

LISA McDONALD

baroque inclinations

TARA FORREST

The Politics of Imagination: Benjamin, Kracauer, Kluge

Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2007

ISBN 9783899426816

RRP £20.78 (pb)

The first glance takes in a blue-black encounter of a film still reproduced from the 1978 montage *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn), alluding to thoughts of what constituted political commentary in and about 'West Germany' in the late twentieth century. By extension, this impressionistic rendition of the still evokes a much-needed tendency towards mutability, the kind of inclination towards deterritorialisation demanded by a careful critique of what constitutes 'the natural'. The image sets up space to question what takes shape through the alteration of all kinds of conditions, and what induces prolific qualities from matter. Early on, then, I sense a call to consider creative and peripatetic strategies for re-reading the role of 'imagination' in the diversely assembled works of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Alexander Kluge, the filmic gestures of the latter inclined towards *tableau*.

The book appears when, for the second time, I am about to study 'conversational German' in preparation for a Berlin visit. I am drawn in to atmospheres of an imagined past which inherit the diaspora of my European family. I confuse the atmospheres with the language, a troubled fluency of trauma and loss impressed upon my childhood by the displacement of bodies at the end of World War II. It seems impossible to think away from these residues in my reading of the book. So it is intellectually refreshing to encounter here the proposal of 'suspended understanding' (10) which, in turn, gives onto the view that the writing is itself caught between the structure and movement of a reader's 'European encounter'—an apprehension of thought

given momentary form by one's larger engagement with the writer's proposals.

It is clear that Forrest has the advantage with the German language, over my struggles with its forgotten connotations. Her intuitive engagement refracts the subjects' philosophies, and her command of their historical turns displays a density of thought that fulfils the ambition of this rather large project. To have consigned the question of 'imagination' only to the demands of discourse thinking would have made this text a much easier read.

Alive with the complexity of the geographically disparate but somehow coincidental existence of these three men, and among other interests for all three than their known roles as cultural critic, writer and filmmaker, Forrest presents what Benjamin must have yearned for—the taking seriously of a generative and excessive aesthetics, its groundedness evident in embodied moments of cultural and political limitation.

In the first instance, the writing elicits Benjamin's encounter with 'imagination' through the notion of 'play', a logic proposed here as unstable and dynamic, as usefully on the move. Although writing in the company of Benjamin can do little else but articulate a sense of the immeasurable, this logic makes for a serious undertaking that is aspirational without being entirely transcendent—a hint here and there, perhaps. But, in Benjamin's thinking, the generality of 'play' particularises through a focus on the play of children. It's there that he developed an acute taste for the promise of possibility and invention. Forrest deploys words from Charles

Baudelaire which present the idea that children's play 'decomposes all creation; and with the raw materials accumulated ... it creates a new world—it produces the sensation of newness'. (15)

It is both provocative and apt, then, that the opening pages of the book present a paradoxical depiction of the after-effects of an earthquake on the usual order of display in a natural history museum. Words which describe the event were first put forward by counter-Enlightenment thinker Joseph de Maistre and offered again in Benjamin's text *The Arcades Project* (1999). I like the last few lines of the quote: 'The order is as visible as the disorder; and the eye that ranges over this mighty temple of nature reestablishes without difficulty all that a fatal agency has shattered, warped, soiled, and displaced'. (9)

While one can spot de Maistre's restorative project in this book, it can be thought to work alongside itself, simultaneously incorporated into the spaces of disorder that the scene demands—the 'new view' is made possible by the imagined imprint of its former appearance. We are required to ask here, 'What is the quality of that moment?' 'Can that quality be known?' This is one example that shows the alignment of Benjamin's partiality towards mimetic sensation with a type of lively duration that explodes what is commonly thought about experience in space and time; the dismantling of the orders of 'historical naturalism' into possible sensation.

Kracauer's contribution to shambolic sense-making is introduced via his analysis of a particularly large and disordered photographic

archive in which ‘the scrambling of “natural reality” performed by the intermingling of the undated, disorganised contents’ (9) induces a suspension of understanding. This goes on to invite the viewer to ‘reconceive the possibilities of both the past and the future outside of the evolutionary conception’ most often assigned to ‘the workings of nature’. (10)

These themes attract what is presented as the significance of Kluge’s critical aesthetics to the practices of reconception, with those thoughts taking shape through Kluge’s emphasis on the incidental nature of history, or the influences of contingency and improbability in his many works. (13) For Kluge, the stimulus for a politics of imagination comes from experimental film and television practice, where, if we consider Kluge’s effect on what might cautiously be termed ‘New German Cinema’, eclectic preoccupations with the interplay of realism and montage offer ways of ‘rejuvenating our capacity for perception and imagination’. (16) This presents as the dialectical promise of non-representation. It’s interesting to speculate about the effects of *vérité* upon *vérité*, the folding in and doubling out of difference and in/difference. Were there recollections of Leibniz rolling around in these pages, I wondered?

The writing is organised into three parts, one for each subject. But to recall from above what I interpret as the book’s main proposal, that of a new politics of appearance—an aesthetics of material generativity—the book demands a lot more than systematic interactions with its ordered but ultimately non-linear momentum. The ordering offers modes of assembly that

need time to work out and work through, where the words test each other against the philosophical demands of those they study. Poetically, the writing is less ‘about’ than ‘with’ the subjects it presents.

