the complexity or perilousness of its theme; and in the pages of that little book I found confirmation of my own suspicions that it is duplicity and outrageousness which determine the quality of those American books ordinarily consigned to the children’s shelf in the library” (Fiedler 14-15). But in his study *Love and Death in the American Novel* Fiedler uses
Leo Marx as well as Lawrence, the idea of a double structure is needed to turn the literary text into a work of art that can help us to gain “deeper” insights into American culture.8

III.

Myth and symbol critics like Leo Marx still believed in America, but the next generation in American Studies had its formative experiences in the Sixties, had gone through the experience of Vietnam and had become skeptical about America. What was wrong about America was no longer conformity or a shallow optimism. The real realities of America are now racism, sexism and capitalism, that is, aspects of American life that had been ignored or repressed by liberalism and had therefore remained hidden from official American self-definitions. These were realities that had had no place in the narrative of American exceptionalism.

Sacvan Bercovitch, successor to Perry Miller on the chair of American civilization at Harvard University and for twenty years the leading American Studies scholar after the Myth and Symbol School, provides an interesting case study of transition. Perry Miller had put the Puritan errand at the center of American self-perceptions. But for Bercovitch, this Puritan errand is not what it seems to be. At a closer look, there is an unmistakable ideological dimension to it: “It is that ideological function of the errand I want to stress. Considered as myth, the errand was a radical skewing of Christian tradition to fit the fantasies of a particular sect. Considered as ideology, it was a mode of consensus designed to fill the needs of a certain social order. Perhaps the most obvious of these needs was expansion. By errand, the Puritans meant migration – not simply from one place to another, but from a depraved Old World to a New Canaan. In other words, they used the biblical myth of exodus and conquest to justify imperialism before the fact” (3). Why had that not been realized before? Not because it was hidden. To be sure, myths and symbols can mask social realities but more often they are based on “a very real system of values, symbols, and beliefs” and “persist through their capacity to help people act in history” (1). Thus, their effectiveness is not based on their power to deceive. They are, on the contrary, part of a national consensus that is widely shared and constantly reaffirmed through exceptionalist rhetoric. Americans participate in this rhetoric of consensus, because it allows them to disavow the darker realities of American life.

the argument of a double structure to provide yet another “deeper” meaning: the suppressed truth classic American fiction reveals once one looks deeper is how immature American society still is. As Fiedler argues, Americans try to hide their adolescent immaturity even from themselves, so that duplicity also functions as self-deception.

8 Doubleness has been a key issue in many discussions of American literature, not always from a political perspective, however. In my essay “Double Structures and Sources of Instability in American Literature,” I discuss different approaches that focus on doubleness as a source of aesthetic experience, from the Myth and Symbol School to Deconstruction.
One reason why the terms myth and symbol had gained such prominence in the post-War years was because critics wanted to avoid the term ideology. For thirty years the term had been tabooed in analyses of American society. It was part of the rhetoric of consensus to claim that America had reached the end of ideology. In defiance of this liberal consensus, Bercovitch introduces the term ideology again but reconceptualizes it: it is no longer a class-based (false) consciousness but a commonly held world view, such as, for example, American exceptionalism and the idea of the American errand. Even in dissent, the idea of a unique nation that has a special historical mission still remains the tacit premise for defining America. For Bercovitch, this explains why, in contrast to other Western societies, there is no socialist movement or strong oppositional counter-tradition in America. The major writers of the *American Renaissance* have made especially effective contributions to a national rhetoric of consensus by creating an illusion of resistance through art. However, to reveal the ideological function of the rhetoric of consensus, no symptomatic reading is needed, only a non-exceptionalist perspective that provides the necessary distance for having another look at the role the rhetoric of consensus has played historically.

In a way, Bercovitch is the last of the myth and symbol critics because his objects of analysis are still American myths. But in contrast to the Myth and Symbol School, he is a critic of the idea of American exceptionalism and his critical work is very much concerned with the question of how to overcome an exceptionalist view of America. To be sure, the American founding myths serve psychic needs – otherwise they would not be so resistant to critique – but in contrast to the views of the New Americanists, they do not yet constitute subjectivity for Bercovitch. In principle, they can be demystified and overcome, and after Hiroshima, Vietnam, and Watergate they have already become increasingly hollow. Thus, Bercovitch can conclude: “Who knows, the errand may yet come to rest, where it always belonged, in the realm of the imagination, and the United States recognized for what it is, one more profane nation in the wilderness of the world” (20).

For Bercovitch, American exceptionalism tries to hide the “profane” reality that the U.S. is not unique but merely one nation among many others. But whereas Bercovitch still wants to undermine exceptionalist claims by an emphasis on the unexceptional non-distinctiveness of the American nation, scholars in the following generation saw this “normality” as a mere cover-up. In consequence, the realities of America are redefined, in fact, inverted. To be sure, as in the case of Leo Marx the covert level remains the site of the real America, but this real America has now changed its character. While in the

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9 It is interesting to compare Bercovitch with Leo Marx on this point. One may argue that, deep down, *The Machine in the Garden* is also trying to explain why there is no socialism in the U.S. For Marx, the reason lies in the continuing imaginary attraction of American pastoralism. In Bercovitch’s broadened view of ideology, pastoralism is merely one element in a rhetoric of consensus. It can easily be exchanged by the idea of the errand or the frontier or the American dream of success. Thus, it is no longer a single myth that can explain America but its exceptionalist mythology as a whole.
Myth and Symbol School the double meaning of the text signals the possibility of negation, it now reveals exactly the opposite, namely the illusionary nature of any hope for negation. There is no normal or better America, not even a hidden one. In fact, the real horror lurks on the covert level, the former site of opposition, where things are worse than on the surface. Even the great writers are now affected by these ugly realities of America, as, for example, when Toni Morrison uses *Moby-Dick* to draw attention to the pervasiveness of whiteness as a hidden racial marker in America. The “normality” of American life turns out to be an especially insidious form of oppression. It is interesting to see that *Moby-Dick* can still tell us something important about America but the “something important” is now an ugly truth, no longer a manifestation of a better America. And because this reality has been suppressed, a symptomatic reading is needed in order to reveal its true nature.

Morrison’s case is of special interest methodologically because of the changing nature of symptomatic readings. If we ask what the relation between literature and society is in readings like hers, so that literature can tell us what America is “really” all about, the assumption now is that the relation is metonymic. There is no “organic,” metaphoric relation between the whiteness of the whale and the race problem; their “relation” simply consists of the fact that they are both manifestations of a problem that pervades all of American society. For Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, the scene in *Huckleberry Finn* where a steamboat destroys the raft is a key metaphor through which Mark Twain, the great writer, provides insights into the ambivalent views Americans held about progress. But racism is everywhere and thus every aspect of the text can, in principle, stand for the whole, as, to give another example from revisionist American Studies, when Amy Kaplan calls empire the “submerged foundation” of all of American culture. If empire is a submerged, “covert” foundation, then it is foundational and that means that it constitutes and shapes all of that culture’s manifestations in one way or another.10

IV.

Thus, from focusing on single, privileged moments of insight, symptomatic readings have moved on to larger generalizations – to something that, in the words of Fredric Jameson, can be called the political unconscious. Jameson’s book *The Political Unconscious* had little direct influence on American Studies

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10 On the significance of Morrison’s book see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus: “The influence of Jameson’s version of symptomatic reading can be felt in the centrality of two scholarly texts from the 1990s: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991), which crystallized the emergent field of queer theory, and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), which set forth an agenda for studying the structuring role of race in American literature. Both showed that one could read a text’s silences, gaps, style, tone, and imagery as symptoms of the queerness or race absent only apparently from its pages” (Best 6). To this list of influential, agenda-shaping texts Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) should be added.
but it played a crucial role in giving the idea of a political unconscious a theoretically sophisticated basis. This idea, in turn, stands at the center of the theoretical reorientation that the 1960s brought about in literary and cultural studies in the wake of the Paris May and the new social movements. Both called for the development of a new form of political criticism and regarded formalism and aesthetics as merely an escape from politics.

One of the radical alternatives to formalism seemed to be Marxism. But orthodox Marxism was widely discredited by that time, both politically and as a political hermeneutics. It was Louis Althusser who showed a way out by drawing on ideas from structuralism and reconceptualizing Marxism as “structural Marxism.” One of his students was Pierre Macherey who applied Althusser’s revised Marxism to literary studies. Macherey’s study A Theory of Literary Production paved the way for a major reorientation in political criticism in which the work’s ideology (and hence its politics) no longer manifests itself on the level of content but in what Macherey calls “the structures of the ideological” (43, m.t.): “The hold of ideology can be undermined by radical criticism, however not by a superficial denunciation of its message; instead, a conventional ideological criticism (critique de l’idée) has to be replaced by a critique of the structures of the ideological (critique de l’idée))” (43, m.t.).

One may also call this the opening shot in the transition from political radicalism to cultural radicalism. In contrast to the interpretive practice of critics still working in the tradition of political radicalism, a political interpretation of a literary text now cannot simply focus on its politically or ideologically relevant passages but must consider its mode of expression, called, from today’s perspective somewhat surprisingly, “the specifically literary dimension” by Macherey (27, m.t.). Because of its specifically literary dimension, a literary text cannot be reduced to ideological messages. One consequence is a reconceptualization of ideology. In traditional political criticism ideology is identified with a particular political position or class based-view. Now,

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11 Macherey’s book was first published in 1966, one year after his cooperation with Althusser on Lire le Capital. A German translation appeared in 1974, an English translation in 1975. Jameson’s study The Political Unconscious in which he refers to Macherey several times, was published in 1981. Macherey also had a major influence on Terry Eagleton; in fact, one may argue that the approach called “cultural materialism” was developed on the basis of an application of Althusser’s theories to literary studies. For quotations from Macherey’s book, I could only use the German translation from which I have translated into English.

12 In the interpretive framework of political radicalism, including orthodox Marxism, there are progressive and reactionary forces in society, and the challenge is to provide support for the one and resist the other. For this political struggle, there are still institutions like progressive political parties, or the labor unions, or the student protest movements, or simply the institution of art, that hold a promise of resistance. In cultural radicalism, such hopes are rejected as liberal self-delusions, because for this newer type of radicalism the actual source of power does no longer lie in particular institutions but in culture and its processes of subject formation. I have described the difference between the two and its consequences for literary interpretation in more detail in my essay on “The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism.”
ideology also manifests itself through the form it takes; in fact, the literary form becomes its primary site of manifestation and the ideology of form the main focus of analysis.

Macherey’s revision of ideological criticism can be understood as response to an impasse that Marxist literary criticism had reached in the post-War years. As long as the politics of a literary text was sought on the overt level, only critical realism qualified as a potentially progressive, politically acceptable literary form, whereas movements like modernism were rejected wholesale as decadent. By the mid-Sixties, this schematic approach became increasingly untenable. If Marxist literary criticism was to be taken seriously as an approach in literary studies, it had to be able to deal with the question of literary form. By making form the actual site of ideology, Macherey turned weakness into strength. Ideology is seen as a representation of reality that manages to successfully paper over certain “unspeakable” realities: “…ideology consists of that which must remain unmentioned. Ideology exists, because there are things that cannot be openly expressed” (44, m. t.). In a programmatic reconceptualization of the base-superstructure model (Widerspiegelungstheorie) Macherey writes: “It is thus wrong to see contradictions in the literary work as a truthful reflection of historical contradictions; they are on the contrary the result of a lack of truthful reflection” (40, m. t.).

