

Gabriele Brandstetter and Sibylle Peters (editors):

de figura. Rhetorik – Bewegung – Gestalt

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de figura is a collection of fourteen scholarly essays focusing on the topicality and dimensions of the concept of figure in rhetoric, philosophy, literature, and theater. The essays are based on selected papers presented at the 1999 *Theorie der Figur* conference in Hamburg. The conference was part of a larger project on theatricality, and this original context of the contributions at least partly explains their emphasis on the performative potential in the figure and figurative modes of representation. Each of the articles – either explicitly or implicitly – takes its cue from Erich Auerbach’s seminal study, “Figura”,¹ and explores the theoretical potential of figure, figuration, or figurality. Verging on conceptual Platonism, the editors underline, on the basis of etymology, the corporality and plasticity (“Plastizität”, p. 8) – and hence the theatricality – of the figure. *Figura* is indeed related to the corporeal and shaping meanings of such Latin words as *ingere*, *figulus*, *fictor*, and *effigies*, but does this justify or explain the semantic content or use of the concept in other contexts? On the other hand, in the context of the present volume, the heuristic link between figure, body, performative *Gestalt*, and drama functions well and results in interesting readings of a variety of subjects ranging from philosophical and literary texts to cartography, performance, and music.

de figura is divided into five sections. In between the editors’ “Einleitung” (pp. 7-30) and Sibylle Peters’ fragmentary photo-essay on figures and theater (“Figuren/Theater – Fragmente einer Sprache der Dinge,” pp. 327-39) there are three sections devoted to more conventional scholarly articles. The “Einleitung” itself also consists of three parts. Gabriele Brandstetter and Sibylle Peters first sketch the conceptual history of *figura* from antiquity to post-structuralism and explain the approach employed in their book. Following this brief propaedeutic the editors exemplify the theatrical and performative “Szene der Figur” by analyzing Jérôme Bels’ dance theater or performance piece *The Last Performance*. While this lengthy analysis is interesting as a dramatization of the interface between the figure and drama, it may be frustrating for the reader who has not seen the performance in question. The last part of the introduction returns to a more conventional academic discourse by providing a very helpful overview of the fourteen scholarly articles to follow.

Figure der Differenz – Differenz zur Figur (pp. 31-149)

The five articles in the second section of *de figura* approach the history and theories of figure from philosophical perspectives. As a result of its level of abstraction, this section is the most ‘difficult’ in the book, especially if philosophy is not the reader’s main field of scholarship. The reader should not, however, be intimidated by the conceptual challenge of the essays, since they form the theoretical basis for the applicatory and hence more approachable articles.

Kai van Eikels’ dense and far-reaching essay, “Die erste Figur. Zum Verhältnis von Bewegung und Zeit” (pp. 33-50), focuses on the figure in relation to time, space, and motion. In

¹ *Archivum Romanicum*, 17 (1938), pp. 320-41.

its philosophical survey of what Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, Heidegger, and de Man have written about the subject, the article proposes that when time is conceived of as motion (“Bewegung”) the difference between the two is itself a figure. The spacing of time thus bears every trace of figurality, but motion as the first figure of time retains a temporal and conceptual difference from the figure itself. Or more generally, the figure – be it the ‘first’ or, even more hypothetically, the ‘last’ – always dramatizes difference. The conception of thinking as motion and as dependent on language marks the beginning of the modern era, changing temporal figures into metafigures. Theoretically, figural thinking can be demarcated from temporal thinking, but the borderline between the two is never actualized. As long as thinking operates with language, it remains figural, even when dealing with motion and time.