Even so, this incarnation of the text began life as a doctoral thesis, and while I have forgotten much about the intensity of attempt, and the bodily labour of thesis writing (something to be reminded of, often), I wonder how the words would work with a little less academic scaffolding and a little more of the kind of literary conjuring a project beginning with Benjamin might evoke? I can’t dodge the feeling that somehow the publisher has sidestepped the point and forced, at times, the over-collection of the uncollectible. How shall evidence be made, as one example, for Benjamin’s insistence on a ‘rejuvenated ... film practice which actively encourages the audience to draw on their own imagination and experience in an attempt to reconceive the possibilities of the present?’ (85) ‘Imagination’ amid a somewhere called ‘the present’ must surely activate moments of disparate negotiation, especially if the imagined is what is in question.

While I sense that this is what the writer means, the hope for an incomplete political particularity, I wonder if this import is at times diminished by the tendency to sum up the thrill of fragmentary logic otherwise in play here. On a number of occasions I am reminded of the project of reconception almost as guarantee, and what I want is less assurance. Perhaps what I’m after is more of the kind of delusional clarity reminiscent of Benjamin’s

hashish-induced moments (*Über Haschisch*, 1972) (45), which also provokes Forrest to borrow this from him on surrealist intent:

'To win the energies of intoxication [*die Kräfte des Rausches*] for the revolution ... is the project on which Surrealism focuses in all its books and enterprises' ... the significance of which can be traced to the manner in which the perceptual effects induced by hashish intoxication provide access to the 'image space' that both Benjamin and the Surrealists associate with the activation of involuntary memory. (46)

A strength of this text, though, is its articulate unsettling of the persistence of the essential, the dismantling of its lingering historical potency. Where the text works well for me is in moments which bring the potential for philosophical deviations up close, close to one's own experience of, perhaps hope for, the unconscious nature of play, and then to its loss—an 'inter-play' between thinking and unthinking the odd encounters of quotidian life.

Enter Kracauer and a grab from Chapter Four ('Kracauer and the Promise of Realist Cinema'), where the spectacular ordinariness of everyday things is shown to be rendered from within the cinematic close-up. The significance for a politics of reconception is found in the ability of close-ups to 'blow up our environment in a double sense; they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before'. (99)

This thinking might well echo German idealist philosophy at one of its greatest points of transcendence were it not for Kracauer's insistence on finding sensation through 'visceral faculty' (99), the point being that the logic of superior reason falls away through the strangeness of the new, the moment of first encounter. Theoretically, this presents as the articulation of difference without the ruse of identity, and what could be more useful a concept for a politics of imagination still crafted through the authority of realist endeavours? One wants to punch the air with the significance of this simple thought, its quiet, too often subterranean, value.

It's also important to reproduce the point about Alexander Kluge that Forrest makes at the end of Chapter Seven ('Raw Materials: Kluge's Work for Television'). This proposes that Kluge's project is not limited by a need to impose educative strategies onto audiences, nor to provide a basis for 'alternative readings' as the *dénouement* of radical cinema. Instead, Kluge's intellectual and visual eclecticism offer what Forrest calls 'cultural windows' which 'actively encourage the viewing audience to draw on their own imagination and experience in the aid of the creation of different cultural and historical imaginaries'. (168) For Kluge, these would be moments not of decreation or historical denial, but of variation amid actuality, perhaps as material homage to Benjamin and Kracauer, to the heritability of their philosophies in his many works. (16)

And with reference to some of the more interesting elements of her subjects' personal lives, the text both broadens and narrows the

aperture of engagement at the same time that it organises one's reading orientation into spatial disparity. One example is in how the meeting of Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht is recalled through Benjamin's association (some might say infatuation) with the writer and 'Latvian Bolshevik' Asja Lacis, prompting me to seek out more about this woman's influence in his life.¹ And the reader's attention is turned to the way that 'extraterritoriality' influenced Kracauer's 'conception of an alienated mode of perception'. (119) This constitutes through presenting the wholly embodied experience of exile from Germany he and his wife Lili endured between 1933 and 1941, prior to their emigration to the United States. (118–19) Emphasis is placed on how the work of all three men was influenced by the effects of Nazi Germany, but Forrest argues not only for their historical significance but also for their continuing relevance at the *fin de siècle* and beyond. (173)

In summary, I would say that, as for Kluge, this is writing that expands on repertoires for presenting ideas that move away from, rather than towards, the stifling tropes of representation. The book will frustrate 'evolutionary historians' but beyond its immediate appeal to those interested in film and cultural theory will contribute well to the increasing interest in emergent studies, the interactions between literature, art, science and science philosophy. Perhaps I will defer the 'last glance' to Kluge, who corroborates the value of interplay between preservation and reconception, asking this of the writer Heiner Müller: 'But how would you begin to narrate the moon, would you begin with the sun, would you begin with the stars?

You have begun: It should not be walked on ...' (163)

LISA McDONALD lectures at the University of Adelaide's Centre for Learning and Professional Development. She has taught in communications, media, and cultural studies at the universities of South Australia and Adelaide, with recent work experience in Asia. Her interests extend into relations between humanities and biological sciences thought, and follow her doctoral research into the cultural practices of fertility science. Her art practice is situated within photo arts and digital media areas. <lisa.mcdonald@adelaide.edu.au>

1. See for instance, Susan Ingram, 'The Writing of Asja Lacis', *New German Critique*, no. 86, Spring–Summer 2002, pp. 159–77.