

Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (eds.): *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2002

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1 Reviewing *Regarding Sedgwick*, it is somewhat ironic to see that this eminent scholar and her exceptionally influential rediscovery of shame with regards to identity (trans-)formation should be so shamelessly ignored by large parts of academia. In certain quarters one still seems to assume that one can do without the groundbreaking insights that this remarkable and controversial thinker has produced over the last two decades. As a matter of fact, none of her works have been translated into German.¹ And that is a shame! As it is, we can only hope that this dubious condition will soon come to an end; meanwhile, we can turn to publications that do recognize the outstanding impact Sedgwick has had on Gender Studies in general, and on Queer Studies in particular. One such study is *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*.

2 Celebrating Sedgwick as a prime source of inspiration, this compilation of essays comprises ten articles on Sedgwickian topics such as shame, queer ethics, or the protogay child and a comprehensive introduction as well as an interview with the critic herself. Considering the diversity of material discussed in this ambitious project, the editors have chosen to provide their readers with a critical positioning of the term queer as a lead-in to the subsequent debate before sketching the contents of the various contributions, of which a selection shall be discussed in the following. The arrangement of the essays follows thematic aspects, dividing the main part of the study into two sections, namely "Sedgwick's Subjects and Others" and "Writing Ethics: Reading Cleaving".

3 One of Sedgwick's most notorious subjects, then, is shame. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the two opening articles deal with this powerful affect. Lauren Berlant's essay "Two Girls, Fat and Thin" pursues a politics of de-shaming that is however strangely at odds with a Sedgwickian notion of shame, for it hints at a strategic shamelessness, a de-shaming, that prevents Berlant from realising the full potential of a queer performativity that eventually triggers a similarly queer identity formation through, and via, shame. In contrast to Berlant, Douglas Crimp understands shame in much the same ways as Sedgwick herself, namely as "a free radical that [...] attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of - of

¹ In fact, the only available translation so far is an excerpt from Sedgwick's "Epistemology of the Closet" published in: Andreas Kraß, ed. *Queer Denken: Gegen die Ordnung der Sexualität*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003. 113-143.

almost anything" (Sedgwick 62). His exceptionally significant essay "Mario Montez, For Shame" easily marks the most vigorously political contribution to the entire compilation. Crimp offers his creed in praise of shame, "queer before gay" (58), which aims at the rejection of what he calls "the current homogenizing, normalizing, and de-sexualizing of gay life" (58). According to Crimp, gay mainstream movements have compromised themselves by denying that "shame is what makes us queer, both in the sense of having a queer identity and in the sense that queerness is in a volatile relation to identity, destabilizing it even as it makes it" (64). This ever so compliant denial, this eagerness to be gay at the expense of being queer, indeed this uncanny desire for exclusively positive interpellations, however, already discloses its hideous effects in countless ways such as, for example, the increasing exclusion of AIDS from mainstream gay policies. As it appears, we cannot do without shame; and indeed, we would not want to, for to prematurely discredit shame as a poisonously paralysing affect is simultaneously "to miss a vital point about the positivity of shame, namely its demonstrative character, the myriad ways in which - under certain conditions that await further analysis - it can and is put to creatively performative work" (26). In his essay on the cinematic art experiments of Andy Warhol, Crimp explores some of these ways by advocating a queer performativity that acknowledges, negotiates, and at times even playfully subverts shame without ever being shameless - in the severely normative sense of current gay pride movements.

4 In the realm of queer ethics, Regarding Sedgwick includes a number of essays that have taken on exactly this point, i.e. the distinctiveness of Sedgwick's ethics. Ross Chambers depicts these as an "ethics of inversion" (178), thus highlighting the matchless move by which Sedgwick has "inverted" gayness: "from 'exceptional' deviancy to paradigmatic status" (172). However, his text "Strategic Constructivism?" is somewhat referential, gay rather than queer, and illustrates that the entire compilation is not at its best when its contributors try to explain Sedgwick, but when they show how their readings, and writings, have been influenced by her. Turning to Judith Butler's "Capacity", we at once realise how the linear logic of philosophy has benefited from the inspiration of someone who "takes us beyond that logic and opens up what I [Butler] want to affirm as a certain ethics of thinking, one that postpones the question of logical incongruence in the name of historical possibilities" (117). Butler, then, offers short discussions of Kimberly Peirce's movie *Boys Don't Cry* and Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* that strikingly demonstrate how Sedgwick stretches the range of the possible in the realm of thought by asserting that ambivalence, incongruence, and non-closure need to be perceived as "specifically ethical practice[s]" (110)

5 Regarding Henry James, we have to mention Kathryn Bond Stockton's hilarious essay "Eve's Queer Child." Stockton lets us in on an open secret by revealing the true author of what has up till now been believed to be a characteristically Jamesian novella, *The Pupil*. Anyone who is interested in the shamefully masochistic pleasures of the protogay child will have a fantastic read - and the delights of witnessing the rare act of a truly queer procreation.

6 Hopefully, this review has illustrated that *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory* is itself a heterogeneous manifesto whose wide range displays an impressive and inspiring diversity of texts, including some that have not even been discussed here such as Paul Kelleher's appeal for a new sentimentalism, "If Love Were All: Reading Sedgwick Sentimentally," or James Kincaid's camp love letter to Eve, "When Whippoorwills Call." What makes it exceptional is the fact that this diversity is present not only in what, but moreover in how it is discussed. Eve's "queer children" have thus accomplished a worthy tribute to their teacher; a tribute that lastingly portrays Sedgwick herself as "a free radical that [...] attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of - of almost anything" (Sedgwick 62).