Or, to put it differently: they are symptoms of something that could not be openly articulated and had to be repressed.

In order to successfully realize its political function, ideology must leave out or repress certain facts without, however, giving any indication that it has done so. Ideology is thus most successful when it manages to create the illusion of a coherent and internally consistent representation of reality. The literary form that is most effective in achieving this reality effect is realism and thus, in an astounding reverse that reflects the transition from political to cultural radicalism, the form that was formerly considered the potentially most critical of ideology – namely realism – is now the potentially most ideological of all. This raises the question of how the ideological nature of realism can be revealed, although it manages to present the illusion of a truthful representation of reality to us. The only way to undermine this reality effect is to restore “to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history” (Jameson 20). Because realistic texts can only achieve their reality effect by suppressing aspects of reality that do not fit, they must produce inconsistencies and textual symptoms that point to hidden

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13 One may claim, however, that Macherey is not yet quite clear on the sources of the work’s inconsistencies and contradictions. Are they produced by the need to leave out important aspects of reality and therefore undermine the (authority of the) work’s representation of reality, or because the literary form “doubles” the ideology and thereby does not leave it intact in its original form. At times, Macherey sounds like Roland Barthes, at others like Jacques Lacan. One of the major differences between Macherey and Jameson is that Jameson, who harshly criticizes Barthes on several occasions, ties the argument firmly to Lacan’s concept of the Real as a word for an inaccessible reality.

14 The analysis of 19th century realism thus stands at the center of Macherey’s and Jameson’s studies.
tensions, conflicts and contradictions: “In Jameson’s version of symptomatic reading, the symptoms represent contradictions that have been driven into unconsciousness by repression” (Crane 81). What pushes Jameson towards symptomatic readings is thus not necessarily a “suspicious mind,” as Rita Felski would later describe the motivation for symptomatic readings, but the logic of a “literary” redefinition of ideology in which ideology does no longer manifest itself in terms of ideological content but in the literary form of expression.

Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* was instrumental in establishing symptomatic readings in literary studies as part of what Paul Ricoeur has called a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” This hermeneutics proceeds on the assumption that we cannot trust the surface of the text, including that of a realist text, and that the actual meaning of the text may therefore be repressed or hidden underneath. As Rita Felski has pointed out in her essay on “Suspicious Minds,” in the hermeneutics of suspicion the interpreter takes on the heroic role of a detective or of an archeologist who explores dark secrets or dark caves in search of hidden facts or a hidden truth. In fact, at a closer look, it is even better than that, because it is the scholar who now takes the place formerly occupied by the great writer. In revisionist criticism even the great writers are reproducing the dominant ideology in their works, and it is only the scholar who still seems able to penetrate the deceptive ideological surface. Thus, Crane can speak of the heroic agency of the reader “who is able to bring to light meaning that has been hidden from everyone else” (Crane 83). However, the funny thing is that the hidden truth has always been in plain sight. Because Macherey and Jameson are Althusserians, we know from the start what the underlying cause of the symptoms is that they will identify, just as we already know the narratives that psychoanalysts will weave around the symptoms they find, or the underlying realities of America that the black activist Toni Morrison or the New Americanist critic of imperialism Amy Kaplan will find. Seen from that perspective, symptomatic readings perform a magician’s trick, because they already know what the symptom stands for. “Hermeneutics of suspicion” is thus actually a wrong designation, since critics do not merely suspect that something must be hidden but they already know what they will find. One may even go one step further and claim that certain textual aspects are declared to be symptoms, because of their apparent usefulness for a critical analysis of capitalist and/or American society. By presenting one’s view as the result of scrupulous detective work, one can endow it with the authority provided by a heroic narrative of discovery. But the game is rigged from the start, because the detective already

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15 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. See, for example, chapt. 2 and the passages on “Interpretation as Exercise of Suspicion,” 32-36 in which Ricoeur discusses Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

16 See also Rita Felski: “The pervasiveness of this mindset also testifies to the increasing pressures of professionalization and the scramble to shore up academic authority: the hermeneutics of suspicion, after all, assigns a unique depth of understanding to the trained reader or theorist, equipped to see through the illusions in which others are immersed” (“Suspicious Minds,” 218).
knows who the murderer is and the daring archeologist already knows what she will discover in the dark recesses of the cave. Symptomatic readings often function tautologically: they look at symptoms as expressions of an underlying truth and take the underlying truth to explain the symptoms they have selected to stand for the underlying truth.

V.

The problem of symptomatic readings has at present become a key methodological issue in literary and cultural studies and thus goes beyond the field of American Studies. Recent publications like the important essay “Suspicious Minds” by Rita Felski in Poetics Today or a special issue of the journal Representations, collecting essays that were first delivered to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of The Political Unconscious, indicate that the question of a hermeneutics of suspicion is currently getting special attention in literary and cultural studies. In both publications, the phenomenon is attributed to the rise of critical theory in literary and cultural studies. In their introductory essay to the Representations-issue on “Surface Reading,” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus attribute the search for hidden meanings to the special theoretical authority Marxism and psychoanalysis had gained since the 1970s. Rita Felski’s essay poses the interesting question why the search for hidden or repressed meanings seems to be so dominant among contemporary scholars and finds the answer in a particular state of mind, a distinct sensibility she calls suspiciousness: “Suspicious reading inscribes itself in the psyche as a particular mode of thought and feeling, a mind-set” (222). Here, too, the implication is that the rise of critical theory has led to unhealthy attitudes that have had a negative impact on literary and cultural studies, leading to “the critic’s entrapment within a suspicious sensibility” (218). What may at times have served a useful purpose has now become a bad habit.

But such an explanation does not fit the American Studies examples I have given, because neither the left liberal Leo Marx, nor the modernist D.H. Lawrence are motivated by a particularly suspicious sensibility. The problem of symptomatic readings may still be seen in another context, then. I see the phenomenon not simply as the result of a particular critical climate and mind-set, contaminated by Marxism, psychoanalysis or cultural radicalism more generally. Rather, it is a problem of a much more fundamental nature.

17 Best and Marcus start their discussion of surface and symptomatic readings with a section on “The Way We Read Now”: “One factor enabling exchanges between disciplines in the 1970s and 1980s was the acceptance of psychoanalysis and Marxism as metalanguages. It was not just any idea of interpretation that circulated among the disciplines, but a specific type that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter. This ‘way’ of interpreting went by the name of ‘symptomatic reading.’ We were trained in symptomatic reading, became attached to the power it gave to the act of interpreting, and find it hard to let go of the belief that texts and their readers have an unconscious” (I).
that is constitutive of many fields in the humanities, above all literary and historical studies, but also art history, film studies and other forms of cultural studies. American literary history belongs to the field of national histories that, in their modern form, have been decisively shaped by Hegelianism.\footnote{For a more detailed analysis of this aspect see my essay on “American Literary History and the Romance with America” from which I have taken parts of the following passage. The same phenomenon can be observed in histories of American art, as I show in “Transatlantic Narratives About American Art: A Chapter in the Story of Art History’s Hegelian Unconscious.”}

With his concept of a history of the universal spirit (*Weltgeist*), Hegel found a way to tie together single objects in a story of progressive evolution and to assign national cultures a significant role in different stages of historical development. A number of claims derived from Hegel’s starting premise have been eminently influential and still have a lingering presence in many literary and cultural histories. By regarding art as supreme expression of the universal spirit in an age, the study of art was moved from the leisure interest of an upper class to the center of society’s self-definition. Art could become a privileged form of national self-recognition and gain central relevance for the analysis of society and culture.\footnote{See, for example, the following statement by Leslie Fiedler that can be seen as representative of the early phase of American Studies. As Fiedler puts it, the subject of his study *Love and Death in the American Novel* “is the American experience as recorded in our classic fiction” (Fiedler 8).}

The assumption that its history is organized by a unifying principle that connects various stages and single objects in meaningful fashion made it possible to provide an ostensibly random collection of cultural forms with a sense of direction and purpose and created a basis for the writing of national histories.

For literary histories, however, the most important legacy of Hegelianism may be the search for a unifying principle as the basis for the identification of a national identity. Ever since Hegel, intellectual, literary and art historians have been in search of such unifying principles. Intellectual historians solved the problem by transforming Hegel’s manifestation of the spirit in an age to a manifestation of the spirit of an age, and made that region- or period-specific spirit – e.g. in the form of the New England Mind or one of the American founding myths – their starting assumption for the analysis of a particular area or era.\footnote{One of the first major books in American Studies was Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind*, an exemplary study in the history-of-ideas tradition. In the following generation, the word ‘mind’ disappeared from book titles in American Studies but not from approaches in the field. For example, in his spirited defense of American Studies, “American Studies – A Defense of an Unscientific Method,” Leo Marx defines American Studies as “the effort to describe and understand the state of mind of a group (or groups) of people at some moment in the past” (76).}

But although the assumption of a mind that can be seen as expression of something like the essence of a nation or region may be helpful to provide interpretive objects with larger meanings and significance, such a mind is also by definition an elusive phenomenon that is hard to pin down. We therefore have to learn to interpret its manifestations in order to be able to understand what they tell us about the true nature of that national
or regional mind. In other words, an explanatory model in which the textual surface expresses something that is lying behind or underneath the surface is built into the starting premise of the humanities, namely that culture is a privileged expression of a national mind or of the mind (or the character, as it is also sometimes called) of smaller cultural or social units. Even where a national ideology is rejected, the starting assumption – that a single text represents a larger totality – can still be at work. It is certainly true that new revisionist histories of American literature are no longer nationalistic but they retain the Hegelian premise that literary texts and cultural objects can be a key for understanding a social body or historical period.

If literary texts and other cultural objects are of interest because they stand for a larger totality and therefore can tell us something significant about that totality (called America in American Studies), then the question of the representativeness of the interpretive object arises. Are all texts equally expressive of their culture? Or are certain texts especially helpful? Sklar’s appeal to replace a – in his view unrepresentative – high cultural history by a “whole cultural history” is obviously an attempt to put the question of representativeness on new grounds by recommending a method of interpretation that would try to include the full plurality of American culture. But in the final analysis, a “whole cultural history” must also at one point draw a conclusion from its comprehensive study of a historical period or a region and tell us by what they are characterized or distinguished. Plurality can thus become the new totality.²¹ In contrast, symptomatic readings go exactly into the other direction: they offer a strong claim that a single phenomenon can provide a key for understanding a whole culture. As we have seen, they do so by offering a different answer to the question of representativeness, namely that of metonymization: if all texts are part of a totality that is characterized by capitalism, racism or homophobia, then all texts are shaped by these features and can represent them equally well.²²

Symptomatic readings, then, do not only provide a new and promising approach for political criticism; in doing so, they also provide a new and ingenious answer to the key problem of the humanities, that of representativeness. In this sense, surface readings and symptomatic readings are not fundamentally different; both have found ways, albeit very different ones, to claim

²¹ It would therefore also be hermeneutically naive to try to solve the problem by replacing the study of nation by a (critical) regionalism, or by replacing macro-level studies that aim at the “big picture” by micro-level studies that are more open to contingent and multiple forces and do not apply single factor models of explanation. However, although for multi-factor models it may be the interrelationship of elements that shapes the whole, and not any single factor, the heuristic assumption must still be a “whole” in the sense of some form of integration, that is, an interpretive unit in which multiple factors come together and produce a result that goes beyond the single phenomenon.

²² See the astute characterization of New Americanist assumptions by Johannes Voelz: “As the title Cultures of United States Imperialism indicates, the critical point of the volume lay not only in replacing the ideology of American Exceptionalism with an account of U.S. imperialism but also in extending the critique of empire from foreign policy and economics to culture itself” (175).
that their objects of analysis represent a larger totality, no matter whether it is called nation, region, class, or social group, and that they can provide a key for understanding this larger unit. In American Studies, this larger unit is “America” and thus we find three different Americas in the three approaches we have sketched: in the Myth and Symbol School an exceptional America that has not yet reached its unique potential; in Sklar’s “whole cultural history” a plural America that has not yet fully acknowledged its plurality; and in symptomatic readings of a political unconscious, an America that is living in a state of mis-recognition and self-deception, either by joining a rhetoric of consensus or by disavowing the realities of America altogether. Although it cannot be done here for lack of space, it would not be difficult to demonstrate how these underlying views of America shape the characteristic interpretive procedures of these approaches. Symptomatic readings provide merely one version of what literary and cultural studies do all the time, and a suspicious disposition is not an inherent aspect of the method itself but of the particular politics on which it is based.

For such a politics, symptomatic readings can be eminently useful. If you say that racism is still pervasive in the U.S. that will hardly cause more than a polite nod in intellectual circles. But if you claim that even *Moby-Dick* is racist, that will still capture people’s attention and put you in the position of someone who has realized something about America that others have not. The scholar becomes a scout and a pioneer and he or she can be in that position because others have not yet dared to acknowledge the full extent of America’s racism, namely that even America’s masterpieces are affected by it.²³ When Jameson wrote *The Political Unconscious*, or when Kaplan wrote her book on *The Making of Empire*, concepts like capitalism or imperialism were still somewhat suspect and often dismissed as polemical terms. That is one of the reasons why the Marxist Jameson prefers to use the word history to refer to a truth about capitalism that he sees as repressed. Symptomatic readings made it possible to smuggle in “truths” about America that were tabooed as long as the official American self-definition was based on the idea of American exceptionalism.

²³ Cf. Crane: “Despite these theoretical difficulties, symptomatic readings remain appealing because they are generally strong readings; the interpretation they offer is different from what appears obvious on the surface of the text. The symptomatic reader claims access to meanings that others do not notice, and of which the author (or text) is unaware or seeks to repress” (Crane 83). Fittingly, Felski speaks of “the bravura of such claims that helps ensure their impact” (228). In an academic culture, in which strong statements, even if they are seen as overstatements, can help the scholar to stand out and can thus become a golden opportunity for individual distinction, symptomatic readings and their dramatic revelation-effects can obviously be helpful. (On this point, see my essay on “The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism.”) However, in the present essay, symptomatic readings are not discussed as a professional strategy but as a theoretical position.
VI.

But now they are no longer tabooed. Political and social developments have moved certain phenomena from the deep level to the surface. There is now not only a liberal consensus about American society but also a critical one. One may even claim: what used to lurk underneath the surface is now in plain sight. Post-exceptionalist American Studies thus do no longer have to define themselves as a discipline in search of political truths that have been repressed and have to be retrieved. Does this mean that we should move from symptomatic readings to surface readings or, to use Josselson’s more fitting, less loaded terms: should we replace a hermeneutics of demystification by a hermeneutics of faith whose goal is a faithful restoration of meaning? As Josselson shows, such an approach could draw on phenomenology as its philosophical basis and methodological inspiration in order to do full justice to the subjective world of a speaker or author. Indeed, in her criticism of the suspicious mind-set of symptomatic readings, Rita Felski characterizes her own counter-position as a turn to “neophenomenology” (“After Suspicion,” 31). Similarly, in their critique of Jameson’s method of symptomatic readings, Best and Marcus propose a “new formalism” as an alternative, “literal readings that take texts at face value” (12), because, as they argue, “texts can reveal their own truths” (11). A common assumption in new formalist work “is that we do not need to criticize art-works, because they contain their own ‘critical (and self-critical) agency’” (13).

Like phenomenology, formalism is based on the assumption that it is possible for subjects to know their own world. The subject “is the expert on his or her own experience” (Josselson 5). This claim also applies to literary texts. Our task as interpreters is thus a faithful reconstruction of a meaning that is already in place. For this purpose, we have to take a literary text at its word. The high prestige that works of art possess(ed) can be attributed to the fact that they are seen as fully achieved manifestations of human consciousness. In contrast, readings searching for hidden meanings see consciousness as potentially a site of illusion and self-deception. Even where these readings do not subscribe to the concept of false consciousness, they claim that there are “aspects of self-understanding or meaning-making that operate outside of the participant’s awareness” (Josselson 15). What links different approaches in critical theory, including those of cultural radicalism, is the assumption that subjective experience is not necessarily transparent to itself. For confirmation, they may even refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, who, in his classical study on hermeneutics, Wahrheit und Methode, sees prejudice as the necessary, unavoidable basis and starting point for understanding.25

Felski’s version is more ambitious: “Phenomenology seeks to make the familiar newly surprising through the scrupulousness of its attention, exposing the strangeness of the self-evident” (“After Suspicion,” 32).

In Gadamer’s use, “prejudice” means “horizons of understanding constituted by language and culture” (Josselson 10). Thus, a “prejudiced” perception of the world is not necessarily the consequence of ideological blinders, but reflects the fact that we simply
Gadamer’s position is often associated with a hermeneutics of faith, because he believes that the prejudice of the interpreter can be overcome, if interpreters are willing to reflect on their own premises. Nevertheless, it is Gadamer’s starting point that underlying premises (or “prejudices”) – often tacitly held – provide an interpretive frame that shapes the interpreters’ perception decisively and determines their interpretive focus. One logical consequence is that one and the same object can be interpreted differently, depending on different interpretive frames. From that point of view, the assumption that close readings can avoid interpretive distortions and reveal faithfully “what the text says about itself” (11) is a stunning hermeneutical naiveté.

To criticize the – largely unquestioned – dominance of symptomatic readings in American Studies thus does not mean that we have to stay with – and, worse, be stuck with – mere “surface” readings or a literalist formalism. We must still be interested in “meanings that are not immediately apparent on the surface of the text” (Crane 83). In effect, we must continue to proceed from the assumption that, for a number of reasons, meanings will not always be apparent on the surface: “It is a property of all texts to have manifest and latent content (…)” (Josselson 5). Sometimes meanings are implied but not explicitly expressed: “Interpretation is not limited to direct, expressed, explicit meanings but may consider implicit meanings that lie beneath or within the structure of the language used to depict experience” (Josselson 8). Sometimes views are tacitly held without the subject’s self-awareness.

Language and cannot focus on everything at the same time and in equal measure and that we therefore use filters through which we view reality.

Josselson mentions this aspect almost in passing, without drawing any conclusions from it: “In anthropology, researchers have studied the same culture with an aim to present their informants as they see themselves and have nevertheless created very dissimilar portraits” (10).

This naiveté in Best’s and Marcus’ plea for surface readings becomes apparent, for example, in the following reference to the New Criticism: “This valorization of surface reading as willed, sustained proximity to the text recalls the aims of New Criticism, which insisted that the key to understanding a text’s meaning lay within the text itself, particularly in its formal properties” (10). In spite of sixty years of scholarship on the New Criticism, the authors seem to be entirely unaware of the fact that the close reading practiced by the New Criticism stood in the service of a particular aesthetic theory which made New Critics register and value certain formal properties and dismiss or ignore others, irrespective of their calls for close readings. The problem of interpretation is that of selection (which even a “mere” description has to make) and the principles (in Gadamer’s term “prejudices”) on which these selections are made. Literary theory is not the opposite to description; it is the attempt to clarify what the principles of selection are, no matter whether the interpretive focus lies on the surface or on other levels.

Thus Felski concludes: “Suspicion remains an indispensable sensibility and reading strategy in the classroom; students need to learn to read against the grain, to question received wisdoms, to learn the fundamentals of critical interpretation” (“After Suspicion,” 33). As it turns out, Felski’s criticism is not one of suspicious readings per se but their doctrinaire application: “Elevated to the governing principle of literary studies, however, suspicion solidifies into a sensibility and set of disciplinary norms no less doctrinaire than the fastidious aestheticism and canon worship it sought to replace” (33). Hence, she adds: “Critique needs to be supplemented by generosity” (33).
narrative can structure the representation of our experiences in unforeseen ways. Sometimes certain aspects of experience are taken for granted because of habit and are thus not explicitly stated. But they may be of special interest for the cultural historian nevertheless, precisely for that reason. A good example is provided by Clifford Geertz’s interpretation of Balinese cockfighting. No interpretive harm would be done, if descriptions of this event would remain on the surface, but through Geertz’s reading, we gain a valuable perspective that goes beyond the transparent physicality of the phenomenon itself.

The purpose of interpretation is not only to recover what we already know but, much more importantly, the discovery of that which we do not yet know. The absent, the latent, the hidden continue to be important dimensions of meaning. However, symptomatic readings should not be our method of discovery. Symptomatic readings can be criticized for a number of reasons, including their notion of the unconscious, but the major problem is that they must provide single-cause explanations because of their starting assumptions: if I start from the assumption that a literary text or cultural object represents a larger unit, my interpretation has to identify those elements that are, in one way or another, pointing toward that larger unit, so that my interpretation has to be metaphorical (as in the Myth and Symbol School) or metonymical (as in cultural radicalism). And if I identify this larger unit as a structural totality that does not have any representative expressive core, then the meaning of the larger unit is, by definition, an “absent cause” and can only manifest itself in the form of a symptom. This set of assumptions also works the other way round, however: if what I am looking for as an interpreter of literary texts is a symptom, then this symptom can only have one cause, not several, and must therefore represent a single cause, even though this single cause may be an absent one. Again, the example of Jameson is instructive here.

VII.

The long and carefully argued first chapter of Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, entitled “On Interpretation,” is one of the theoretically most ambitious recent discussions of how to constitute and define one’s interpretive object without falling into the Hegelian trap. In drawing on Althusser’s terminology, Jameson’s search for an alternative starts with a rejection of the Hegelian model of an expressive totality, because this model “presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an inner essence, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole (…)” (24). However, the problem is that such an “essentially allegorical operation” (33) cannot only be found in approaches within an idealist tradition of intellectual history. It has also been a mainstay of traditional Marxist approaches: “Here Lukács’ essays on realism may serve as a central example of the way in which the cultural text is taken as an essentially allegorical model of society as a whole (…)” (33).
Jameson insists that only Marxism can restore to the surface of the text “the repressed and buried reality” of history (20). But he faces the problem of how this can be done without falling back into an allegorical mode of explanation. The challenge consists in no less than the outline of a new hermeneutics, and this new hermeneutics is based on Althusser’s concept of a “structural causality.” Texts are determined, not by any single element, not even by the economical base, but by a “structural totality.” Again, the move is from content to form, from a mind that expresses the whole to a structure that constitutes the whole. And in contrast to Hegel’s universal spirit that can be expressed best in its essence by works of art, “this ‘structure’ is an absent cause, since it is nowhere empirically present as an element, it is not a part of the whole or one of the levels, but rather the entire system of relationships among those levels” (36). Seen as “absent cause,” this “totality is not available for representation” (55). It is only visible in its effects – through which it is present in its very absence.

