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Gerhard Richter. *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. xiv + 233 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5616-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5617-4.



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Picture Books

This collection of four essays treats the *Denkbilder* of Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, and Theodor Adorno, respectively. Much of this material has been published before: the essay on Bloch appeared in *Sound Figures of Modernity: German Music and Philosophy* (2006), which Richter co-edited with Jost Hermand; his meditations on Adorno and National Socialism were initially published in his *Ästhetik des Ereignisses: Sprache-Geschichte-Medium* (2005); and the Benjamin text appeared in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (2006). While readers may have already had access to the bulk of the ideas presented in this book, it is nevertheless rewarding to have these four discussions in one book. The new essay on Kracauer and Jacques Derrida and the substantial introduction (its length exceeds most of the subsequent chapters) are the most compelling of the volume, and readers familiar with Richter's thoughts on Benjamin, Adorno, and Bloch still have much to gain by re-reading them in light of this new material.

At the very outset Richter presents us with three epigrams, and he repeats this gesture of quotation at the start of every subsequent chapter. Each epigram an-

nounces major themes of the book as a whole, not only with what they explicitly declare, but also by way of their formal construction or the proper name of their author. The first, by Maurice Blanchot, signals Richter's sensitive and intelligent achievement in bringing these Frankfurt School thinkers in dialogue with French post-structuralism, which makes this book a particularly welcome addition to a growing literature on the accord among these diverse philosophers. Blanchot's presence is, ultimately, rather marginal, with Derrida and Paul de Man structuring the bulk of the comparative approach throughout the book. Thus, in retrospect, this epigram (which cites Blanchot quoting Valéry) stages a displacement that lies at the heart of every quotation, one that fleshes out an entire discursive field. The epigram, like the *Denkbild* itself, is less a straightforward, evidentiary document in support of a theoretical argument than an opening that immediately exposes a text to a dense polyphony that is the true object of inquiry. While the previously published chapters of this book attempt an analogous dispersal by reading the *Denkbilder* of each author chiefly through another of his major texts (Benjamin's *One-Way Street* [1928] via *The Arcades*

Project [1983], Bloch's *Spuren* [1930] via *The Spirit of Utopia* [1923], Adorno's *Minima Moralia* [1951] via *Aesthetic Theory* [1970]), the essay that conjoins Kracauer's Weimar essays with Derrida's *The Monolingualism of the Other* (1996) is most effective in fulfilling the promise of dialogic dispersal inherent in this epigram.

The following two epigrams come from Adorno's *Notes on Literature* (1958): one introduces the figure of the *Denkbild* (taken from the context of his meditations on Benjamin's *One-Way Street* and which repeats within the body of the Introduction to an entirely different effect); the other attests to the inevitable opacity and resistance of these "thought-images" to communicability and paraphrase. Eminently quotable, the aphoristic expression of the authors clustered together in this book nevertheless continues to irritate, generating a proliferation of ever more readings resistant to quick summary. The epigram introduces the voice of another author in a text and but yet just outside of it, frustrating our certainty as to where a text actually "begins." By smuggling in a trace from the past (an utterance always prior to the text at hand), the epigram scrambles our expectation of a progressive unfolding of history and allows for future thought.

The historical and utopian dimensions of the epigram apply equally to the *Denkbild* itself. Under the aegis of this aesthetic figure, Richter convincingly unites the fundamentally disparate texts that follow without diminishing their differences. He attends to related notions of collectivity that his subject elicits—the validity of the moniker "Frankfurt School" for a discussion of this particular group of authors, the value of regarding *Denkbilder* generically—yet these discussions only echo what is truly at stake. Richter's chief interest in the *Denkbild* lies in its specific condensation of philosophical conception and aesthetic form. He traces, in their shared response to G. W. F. Hegel, these authors' assertion of the capacity of the work of art to constitute philosophy by virtue of its very difference from thought. The artwork is a model that performs their theoretical postulates rather than describes them by means of borrowed philosophical terminology. This performance of negativity or non-identity calls forth philosophy (or truth) precisely where it is not: that is, in art (or semblance). Put simply, the political, utopian, or discursive ambitions of the aesthetic object are more legible in how the object presents something than in what it presents. This requires Richter to contend with the formal properties of his chosen authors' writing as inexorably bound to the ideas they summon just as they, in turn, had sought historical depth