Logically, ‘non-figurative’ (“afigurativ”, p. 51) thinking would seem to liberate thought from the confines of the figure, and this is the topic of Martin Jörg Schäfer’s essay “(A-)Figurativ. Heidegger mit Celan und Benjamin” (pp. 51-77). Schäfer approaches the problem by way of a cross-reading of Paul Celan’s Büchner prize speech “Der Meridian” and Heidegger. Both Celan and Heidegger seek ways out of the ubiquitous figurality of language. In Schäfer’s reading, Celan’s speech is a rhetorical account of rhetoric. Celan speculates on the possibility of a utopia in which one could speak about things in an alternative way. This does not simply mean a denial of the connection between language and rhetoric, but rather a conception of rhetoric itself as a ‘disfiguring’ phenomenon. This circular or defacing quality of rhetoric and figurality may remind the post-structuralist reader of Paul de Man’s formulations. According to de Man, the rhetoricity of all language not only makes discourse and thinking figural but it also, with the same gesture, disfigures – only to generate figurality, and so on *ad infinitum*.² In Schäfer’s analysis, Celan does not, however, regard disfiguration as the automatic flip side of figuration. Sketching his utopian state of expression, Celan dubs the nameless nothing, which tries to reach the unreachable and articulate the ineffable, ‘poetry’ (“Dichtung”). Figurality also ties in with the form/content dyad, which, in Schäfer’s reading of Heidegger, can be rearticulated with the figuration/disfiguration dialectic in at least two ways. Making the form/content schema more dynamic, figure can be regarded either (1) as synonymous with form or (2) as traversing the whole dyad. Schäfer introduces ethics into this seemingly formalistic theoretization by discussing Heidegger’s Nazi sympathies in connection with such Nietzschean ‘matrix figures’ as *der Übermensch*, the will to power, and the chaotic flow of things before the new order takes over. Strangely enough, Schäfer does not attempt to make analogous connections in de Man’s case. After discussing naming and nature in Celan and Heidegger (“Das Nennen der Natur nennt die Natur des Nennens in ihrer unhintergehbaren Differenz”, p. 65), Schäfer picks up the theme of *Gestalt*. He utilizes Walter Benjamin and especially Werner Hamacher’s concept of “Afformativ” (i.e. “das Ereignis der Formierung, das in keiner Form aufgeht”) in problematizing the traditional figure/ground dualism.³ As a literary corollary of this, Schäfer discusses the ‘mad’ language of poetry as the middleground between muteness and speech, between silence and articulation. Running the unavoidable risk of a performative paradox, Schäfer’s article succeeds in providing ways of naming the unnameable, and suggesting what nonfigurality might be and mean.

Ulrich Wergin’s essay “Figuration und Fragmentation in Novalis’ Sprachpoetik” (pp. 79-99) interprets Novalis’ writings on language and poetics by paying special attention to self-figuration and alterity. In Wergin’s analysis, the poetics of German romanticism in general can

² Cf., e.g., Paul de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor”, *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), pp. 13-30, and “Autobiography as De-facement”, in *idem, The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), pp. 67-81.

³ Cf. Hamacher, “Afformativ, Streik”, in Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (ed.), *Was heisst “Darstellung”?* (Frankfurt an Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), p. 346.

be seen to have figuralized the philosophical discourse of the period. Wergin raises the interesting question whether this figuralization served or transgressed the philosophy of subject and its model for reflection. The answer to that question is ambivalent. For instance, Novalis' figurative interpretation of Kant's schemata, combined with the temporality of reflection, makes any strict subject/object division problematic. According to Wergin, temporalization also underlines the dependence of self and figure on others. As corollaries of this dependence, self-knowledge and speech turn out to be dialogic in nature, and figure loses its unity by becoming fragmented. Novalis' seminal discussion of fragments is also utilized in Martin Zenck's article in the forth section of the volume (cf. below in this review).

Dieter Mersch's contribution "*Argumentum est figura. Bemerkungen zur Rhetorik der Vernunft*" (pp. 101-25) discusses the rhetoricity and figurality of philosophical argumentation. Mersch is not content with merely reiterating the post-structuralist *idée reçue* that philosophical discourse is irrevocably doomed to use tropes like any other mode of writing. His argument is much more profound than that. Mersch sees the performatives of argumentation – the grounding figures of movement, the irreducible kernels of discourse – as the basis for the equation between argument and figure. Figurality can, thus, be regarded as the foundation of argumentation, albeit as a seriously shaky one. No matter how rational or denotative the discourse, the connotative sneaks into argumentation via the very use of 'natural' language. Philosophy earnestly tries to say what it means, but also irrevocably means what its discourse seems to say, which is not the same thing. Mersch discusses this phenomenon with the unlikely help of Wittgenstein's saying/showing dyad and emphasizes the performative functions of the figure in both 'scientific' and fictional writing. In its fiercely intellectual argumentation and scholarly sophistication, Mersch's is one of the most stimulating articles in *de figura*.

By combining rigorous scholarship and stylistic playfulness, Sibylle Peters' essay "Figur und Agentur. Eine Ab-handlung. Demonstriert an: Kants Antinomie der Freiheit. Pointe: Bruno Latour" (pp. 127-49) is exceptional among the articles in *de figura*. Peters' topic, agency in figurality, is interesting in its own right, but the author's lucid way of presentation also makes the article a pleasurable read. Peters shows how, in antiquity, there was an affinity between truth and effect in philosophy and rhetoric respectively, in spite of the strict division between the two. In modernity, the theory of action ("Theorie der Handlung") turned out to be unthinkable without figurality, as Peters demonstrates with her elaborate reading of Kant. In more recent times, philosophical discourse has become increasingly self-critical with respect to its own authority, Blumenberg and Derrida being the culmination of this tendency. This self-criticism has tended to regard agency and authority as effects of the figure, rather than the reverse.