How can we identify these effects, “of which linguistic practice is one,” (46) as “representations” of the absent cause? As in the case of Macherey, we have to look out for discontinuity, disunity, dissonance and discrepancy: “The aim of a properly structural interpretation or exegesis thus becomes the explosion of the seemingly unified text into a host of clashing and contradictory elements” (56). This sounds like Barthes and not Lacan, and thus Jameson hastens to add that the heterogeneous impulses of the text have “to be once again related, but in the mode of structural difference and determinate contradiction” (56). The contradiction must have a deeper cause and stand for something, it cannot just be a result of the play of the text. And what it stands for is also clear: it is the absent cause that cannot be explicitly represented and thus has to be traced through its effects. Moreover, although the cause is absent, we also know what it stands for, namely no longer Hegel’s expressive spirit but Althusser’s theory of structural totality of which the interpretation provides an allegorical reproduction. Jameson’s attempt to escape a Hegelian totality (and hence an allegorical reading) thus has a paradoxical result: allegorization is not avoided but merely moved to a theory that promises to avoid allegorization. Interpretations in this mode are therefore entirely predictable: contradictions are symptoms; symptoms are the effects of an absent cause; the absent cause is a structure that determines the whole; hence symptoms stand for the whole and can become the basis for a sweeping generalization about the whole.

Jameson’s struggle with the issues of representation and representativeness provides an exemplary case study for literary theory in times of cultural radicalism. As such it had a strong impact on literary studies, including American literary studies. Again and again, cultural radicalism has re-enacted the Althusserian move from overt ideological content to the “ideology of form” as the actual site of the text’s politics. And again and again, the textual presence of this politics can only be conceptualized as absence. Jameson’s paradigmatic move from expressive totality to structural totality has two important consequences for the interpretation of literary texts. One is that the
unrepresentable absent cause will inevitably be conceptualized as a single cause. Secondly, such an approach will eventually have to give us an idea about what this structural totality is determined by, because such a revelation is, after all, the rationale for symptomatic readings that want to retrieve hidden and repressed meanings. For Jameson, in following Althusser and Macherey, it is the mode of production that provides the organizing unity for the structural totality. But, as subsequent work in American Studies has shown, the absent cause that determines the structural totality can also be race, queerness, empire, or the nation-state.

The major problem with symptomatic readings, then, is not a bad mind-set or some form of radical posturing but a philosophically problematic starting point: beginning with Macherey and then reaching a more sophisticated formulation in Jameson, the literary and cultural approaches of cultural radicalism are still based on the assumption of a totality that gives meaning to all of its parts. In the case of cultural radicalism, this totality will be a single cause because of the need of political criticism to claim that the political shapes all aspects of reality, even where this does not seem to be the case at first sight. Thus, the determining political cause can be absent on the surface. The starting premise of cultural radicalism that everything is political points toward an absent structural cause and thus creates the necessity for a symptomatic reading that is able to lead us to this absent cause, that is, to a unifying principle that metonymically explains it all. Symptomatic readings thus make larger generalizations about America possible. By looking at Moby-Dick, the scholar can analyze American society as a whole. The idea of the national, our starting point, is thus still present even in the act of revision and redefinition, because this revision continues to be based on the assumption that there is one key principle that explains all of the rest. Or, to put it differently: even where the idea of the nation is put into question marks, the method keeps it alive.

VIII.

Our starting point has been the founding idea of American Studies, the idea of American exceptionalism which stands at the center of American national identity. Two approaches have emerged in American Studies in the critique of this idea, transnational studies and symptomatic readings. While I have discussed transnational American Studies in a different context, this essay has focused on symptomatic readings. Despite their revisionist claims, we found that a national paradigm is still in place. Even where the intention is to criticize American exceptionalism, this is still being done in search of the true meaning of America, of what the realities of America really are. I thus think that one of the major challenges for a post-exceptionalist American Studies is how to deal with the idea of the national. Let me suggest a first step by introducing a conceptual differentiation.

29 See “A New Beginning? Transnationalisms” and Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies, edited with Donald E. Pease and John Carlos Rowe.
As is well known, the term “American” as it is used in American Studies can refer to two different interpretive objects which explains why we are using two different words in the field, often interchangeably it seems, to refer to American society: we often speak of America but then we sometimes correct ourselves and speak of the United States. This parallel use is not necessarily a result of confusion or intellectual imprecision. On the contrary, most users, especially in American Studies, are quite aware of the difference. We still use the term “America,” although we know it is incorrect and perhaps even improper, when we want to refer to the idea of America, that is, in a Hegelian sense, to the meaning of America. And we use the term “United States” or U.S.-America when we want to refer to the political system, and other political, social, and cultural arrangements that characterize American society. Another way of describing the same difference would be to use the terms nation and state. Nation refers to the imagined community based on the idea of America, state refers to the often pesky and irritating realities of that nation, what Robert Sklar may also have had in mind when he spoke of the realities of America. (But Sklar also illustrates the problem: he should have referred to U.S.-America.) To distinguish between the nation and the state can explain the paradoxical fact that American society may be in crisis but that Americans nevertheless strongly support the ideal of American exceptionalism, the imaginary construct of the greatest nation on earth. When conditions in the U.S. are deplored, no matter from what side of the political spectrum, criticism is leveled against the government, not against the nation. The government is criticized for not living up to the ideals of the nation – which leaves the idea of the nation intact. Even in the act of criticizing American society, the idea of America as a nation distinguished by superior values can thus be reaffirmed.

