

Barbara Mennel

Stehle, Maria. *Plants, Places, and Power: Toward Social and Ecological Justice in German Literature and Film*

Camden House, 2023. 186 pp. \$99.

For those familiar with Maria Stehle's significant scholarly oeuvre, her newest sole-authored volume *Plants, Places, and Power: Toward Social and Ecological Justice in German Literature and Film* presents a departure that is nevertheless firmly rooted in her previous work. Known to many scholars in German Studies, Stehle's work has previously focused on minority discourse, popular culture, feminist approaches, film studies, and affect theory, often in collaborative projects. *Plants, Places, and Power* expands her theoretical conception of the world and justice to include its ecological dimensions, while her textural analysis centers on plants and places.

Stehle's approach therefore not only advances an expanded notion of justice but also delineates an innovative understanding of contemporary German film and literature. Her scholarly framework, which she outlines in detail in the substantive introduction and mobilizes throughout the five outstanding content chapters, is in dialogue with current American environmental humanities, critical race theory, indigenous studies, and ecofeminism, but also highly attuned to the legacy of *Naturschutz* in its German context and accompanying cultural connotation. Her methodology self-reflexively attends to her own subject-position as a white woman, while she intentionally aims to 'undiscipline' German Studies and decenter its canon.

Stehle's ground-breaking argument examines relations between humans and plants, including trees and flowers, and literary and filmic topographies of power and place-making. Chapters eloquently and elegantly combine readings of literature and film, organized around themes, such as 'landscapes' (chapter one), '*Heimat*' versus '*Herkunft*' (chapter two), 'metaphors of trees' (chapter three), 'flowers' (chapter four), and 'kinship between people and plants' (chapter five). The organization of her chapters develops from investigations of problematic landscapes marred by imperialism and postcolonialism to cultural productions that offer future-oriented reimagining of topographies. Stehle's focus on plants, topography, and place-making radically shifts the perspective on familiar texts, such as the

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film *Western* (dir. Valeska Grisebach, 2017) or established authors, for example Juli Zeh, providing novel insight and unique connections across diverse materials.

The combination of texts often surprises, and their synergy energizes. For example, in her chapter on flowers, Stehle discusses Czech art film classic *Daisies* (dir. Věra Chytilová, 1966), Swiss experimental artist Pipilotti Rist's *Pepperminta* (2009), and Berlin School horror movie *Little Joe. Glück ist ein Geschäft* (dir. Jessica Hausner, 2019). The meaning of these films is famously not readily accessible. On the contrary, their experimental quality and lack of conventional narrative position them as idiosyncratic films that scholars tend to discuss in their distinct contexts of respective art or film movements. Cutting across those sub-disciplinary divides, Stehle concentrates on the shared thematic concern of flowers and unlocks previously ignored significance. While considering the history of flowers as essentialist metaphors for femininity, her approach impressively studies *Little Joe's* strategy to estrange the viewer from affect in order to stage modern anxieties about human relations to the natural world. Her reading of the three films concludes by explaining the shift from Rist using a flower in her multiscreen installation *Ever is Overall* (1997) to Beyoncé wielding a baseball bat in her adaptation of Rist's video for her visual album *Lemonade* (2016). This is but one example of how Stehle's agile thinking and deep knowledge productively reads cultural imaginaries of plants.

Plants, Places, and Power importantly has the potential to expand our understanding of the world as planetary while engaging the scholarship of decolonial and Indigenous feminist ecocriticism to illuminate German contemporary culture. Stehle's blend of a broad theoretical and cultural corpus with a tight thematic focus produces a cohesive, convincing, and inspiring argument. With its ability to revise approaches to contemporary German culture, literature, and film, and its theoretical implications for German Studies, feminist theory, and environmental humanities, the book deserves a broad audience of a wide range of readers, including but not limited to scholars of ecocriticism in German Studies.