and utopian possibility in "surface phenomena." In an elegant expression of frustration with the form/content dichotomy (precisely because it highlights its inevitability) Richter argues that the *Denkbild* "self-consciously exposes the inescapable contamination of the theoretical by the figurative—rather than glossing over this tension in an effort to create the false semblance of disembodied meaning" (p. 25).

In what remains a rather underdeveloped polemic, Richter claims that what de Man described as "aesthetic ideology" is resurfacing in the humanities today: the notion that artworks are capable of mimetically communicating something other than themselves, when they actually only communicate that they resist communicating anything. While it is difficult to concede that many readers of Adorno, for example, could remain blind to the political radicality of his concept of aesthetic autonomy, it is nevertheless the ambition of this book to insist upon the resistance of these writers' more aphoristic or epigrammatic writing to instrumentalization (or even to a basic adaptation to literary or philosophical norms) as the hallmark of their political "commitment" and their ongoing relevance today.

The essays of this book orbit an absent center: namely, a precise articulation of the function of the image in these writers' thinking. For Richter, their impossible ambition to write *images*—to use language to create or interpret that which is other than language or evades it entirely—motivates his attention to the ways in which they reveal constitutive fissures in *language*, the moments when it fails to deliver its promise of transparent communicability. I am thinking, for instance, of a stunning passage where, by means of a micrological analysis of his own, Richter exposes a host of productive ambiguity in Benjamin's use of the word *umreißen*, which can connote both definitive conceptualization and its very destruction (p. 55). The image becomes an allegory for all that escapes language and on several occasions becomes (somewhat ironically) the blind spot of both philosophy and Richter's book.

It is therefore no accident that the essay in which the sole image of the book is reproduced, the chapter on Kracauer and Derrida ("Homeless Images"), is the one that demonstrates Richter's initial steps in a new direction. It attempts to conceive of the image as something other than that which solely calls attention to language's figural properties or exists as not-language. The challenge facing Richter (the same that confronted all the writers he examines) was to write about that which evades writ-

ing but not thought—that is, that which makes writing effectively impossible. In the chapter on Kracauer, the image is not posited as something that could exist, impossibly, outside of language, but rather as a force that insistently transgresses its norms and ambitions. While Richter persistently keeps the pressures of exile and the friendships sustained among these four German authors in the fore of all his essays, reinforcing the importance of place and other in their respective philosophies, the spatial metaphors of delimitation, boundary, and horizon are put to special emphasis in the exploration of Kracauer’s term “extraterritoriality” and its implication of the image as an agent that engenders the appearance of a given identity and simultaneously “resists that formation of identity” (p. 125): “The demand that an image be *of* something and that it faithfully and reliably re-present that something, on the one hand, and the inevitably unpredictable ways in which an image fails to comply with that demand, on the other hand, sponsor a

melancholia that is shared by all images, even as it cannot but travel through the structural and historical specificity of a *singular* image.... We could even say that rather than simply re-presenting its subject, the image retroactively makes visible the absence that already lay at the core of the event it set out to record” (pp. 107-108).

Richter’s emphasis, like those of his chosen authors, falls on the specifically photographic image, and it remains to be seen how or in what ways the mechanics of the *Denkbild* would engage productively with other imaging media or questions of abstraction, for example. However, in the citation above, Richter is most explicit in his recognition of two hallmarks of the image—its “unpredictability” and “making visible”—that warrant further study. And it is therefore with great anticipation that we now await Richter’s future efforts to fully explore the epistemic challenge posed by the image as something more than a negation or subsidiary of language.

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