The separation between nation and state can explain an aspect of the contemporary United States that strikes the outside observer as profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, there is an increasing suspicion and rejection of the government, both on the national as well as on the state level – a mood that can be found not only on the political right but in a growing segment of the population. On the other hand, the military-industrial complex and the national security apparatus have become manifestations of a state power that has no equal in Western societies. However, in American political discourse these strong, government-run institutions are not associated with the state but with the American nation, and as long as they are seen to stand in the service of the nation, they are not viewed as part of the government and its waste. On the contrary, they are indispensable for protecting the superiority of “America.” In military spending, American politicians can thus be remarkably generous. At the same time, these politicians can be pretty mean-spirited about so-called welfare “entitlements.” The reason is simple: welfare is framed as a government program and not as a national project. It does nothing to support the idea of the strength of the American nation. President
Obama therefore tried to define health care reform as a long overdue national project, while critics do everything in their power to characterize it as yet another wasteful government program.

IX.

As an interpretive unit, the state is different from the nation – not a totality shaped by a unifying principle, but a field of power struggles between different institutional and social forces. It includes a variety of actors, among them government, business, classes, ethnic groups, media, civil society, culture which in itself consists of a variety of different elements, ranging from religion to art. These different actors have different influences at different times and in different contexts. That is why generalizations about nations rarely work, because there are always important aspects of reality that do not fit the generalization. Thus, when we think about the state as a political or social context, it does no longer make sense to speak of a totality, expressive or structural. Instead, what we have is a unit marked by complex relations, often antagonistic and conflicting, so that matters cannot be reduced to one common national denominator. We have gotten used to speak of a national identity, but it does not make sense to speak of a state identity, since the state is an organizing framework for a society but not a meaning-giving entity. Even where it exerts power or draws its legitimacy from a dominant ideology, there are always counter-forces and there is always resistance. American Studies and British Cultural Studies have drawn our attention to this fact by making the possibility of resistance one of their major concerns.30

If the nation is a totality that is conceptualized as being shaped by a unifying principle, and if literature and art are the forms in which this unifying principle can find expression and thereby become visible, then it makes sense to interpret literature on the basis of a unifying principle that can serve as a metaphor or metonymy of the larger – expressive or structural – whole. But if we think of the United States in terms of a state that is a battle-ground of conflicting interests that constantly undermine unity, then we do no longer have to interpret texts in terms of a unifying principle.31 In fact, we shouldn’t. What would be the alternative, however? At this point, it may make sense to go back to that moment in the history of American literary studies – and literary studies more generally – when the formalist idea of an organic unity, which had still influenced literary interpretations of the Myth and Symbol School, began to be put under pressure from various sides and was finally given up. This opened the way for discussing literary texts, even those that were canonized as masterpieces, in terms of a non-organicist aesthetics that

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30 On this point, see my essay “Theories of American Culture,” in which I trace the changing visions of resistance through various stages in the history of cultural theory and American Studies.

31 In “American Literary History and the Romance with America,” I have shown that, contrary to the associations of multitude and heterogeneity which the term evokes, “diversity” has also been used as such a unifying principle in American literary studies.
was able to include elements that seemed to be not fully integrated, or discrepant, or even contradictory. A whole new vocabulary emerged: where concepts like organic unity, aesthetic coherence, rhythm, repetition and variation, symmetry, structural patterns, ambiguity, paradox and irony had been dominant before, we now encounter silences, gaps, ruptures, discontinuities, conflicts, discrepancies, contradictions and multiple codes. In one way or another, texts are no longer seen as unified but as heterogeneous.

Can we still gain any insight into American society and culture from such a text? An emphasis on the heterogeneity of literary texts, including their tensions and contradictions, can be taken in at least three different directions. One is the direction we have already encountered in our discussion of Jameson: to see contradictions, or heterogeneous elements more generally, as symptoms of an absent cause and, hence, a structural totality. The second possibility is rejected by Jameson when he sets Althusser in contrast to Roland Barthes: “The aim of a properly structural interpretation or exegesis thus becomes the explosion of the seemingly unified text into a host of clashing and contradictory elements. Unlike canonical post-structuralism, however, whose emblematic gesture is that by which Barthes, in S/Z, shatters a Balzac novella into a random operation of multiple codes, the Althusserian/ Marxist conception of culture requires this multiplicity to be reunified, if not at the level of the work itself, then at the level of its process of production, which is not random but can be described as a coherent functional operation in its own right” (56).

For the post-structuralist Barthes, heterogeneity is the pre-condition for a “play of the text” that undermines any reality effect and carries its own rewards in the jouissance of aesthetic experience. From this perspective, interpretation can only lead to a constantly renewed celebration of a postmodern aesthetic. For Barthes, the source of the heterogeneity of the text lies in an uncontrollable semantic surplus produced by different linguistic and generic codes. But textual heterogeneity can also result from the need to mediate between conflicting interests and impulses or simply from the challenge to coordinate historical, representational, imaginary, and affective dimensions of the text. Thus, multiple modes of signification, including conflicts and contradictions, can also become important sources of cultural insights, for example, when a text pulls in conflicting ideological directions or when political ideals and fantasies of individual self-empowerment clash or when social values and imaginary transgressions are at odds and create an emotional dilemma. All of these conflicts make culture and literature fields of contestation in which different groups, classes and individuals struggle for recognition and dominance. Such

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32 At another point in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson characterizes S/Z as a project “to rewrite Balzac as Philippe Sollers, as sheer text and écriture” (18).

33 I cannot dwell here on the fact that such a reorientation also requires a view of the reading process and the reading subject that is different from theories of interpellation, the theory of reading adopted, often tacitly, by the New Americanists. For a different conceptualization of the reading process see my essay “The Imaginary and the Second Narrative: Reading as Transfer.”
a reconceptualization of the literary text as a field of contestation would allow us to maintain American Studies’ focus on conflict and contradiction as socially and culturally instructive dimensions of a literary text, however, not in the sense of a metaphor or metonymy of national totality. American Studies should continue to focus on the relation between literary texts, cultural objects and the realities of American society and culture. But they should move out of the blind alley into which the idea of structural totality has pushed these analyses.

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