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Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s by Alex Houen

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BOOK REVIEW

Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s. Alex Houen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. vi+282.

Powers of Possibility is a fine, subtle, and ambitious analysis of literary activism. In some respects, Alex Houen's approach to this topic and to the remarkable experiments in form and content he discusses could be seen as a manifestation of literary activism itself. While this century began with all kinds of alternative social imaginings about possibilities, well encapsulated in the phrase of the alter-globalization movement that "another world is possible," the idea of impossibility now seems to have far more currency. If, as Slavoj Žižek contends, we are living in end times in an "apocalyptic zero-point," or a period in which, to use Mark Fisher's words, "the horizons of the thinkable" have been seamlessly occupied by capitalism, then *Powers of Possibility* provides a timely intervention into social theoretical debates that go far beyond the literary.¹

Houen is concerned with literary experiments that build alternative worlds of possibility and "act as an affective force to combat the effects of social and political power on individuals' capacities for thinking and feeling" (16). In a rigorous attempt to theorize some of these practices, he proposes the conceptually complex idea of "potentialism." He is at pains to point out that he is not trying to unearth a new unified potentialist movement overlooked previously by literary scholars. Nor is he trying to fix a single meaning for the term he has coined. Divergent meanings and understandings of the human organism, political power, language, space, the body, and the process of writing and reading emerge in each case of literary experimentalism that is investigated. Potentialism therefore is a variable

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), x; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 8.

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practice (21). The book is more an excursion into potentialist tendencies and impulses in post-1960s American writing than a formulaic attempt at a totalizing theory.

The terms associated with the different senses of potential invoked by Houen—"possibility, latency, capacity, power, and energy" (22)—are themselves open and pliant. This makes it difficult to provide an overview of the five literary case studies Houen develops. Resisting the atemporality of the current era, the book situates each of its five American writers within a rich narrative framework informed by historical detail and the crucial debates and events that occurred in the periods under consideration. Whether it be Allen Ginsberg's mantras, Amiri Baraka's dramatic rituals and speech acts, William Burroughs's textual cut-ups and random recombinations of phrases, Kathy Acker's bodily immersion in words as viruses, or Lyn Hejinian's shuffling of signifier and signified and rebuttal of conventional syntax, each represents a distinctive attack on "the orders of language" (26).

The overarching concern that links this range of radical and imaginative literary and performative practices is "whether literary powers can indeed be politically affective" (7). While to varying degrees each chapter provides an elegant response in the affirmative, *Powers of Possibility* is also a thoughtful dialogue with significant contemporary, cultural, linguistic, and social theorists. Others have suggested that this book is a dispute with Fredric Jameson's analysis of the waning of affect in postmodern culture.² Such a judgment runs the risk of ignoring the breadth of Houen's ambition. Of particular prescience and import is the book's engagement with and contribution to the affective turn in social and literary theory. A finely nuanced but nonetheless strong argument is built for the way these writers each attempt to turn textual possibilities into an affective force toward social action. Linguistic and social possibilities merge.

Following J. L. Austin,³ Houen illustrates how performative utterances can work to change the social reality that is being described. The illocutionary nature of some of these literary experiments is beautifully demonstrated in the account of the breath chants and mantric vocalizations performed by Allen Ginsberg to dissipate the tension between the Hells Angels bikers and anti-Vietnam War protesters at a demonstration in Berkeley in 1965. Ginsberg chanted a Buddhist sutra and everyone joined in (including the Hells Angels) until everyone calmed down (30). The speech act, in this case Ginsberg's mantras—or, his "poetic activism," to use Houen's term (30)—was itself an affective experience that transformed into another act with social

2. See Dongho Cha, "The New Vanguardism," *Pennsylvania Literary Journal* 5 (2014): 143–52.

3. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

consequences, in this instance, quieting the Hells Angels and getting them to agree they would not disrupt any more antiwar protests in the future.

Houen's corresponding analysis of Ginsberg's antiwar poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (31–40) is unsurpassed in its subtlety and insight. However, not all the literary experiments with genre and form discussed in *Powers of Possibility* produce directly recordable affects or acts, nor is this the substance of Houen's argument. Notwithstanding, most do involve bodily actions, performative or otherwise, whether these be physically cutting-up phrases, driving around in a camper van dictating "auto-poetry" into a tape recorder, "resuscitating ghostly sounds and voices from slave ships" (93), or incorporating "affective potentials" into acts of writing the body (192). According to Houen, each literary experiment under scrutiny involves an affective "return to bodily feeling" (31) and a turn away from conventional modes of signification. The theoretical debates about affectivity are relevant here. If affect cannot be fully realized in language, as Brian Massumi contends,⁴ or if it is extradiscursive or unable to be symbolized,⁵ is it always by definition outside the social? If this is the case, what is the relationship between "new aesthetic possibilities" and "powers of social action" (11)?

One imagines that the five postwar American writers under investigation would have had a clear notion of a connection between the two, as their audacious explorations of linguistic possibilities show. One might also imagine that they would reject Simon O'Sullivan's pronouncement that, indeed, "you cannot read affects, you can only experience them."⁶ *Powers of Possibility* is testimony to the intricacy and force of various resistances to this proposition. It is also a timely intervention reminding us of the enduring power and relevance of literary and poetic provocations and their centrality to social imaginings of alternative possible worlds.

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4. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

5. Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19 (2005): 548–67.

6. Simon O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art beyond Representation," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6 (2001): 126.