Book Review

Erhan Şimşek. **2019**. *Creating Realities: Business as a Motif in American Fiction, 1865–1929*. Bielefeld: transcript. 333pp. ISBN: 978-3-8376-4799-0. € 49.99 paperback.

Reviewed by **Dr. James Dorson**, Free University of Berlin, John F. Kennedy Institute for North America Studies, Lansstraße 7-9, 14195 Berlin, Germany, E-mail: dorson@zedat.fu-berlin.de

https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2020-2009

Business owners and the shifting cluster of ideas associated with businesses—from rationalization to risk-taking—have always played a central economic and political role in the United States. But what have businesses meant for American literature? Going against the grain of approaches that seek to uncover the ideological resonances of economic themes in literature, Erhan Şimşek's ambitious first book *Creating Realities* argues that the business motif in fiction serves primarily an aesthetic function. As society modernized and fragmented for millions of Americans following the end of the Civil War, the emergence of realist literature responded to a need among middle-class readers for experiencing a reality that seemed increasingly out of reach and out of control. Because nothing signified the fraught realities of the Gilded Age better than the business enterprise, Şimşek argues that representations of businesses were used to satisfy this new craving for reality. As the perception of reality changed, however, so did the function of business in fiction. By tracing the changing function of the business motif from the end of the Civil War to the Great Depression, Şimşek shows how business representations were used by realist, naturalist, and modernist writers to produce different aesthetic effects in response to social needs. *Creating Realities* thus not only provides illuminating accounts of three major literary movements through the light shed on them by a German-style *Funktionsgeschichte*, but also rethinks American literary history through the lens of the business motif.

Creating Realities is divided into five chapters bookended by an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, Şimşek defines his terms and lays out the stakes of his argument. Here he explains that "business literature or literature of business refers to fictional works that have commercial activity or institutions and people who deal with commercial activities such as companies and businessmen as dominant themes in their plots" (12). From the outset, it is clear that the book's focus on business fiction is not to show how literature reproduces underlying economic structures, such as Walter Benn Michaels's seminal *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) did. Whereas literature for New Historicists like Michaels bears evidence of hidden structures manipulating unsuspecting readers,

Open Access. © 2020 James Dorson, published by De Gruyter. (cc) BY This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

for Şimşek representations of business should be taken at face value serving recognizable purposes for readers seeking orientation in a perplexing world. Şimşek prefers to use the term *Darstellung* instead of representation, however, because "writers did not merely represent business, but constructed, performed, staged and figured it as a literary motif" (13). This argument against simple referentiality emphasizes the literariness of literature. Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, Şimşek argues that attention to the composition of literary texts is crucial, not because texts determine how we read, but because they guide the reading process toward potential meanings actualized by readers—i.e. "the text operates like a rough guideline in the construction of effect" (15). Thus combining *Funktionsgeschichte* with reader-response theory along lines already influentially laid out by Iser and Winfried Fluck, *Creating Realities* presents itself as a needed intervention in current debates raging in the humanities. This is made explicit in the conclusion when Şimşek positions his approach as a middle path between close reading, on one side, which he argues sacrifices general knowledge about bodies of literature for detailed descriptions of individual works, and distant reading, on the other, whose computational approach fails to account for the unique composition of literary texts. The ambitious goal of Şimşek's book, then, is a reading of literature able both to account for the particular aesthetic effects of literature and how these are produced across a number of texts at a certain time in response to larger social issues.

Şimşek launches his investigation into the changing function of the business motif in literature with what Chapter 1 calls "The Loss of Reality in Late Nineteenth-Century America." This short chapter sets out the historical context of the Gilded Age in order to show how social upheaval created a demand for literature to provide readers with a vicarious experience of the new realities brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and mass immigration. But as the explanatory framework of antebellum idealism failed to contain the social fragmentation of a rapidly modernizing nation, the demand for literature to provide authentic experiences of reality also went hand in hand with the need for literature to provide social orientation. Şimşek reaches back to key works of cultural and social history by Robert Wiebe, Alan Trachtenberg, and Jackson Lears to show how the increasingly integrated and incorporated economy of the Gilded Age made a loss of autonomy painfully felt by middle-class Americans whose identity was bound up with notions of self-reliance no longer supported by economic realities. In contrast to more totalizing accounts of power, these accounts of incorporation and modernization wonderfully capture the sense of sweeping change experienced by millions at the time. There is a danger, however, which Şimşek does not entirely escape, of taking this experience as representative of "the American life" (37) without considering the different ways

this transition was felt by many who never were able to define themselves by self-reliance and autonomy in the first place.

Cultural demand for authenticity and orientation in response to social fragmentation is one thing. But how did literature of the period respond to this demand? Chapter 2 turns to Erich Auerbach's definition of realism in terms of "externalization" for an explanation. Auerbach distinguished between Biblical narrative that leaves particulars of time and setting shrouded in mystery and Homeric narrative that foregrounds, or "externalizes," particular details. Şimşek helpfully carries this distinction into American literary history by using it to distinguish between the traditions of romance and realism. Whereas reality in the romance is a question of universal, spiritual essence, reality for realism, in contrast, is a matter of particular experience that requires "externalized" narration. As social fragmentation eroded a universalist framework of understanding, the need for a realist aesthetic—an "aesthetics of externalization" (48)—began to replace the "aesthetics of non-externalization" (51) that characterized the American romance tradition. Here Şimşek argues that representations of businesses in all their mundane details were used to create a "reality effect" aimed at satisfying the reality hunger of the period. Şimşek builds his argument by tracing the gradual emergence of realism in postbellum America through the changing function of the business motif. While Edgar Allen Poe's "The Business Man" (1840) still allegorizes business as a universal signifier of greed, through readings of Herman Melville's "Bartleby" (1853), Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1868), and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's reform novel *The Silent Partner* (1871), Şimşek argues that the business motif is used increasingly for the purpose of creating a reality effect. Because a text like "Bartleby" uses the business motif to criticize Romantic universalization, Şimşek writes that Melville "foreshadowed the coming of an aesthetics of externalization with business" (82). Chapter 2 thus provides a provocative account of the role that business played in the formation of a realist aesthetic in the U.S., casting new light on the much-debated romance-realism dichotomy along the way. Tracing the emergence of American realism out of American romance rather than in dialogue with European realism—Balzac, Flaubert, and Dickens are never mentioned in this context—does create a somewhat insular origins story, but this no doubt speaks more to practical considerations than to any intention of reproducing an exceptionalist narrative.

