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Abstract

Review of Andrea Bachner. *The Mark of Theory: Inscriptive Figures, Poststructuralist Prehistories*. Fordham UP, 2018. 274 pp.

Keywords

inscription, theory, history

Andrea Bachner. *The Mark of Theory: Inscriptive Figures, Poststructuralist Prehistories*. Fordham UP, 2018. 274 pp.

Andrea Bachner's *The Mark of Theory: Inscriptive Figures, Poststructuralist Prehistories* (2018) summarizes the central place of inscription within poststructuralist critical theory. For Bachner's wide-ranging monograph, inscription also existed as a central aspect of earlier psychological, anthropological, and media theories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The Mark of Theory* argues that this earlier residence for inscription infused later poststructuralism by offering a space to theorize interrelationships between signification and materiality. For example, Bachner argues that poststructuralist Jacques Derrida specifically used earlier examinations of inscription to create theories of deconstruction to model interactions between materiality and signification through the idea of the trace, or the inherent spectral and opposite meaning beneath the actual and implied meaning of a sign. As modern scholarship in the humanities questions the importance of social construction to ideas of truth in the public sphere and within critical analysis, *The Mark of Theory* is a welcome addition for understanding how both reality and oppression are often inscribed through discourse, trauma, and corporeality.

Bachner's first chapter focuses on the importance of anthropological study to the development of the idea of the trace. The chapter focuses on the study of tattooing within late nineteenth century anthropology and modernist literature as forceful within later ideas about inscribing the body and the role of writing within discussions of literacy, civilization, and progress. The chapter begins with an analysis of Franz Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie" ("In the Penal Colony," 1914). The savage and tropical setting of that story develops the arguments of *The Mark of Theory* into a discussion of how modernists defined the early literature of tattooing as part of non-Western cultural traditions. For many students of tattooing during the late nineteenth century, the tattooing process was one of the first forms of writing and was subsequently often classified as a way to explore the literacy of Western and alphabetic modernity as superior to previous forms of writing.

The chapter then continues to discuss the works of Friedrich Nietzsche on tattooing, which informed Michel Foucault's later discussion of bio-politics and governmentality in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). For Bachner, exploring these works on social ordering shows how the original study of tattooing as part of previous modalities altered to later include tattooing as a part of a modernity that did not simply march into a positivist eschaton. Bachner takes this understanding of negative dialectics into the study of inscription in Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*, 1967) and the later analysis of cultural difference in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

The second chapter, the finest of the monograph, focuses on the intransigent place of trauma in the study of inscription related to Jewish identity, camp tattoos, and the cultural mark of circumcision. Focusing on the Holocaust as a traumatic event that cannot be accurately described, Bachner explores Freudian ideas of how most aspects of trauma resist signification. Trauma is consequently complicated for poststructuralists because it relates to corporeal inscription in indirect ways. This particularly relates to a space within the mind that has been historically resistant to signification since the foundation of the academic concept of trauma within early Arcadian scholarship. Bachner explores these indirect patterns to look at how Freud conceptualized the mind as a writing pad and therefore a place where trauma could possibly be inscribed through repetitive psychological analysis.

Even so, trauma essentially signifies as a concept that is inherently difficult to define, which Bachner analyzes through the camp tattoo inscribed upon bodies during the Holocaust. Searching the theories of Giorgio Agamben, Bachner pursues how intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust can be understood through the metaphor of the camp tattoo. The chapter continues with discussions of the cultural feminization of Jewish people that was instigated by scholars of circumcision during the early twentieth century. The horrific consequences of that discursive manipulation lead Bachner into a discussion of how poststructuralists like Derrida applied ideas of inscription to discussions of the death drive and the desire for archival retention explored within *Mal d'Archive (Archive Fever)*, (1995).

Chapter 3 focuses on visual studies and critical analysis of photography during the early twentieth century. Exploring the later theories of Roland Barthes, Bachner studies how a false duplicity offered by early photography opened a space for poststructuralists to examine the social construction of reality. