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The Aesthetics of Passage: The Imag(in)ed Experience of Time in Thomas Lehr, W. G. Sebald, and Peter Handke – Book Review

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Heike Polster. *The Aesthetics of Passage: The Imag(in)ed Experience of Time in Thomas Lehr, W. G. Sebald, and Peter Handke*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009. Pp. 140. Paper \$19.80.

The aim of Heike Polster's book is to provide the reader with pertinent examples of four contemporary postmodern writers and artists who use creative ways to unlock traditional notions and representations of time and space (and their relation to each other). According to Polster, Thomas Lehr, Jan Peter Tripp, W. G. Sebald, and Peter Handke all have in common a particular use of "heterochronicity," a term she has coined to define "visual (and literary) strategies that seek to parallelize temporally non-identical acts of visual reception" (11). She stresses that these "artists rely on space's capacity to generate time, but they reconceptualize spatial practices of representation" (39).

What is at stake for Polster is to show contemporary examples of original aesthetic strategies that effectively redynamize and redefine meaningful human and historical agency as well as promoting a feeling of individual "ethical responsibility" (83) as to our present involvement with what she sees as an indispensable need for new and authentic production of meaning through aesthetic representation in contemporary Western culture.

For a short book, the dense and maybe too ambitious presentation of Hegel, Kant, and Bergson as representatives of the West's dualistic and systematic thinking, serves to highlight what Polster sees as the impasse we have reached in imagining new ways to represent constructively our coming to grips with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) and the "presentness" of the present (*Gegewärtigkeit*). Making extensive use of cultural anthropology and social geography, Polster, in the deconstructionist vein, regrets that, for the most part, writers still accept and work within the traditional philosophical discourse, which, promoting a (limiting) dialectical relationship between time (as flux and interior) and space (as stasis and material) is insufficient to engender individual, and different, perceptions of the passage of time in space. Furthermore, prioritizing and relying on space as a generator of our conception of time, this philosophical framework fails to allow for a necessary "critical reconstruction of conflicting temporalities and competing narrativizations of history" (13).

Thomas Lehr's novel *42* functions here as an extreme literary *mise-en-scène* of the shipwreck of philosophy's legacy that derives time from space and thus atrophies our imaginary potential to think and represent time as a dynamic force always already in a simultaneous and mutually engendering relation to space. The novel shows what happens when space has ceased to generate time. When space becomes a static vacuum, human values and society disintegrate, depriving the world of meaningful history.

Jan Peter Tripp's artwork, in general, and his work on W. G. Sebald, in particular, shows his affinity to the latter as to the function and purpose of a work of art, namely to create a sense of alienation in order "to enable us to see the things as if for the first time" (48). Pitching the Deleuzian concept of "genetic perception," which refuses to organize "our perceptions of time to fixate things from a specific viewpoint," (55) against the hierarchal and thus limited "historical" methods of representation

of time through/as space, Polster demonstrates how Tripp and Sebald both in their own medium, produce "heterochronicity," challenging the viewer's and reader's aesthetic and ethical investment in the process of creation. Both artists activate in us "differential perception," by creating "a complex matrix of interchange and interaction between images, interpretations, representations, and visual strategies" (64).

To conclude with a discussion of Peter Handke, a pioneer in the field, is a good idea, because his work offers Polster the opportunity to synthesize clearly her main argument against historical/traditional forms of representation of time and space grounded in uncritical acceptance of epistemological orthodoxy. Here, Polster relaxes from her previous efforts to make the issue more complex by the overuse of conceptual phrases. The reliance on the authority of, perhaps, too many other critics for support tends to detract from and risks to drown her own voice. Nevertheless, Polster's original contribution of "heterochronicity" to the dictionary of theoretical concepts and the choice of her illustrations of the concept through the lens of four provocative innovators is essentially convincing and offers to the trained academic reader a valuable example of interdisciplinary scholarship.

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