The next three chapters each systematically consider the business motif in realism, naturalism, and modernism, respectively, with novels by William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, and F. Scott Fitzgerald taken as representative of each movement. If the business motif generally produces a reality effect, the aim of these chapters is to show how it serves quite different purposes within each movement. American realism creates a reality effect through externalization, but it

is also on a “civilizing” mission aimed at social integration contained within a framework of Victorian morality. Şimşek makes this argument by borrowing Fluck’s notion of realism’s “conversational structure” (68), where the *Bildung* of characters capable of reflecting on and learning from their errors coincides with the moral education of readers made privy to this developmental process. Chapter 3 shows how Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) uses the representation of Lapham’s paint business not only to produce a reality effect but also to orientate readers toward the “true potential” (71) of society by allowing the naïve Lapham to gain insight into himself and society as the business plot unfolds. It is precisely this duality, however, that, Şimşek argues, led to the decline of American realism by the 1890s. The growing economic inequality and social tensions following the Haymarket riot in 1886 made the reconciliation of business and morality that *The Rise of Silas Lapham* dramatizes through the maturation of its protagonist so implausible that it undermined the desired reality effect.

As the use of the business motif for purposes of social integration declined, it began to serve a new function, which Şimşek delineates in his discussion of naturalism and Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912) in Chapter 4. The chapter defines naturalism by its “effect of intensity” (135). In contrast to the focus on ordinary (i.e. middle class) life in realism, naturalist writers emphasized the extraordinary. Sensational themes such as sex, poverty, murder, and greed were described in detail to shock readers out of Victorian mores deemed inadequate for meeting the needs of fin-de-siècle America. The determination of characters by inner and outer forces in naturalist texts undermined the autonomy of the rational subject, and with it the possibilities of realist *Bildung*. To the extent that naturalism uses realist conventions, the shocking unfolding of naturalist plots, where deviance is rewarded or characters degenerate into brutes, subverts realist expectations of a moral universe. “Once readers are trapped by verisimilitude,” Şimşek writes, “naturalists drown them in the shocking intensity of events” (152). His discussion of *The Financier*, with its insatiable protagonist relentlessly pursuing Dreiser’s stock themes of sex and money, is a case in point. Yet the focus on the business motif in this chapter tends to recede into the background of Şimşek’s argument, giving the impression that it would have worked just as well without the business angle. The spectacular success of Frank Cowperwood in *The Financier* by following his own drives rather than accommodating himself to social conventions certainly shocked readers, but so had many naturalist novels before, including not only Dreiser’s first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), but even more sensationally Zola’s Rougon-Macquart series that was repeatedly accused of pornography, and in which only *L’Argent* (1890), the nineteenth of the twenty novels in the series, makes business central to its “effect of intensity.”

The suspicion that the aesthetic necessity of the business motif may be somewhat overdetermined in Şimşek's account of naturalism is strengthened by the next chapter on modernism, where he acknowledges that the business motif plays only a minor role. As modernist texts turned inwards, "the functions that business served were no longer required in this new form of literature" (197). If the business motif in realism served simultaneously to orientate readers toward everyday reality and social integration, the rejection of referentiality as well as the emphasis on subjectively experienced reality in modernist texts would seem to have no use for representations of business. Nevertheless, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) Şimşek argues that Fitzgerald utilizes the business motif—Nick Carraway's professed interest in the bond business and Jay Gatsby's shady undertakings—for effects corresponding with modernism's new conception of reality. Rather than index reality, the business motif in the novel throws into relief Nick's inability to accurately represent it. In Şimşek's words, "the motif of business functions as an underlying and overarching tool that renders Nick's narration unreliable, thereby offering subjectivization to the reader" (200). If the function of the business motif was first used in realism to orientate readers toward a shared social reality, by the 1920s it was being used to demonstrate the inescapably subjective nature of reality.

Representations of businesses may be only one way by which realist, naturalist, and modernist writers created their desired aesthetic effects, but Şimşek's original and richly argued account of the changing function of the business motif in American literary history is nevertheless a valuable contribution to American Studies. Not only does it provide illuminating readings that explain the aesthetic rather than ideological significance of economic themes in literature; it also demonstrates how German American Studies may contribute a unique perspective to debates in literary and cultural studies by not merely following the latest fad coming out of U.S. American Studies. Of course, not following the latest fad does involve the risk of following outmoded ones. *Creating Realities* illustrates this risk when it resorts to psychobiography to explain the aesthetic choices of writers, such as attributing Dreiser's work to his "unresolved Oedipal complex" (160). Observations like these do little to explain the functions of literature or why they change over time in response to social pressure. Such peculiarities of argument are by no means representative of the book, however, and they do not subtract from the significant light that Şimşek sheds on the neglected aesthetic functions of the business motif in literature.