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*The Chatter of the Visible: Montage and Narrative in Weimar
Germany* by Patrizia C. McBride (review)

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204 makes a brief appearance in the book, in fact). Network theorists would be inclined to refer to Spoerri as a “broker,” a figure who plays the crucial role of bridging otherwise disconnected networks. Indeed, this may well be the artist’s most lasting achievement: to have responded to the critique of modernist authorship by ramifying authorship such that the universe of artistic production is a potentially unending process of collaborative creation. This, it seems to me, is the promise inherent in Spoerri’s project, and one that is richly detailed in Cempellin’s text.

If I have one quibble with Cempellin’s book it is that, though meticulously researched and richly informed by interviews with the artist, it does not provide an introduction with which to situate the author’s unique perspective within the context of the established scholarship. References to other accounts of Spoerri’s work are woven throughout the book, but without an explicit statement up front it is difficult to distinguish Cempellin’s interpretive framework from those who precede her. Rather than have Spoerri’s longtime personal assistant, Barbara Räderscheidt, provide the book’s Introduction it would have been more productive to have had Cempellin frame the project herself. At the same time, however, there is something subversively Spoerri-esque about inserting the voice of someone else into what is conventionally a single-authored text. Though I find it less than fully satisfying in this particular instance, the incorporation of other voices into the book’s structure and argument works remarkably well in the case of Cempellin’s footnotes, which include a handful of reflections by a man named Nicholas Curry. Curry isn’t a friend of Spoerri’s. Rather, he is the copyeditor assigned to Cempellin by Vernon Press. That Cempellin would find it appropriate to include Curry’s comments on her text and to credit him by name, is a wonderful tribute to the collaborative generosity at the heart of Spoerri’s career.

***The Chatter of the Visible: Montage and Narrative in Weimar Germany.* Patrizia C. McBride. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. 246. \$90.00 (cloth); \$39.95 (paper); \$39.95 (eBook).**

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The Chatter of the Visible is a dense, sophisticated engagement that focuses on montage in relation to narrative in Weimar Germany. McBride’s foray into montage is far from the reductive analysis of this complex artistic form to which scholars in many fields have grown accustomed. Rather, the book represents a significant contribution to narrative theory in its own right. Through McBride’s deft, thoughtful encounters with early twentieth-century montage, she opens a chiasm of critical possibility in other arenas as well. Reserving the bulk of her sophisticated, potent prose for an unpacking of narrative, she has created what can best be described as a stand-alone assessment that also serves as an excellent companion to the study of montage in fields beyond German Studies.

The book approaches the relationship of montage and narrative by focusing on a discrete series of events and objects. *The Chatter of the Visible* begins with a lengthy discussion of the relationship between montage and narrative at historical points of transition as well as in relation to key examples of montage. Following a meaty, lengthy Introduction, which includes montage-like segments offset by bullet points and focused on particular manifestations, the text transitions to more sustained encounters.

In the chapters that form the body of the book, McBride focuses on deft re-readings of some of the most seminal ideas from Walter Benjamin’s essay “Die Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows” (*The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*) as well as “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (*The Work of Art*

in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility). Here McBride provocatively juxtaposes the idea that Benjamin simply uses montage as a “conceptual prop” in his writings with a much more sophisticated perspective: “For Benjamin the aesthetics of montage was both the signature of modern alienation and a blueprint for inquiring into the possibility of a new storytelling lodged at the intersection of new technological and perceptual patterns” (41). Using her engagement with Benjamin’s “Storyteller” essay to “outline the features of desirable narrative,” McBride then turns to Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay to demonstrate in more specific terms the manifestation of montage’s narrative strategy in relation to its mass cultural forms (42). To these ends, McBride notes that “the two texts make a consistent argument, which hinges on accounting for the present by historicizing (aesthetic) experience and mapping the deep changes produced by technology” (62–3). The two chapters—one focused on “The Storyteller” essay, the other focused on “Artwork” text—are so intimately connected that their separation as distinct chapters seems almost disruptive. But perhaps we witness here another kind of montage-as-meaning moment?

The Chatter With the Visible transitions from its focus on Benjamin’s work, with its theoretical and historical accounting for the relationship between montage and narrative, to what might be described broadly as case studies focused on fairly well-known Weimar artists: Hannah Höch, László Moholy-Nagy, and Kurt Schwitters. Each chapter presents dense, close readings of texts in relation to exemplars of visual montage, providing some of the most lucid examples of montage-as-narrative in the entire book. The focus on these individuals, and these visual works, is understandable. The limits of McBride’s unique take on montage begin to reveal themselves here, however, in that one wonders about the universal applicability of her approach in light of the seemingly ubiquitous culture of montage during Weimar Germany and beyond. In other words, these examples seem themselves to be so unique, so suited to McBride’s argument, that they call in to question the ability of her reframing to explain other examples of montage in the same way. Is the uninformed reader or untutored viewer really able to make sense of other examples of montage in quite the same way?