Redefiguren – Figurenrede (pp. 151-220)

The third section of *de figura* comprises four articles, one on literary theory and three on literary texts. Compared with the previous section, this part of the book is more accessible for the general reader. Caroline Pross' article "Gespaltene Stimme, groteske Gestalt. Zu Michail Bachtins Theorie des Texts" (pp. 153-62) rereads Bakhtin by connecting his poetic and linguistic theory to such themes as the current conceptions of prosopopoeia, speech acts, and post-structuralist critique of sign. Pross sees Bakhtin's textual theory as more valid than Saussure's principle of the arbitrariness of the sign. In Pross' view, Bakhtin's theory can be conceived of as prefiguring the current interest in the pragmatic, social, performative, and mediatory qualities of language. Although it offers a stimulating interpretation, Pross' article may treat Bakhtin too uncritically, trying to redeem his weaknesses by reading modern theories into his texts. Admittedly, Pross is not the only Bakhtin scholar to do this, but this gives me all the more reason to have expected some problematization of his seemingly easy applicability to contemporary thinking.

In her concise article “Stein, Zitat, Apostrophe. Figuration in Gustav Meyrinks *Der Golem*” (pp. 163-75), Sibylle Benninghoff-Lühl traces the possible meanings of the legendary golem figure in the Meyrink novel. In Jewish folklore, the golem is a clay figurine resembling a human being and endowed with life. With admirable insight Benninghoff-Lühl connects narrative levels, act of reading, and intertexts with this figure. Benninghoff-Lühl’s contention that the Meyrink novel as a whole is a textual golem sounds like a patently metafictional reading, but in *Der Golem*’s case this is a highly tenable and productive interpretation. Both the golem and *Der Golem* are shapeless or shape-shifting, and therefore indefinable, entities. The author also claims that the golem in Meyrink’s novel is the effect of apostrophe (pp. 163, 167-70), but one wonders whether the figure involved should not more accurately be described as prosopopoeia.

Both Andrea Allerkamp’s “Unhörbare Stimmen – Zur Figur des Anrufs. Ingeborg Bachmanns Hörspiel *Der gute Gott von Manhattan*” (pp. 177-94) and Claudia Benthien’s “Die stumme Präsenz. Zur ‘Figur’ des Schweigens bei Ödön von Horváth” (pp. 195-220) deal with the problem of figuring silence or what cannot be heard. Allerkamp’s essay reads a radio play by Ingeborg Bachmann and probes the various sounds, noises, and voices contained in it. The figure of the call (“der Anruf”) is especially important in this respect, since it holds a mediating position between various forms of discourse. Intertextually, ‘the call’ relates to several works of art, the most important of which is, in Allerkamp’s reading, Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. Benthien, on the other hand, provides a fascinating account of the representation of dramatic silence from the seventeenth through the twentieth century, as well as a close reading of von Horváth’s plays. As any rhetorically oriented literary critic knows, silence, in narrative texts, can be represented graphically with suspension points, dashes, or blank spaces, and rhetorically with such figures as ellipsis or aposiopesis. As Benthien points out, in drama, silence is mainly mediated by actors’ reticence or body language. Although seemingly a zero degree form of communication, silence can, in Benthien’s analysis, carry surprisingly many meanings, ranging from death to metafigurality. While otherwise theoretically up-to-date, both Allerkamp’s and Benthien’s articles would have profited from the articles collected in Gudrun M. Grabher and Ulrike Jessner (eds.), *Semantics of Silences in Linguistic and Literature* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996).

Einschnitt – Inversion – Ausschnitt (pp. 221-326)

The last scholarly section of *de figura* proceeds toward nonverbal modes of representation and deals with figures of fragmentation, disability, and inversion. A *cornucopia* of disciplines, this section is as challenging as it is fascinating, and I do not pretend to be sufficiently competent to evaluate the scholarly quality of all the contributions.