The book concludes with a rich discussion of montage after Weimar, with McBride focusing on—and breathing new life into—the well-trodden debate between Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács. Bloch thought it was possible to “separate the unmediated and pernicious form of montage from an analytical, mediated practice that refunctionalized the fragments from the older order in interim constructions charged with critical insight” (179). For Lukács, in contrast, montage represented a “self-indulgent subjectivity” that had taken the surface of experience at face value, resulting in what he saw as the highly problematic “twin triumph of escapist abstraction and a false immediacy” (179). McBride’s conclusions, which abstract key lines of insight from the exchange between Bloch and Lukács, challenge the hermeneutic assumption that informs both men’s writings. The “hermeneutic paradigm,” McBride argues, “presupposes an understanding of form as the repository of symbolic content that is to be disclosed through acts of interpretation” (180). McBride instead understands montage as “a narrative mode that conceptualizes meaning as the immanent outcome of relational permutations rather than as correspondence between a specific arrangement of experiential elements and a symbolic order extrinsic to it” (181). McBride concludes, in an all-too-brief discussion of the different approaches to “structure” within formalism and within structuralist thinking, that perception is itself called into question by montage:

If structuralism accounts for the semiotic operations of the empirical world by describing the underlying principles whose execution generates particular sense-making forms, the relational patterns of formalism abandon all assumptions about deep structure and general rules, and instead presuppose that sense-making depends on the constantly renewed encounter between contingent forms and the perceptual patterns they trigger. (181)

In other words, montage as narrative provides for unexpected experience; formalist approaches to montage better grasp this type of meaning-making, since structuralist approaches depend

206 upon pre-existing knowledge, already-solidified signifier-signified relations. Montage does not depend, according to McBride's framework, on creating meaning through the already-known. Montage is a way to make meaning—and, idealistically, to remake the world, differently—both now, and in the future.

The Chatter of the Visible is an important contribution to the ever-growing scholarship that seeks to connect the visual culture of Germany with histories and philosophies of literature, language, and meaning. On its own, the book is an excellent theory of narrative, posting visual montage as itself a unique and heretofore misunderstood form of narrative. The above overview of McBride's conclusion, however, reveals one of the book's few weaknesses: its allusion to histories and theories without the references to fully support such excellent insights. Brought up almost as an aside in the conclusion, for example, McBride's distinction between formalist and structuralist understandings of narrative is provocative and rich. But for all its intellectual nuance, the argument suffers from a lack of detailed historical elaboration and robust listing of scholarship in this area.

The book's otherwise compelling engagements with visual culture and with sense physiology also suffer from this lack of robust supporting research. One thinks of Frederick Schwartz's *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art of Twentieth-Century Germany* or Janet Ward's *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* as examples of visual culture histories that provide substantive engagement with the dynamic changes occurring in scientific understandings of sense physiology in relation to art and mass culture during roughly the same historical period. Coupling McBride's astute analyses with scholarship on Raoul Hausmann's recently published scientific writings on "opto-phonetics," or on Salomo Friedländer's engagements with theories of counterempirical knowledge vis-à-vis his theory of "creative indifference," would make for an enticing set of associations, suggesting a broad understanding of the myriad ways in which artists and thinkers in Weimar worked with montage as part of a wider program of social and political engagement. For an even more robust engagement with the strategies of what might be described as "visual meaning-making" in Weimar, *The Chatter of the Visible* could be coupled with key visual cultural studies of montage, such as Maria Makela, Peter Boswell, and Carolyn Lanchner's *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*; Cornelius Borck and Ralf Burmeister's *Manifesto Collage: Defining Collage in the Twenty-First Century*; or any of the other excellent catalogs produced by Burmeister and colleagues at the Berlinische Galerie, such as *Hannah Höch: Aller Anfang ist DADA! (Hannah Höch: Every Beginning is DADA!)*.

The Chatter of the Visible is a focused, irreplaceable, much-needed study. And McBride offers up a sophisticated, much-needed analysis of the relationship between narrative and montage for German Studies scholars. Coupling the text with other works, such as those listed above, can only strengthen and give additional visual evidence to McBride's assessments. To these ends, *The Chatter of the Visible* is a book to recommend. It is an exceptional study in narrative in its own right. It also would make an excellent companion to those studies that engage in detailed discussions of visual culture, of sense physiology, or of formalist/structuralist debates, for example. McBride's discrete selection of montage works demonstrates the type of detailed, close readings that make *The Chatter of the Visible* such an indispensable text for further scholarship in German Studies, and an invaluable companion for scholars of montage and of narrative in visual studies, art history, literature, and beyond.