Gabriele Brandstetter has written two articles for this section, “de figura. Überlegungen zu einem Darstellungsprinzip des Realismus – Gottfried Kellers *Tanzlegendchen*” (pp. 223-45) and “Figur und Inversion. Kartographie als Dispositiv von Bewegung” (pp. 247-64). The first article provides a refreshing rereading of the theory of figurality and realism in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke, 1946) and “Figura” (1938), mentioned above, by examining the disfiguring potential in Keller’s representation of dance. The figure and discourse of dance relate to the narrative order, but they also have a bearing on the very reading of Keller’s dance legend, and contribute both to metafigurality and metadiscursiveness. In Brandstetter’s reading, Keller’s legend is a scene of figurality, which dramatizes its own disfiguration. The seemingly realistic depiction of dance in Keller can also be read as an account of the workings of figurative language or discursive modes in realism. The familiarity of dance and the ostensible transparency of its representation become, in this process, foregrounded to such a degree that they turn strange and opaque respectively. In other words, by revealing or even erasing its own figurative mechanism, the

figure disfigures. The second contribution by Brandstetter develops the idea of the inversion of a figure as a cognitive principle. Figural inversion can be thematized as an inversion of the figure/ground relation, which also discloses figuration as a process of perception or cognition. Brandstetter illustrates this with a reading of 'spatial inversion' in Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. The Musil novel provides a simultaneous double perspective on such mutually exclusive spatial dyads as inside/outside and concave/convex. By making a seemingly unlikely connection between cartography and choreography, Brandstetter examines 'inversion' as a performative figure of observation. The cartographic and choreographic forms of inscription make the observer oscillate between signs and reality or between notation and performance. Brandstetter also approaches her topic from an auditory direction with an exemplary reading of the aboriginal mapping without graphic notation in Bruce Chatwin's novel *Songlines*.

Martin Zenck's contribution, "Die mehrfache Codierung der Figur: ihr defigurativer und torsohafter Modus bei Johann Sebastian Bach, Helmut Lachenmann und Auguste Rodin" (pp. 265-88), offers an unlikely but all the more thought-provoking comparison of figure, fragment, and torso in music and sculpture.

In his article "Zur Darstellung der Figur des Kastraten" (pp. 289-310), Michael Malkiewicz studies commonplaces and conventions in the visual, literary, and medical representation of *castrati* between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Malkiewicz's article thus deals with figure and disfiguration in the literally corporeal sense of the words, discussing the cultural figuration of the disfigured male body. Complete with well-chosen images reproduced in the book, this essay is an illuminating excursion to a currently non-existent curiosity in the history of Western opera.

Petra Sabisch's "Körper, kontaminiert. Ein Versuch mit Randnoten zur Performance *Product of Circumstances* von Xavier le Roy" (pp. 311-26) provides an experimental reading of le Roy's performance piece *Product of Circumstances* from the viewpoints of body, natural or medical science, and dance. The article plays with the bodily conventions of the textual 'corpus', since it includes "Randnoten" placed not at the bottom as footnotes but in the middle of the page. Utilizing Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-Luc Nancy, Judith Butler, and Elspeth Probyn, the article questions the idea of the body as a whole *Gestalt* by regarding it as a contaminated and contaminating entity. The bodily figure, in Sabisch's analysis, is constantly changing and not strictly separable from the 'ground' of others.

A collection of essays based on conference papers rarely makes a solid whole, and *de figura* is no exception. However, what *de figura* loses in solidity it gains in its variety of perspectives. In addition to the range of topics, the editors have also been liberal in stylistic matters by allowing for semi-essayistic writing (Peters, pp. 127-49) or typographical experiments (Sabisch, pp. 311-26). Unfortunately, the book does not include an index, a general bibliography, and notes on contributors, which would have facilitated reading. A certain upgrading of the bibliographies would also have been in order; for instance, there are several references to Bettine Menke's separate articles on prosopopoeia, which have been reprinted in revised form in her veritable standard work on the subject, *Prosopopoiia. Stimme und Text bei Brentano, Hoffmann, Kleist und Kafka* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000). Furthermore, relevant studies on such branches of cognitive science as psychology, linguistics, and literary criticism are rarely used in the articles.

In spite of its minor editorial weaknesses, *de figura* is a fascinatingly thematized volume, which may appeal to readers interested in literary theory, contemporary performing arts and, above all, in the history of – and interface between – philosophy and rhetoric. It is unlikely that all these interests will be present in any one person, unless you are a Renaissance man – or a reviewer for *Rhetorical Review*, albeit for different reasons. Perhaps this explains why the

editors indicate no intended readership for this collection of mainly high-standard scholarly articles on the conceptual history and corporeal dimensions of the figure.

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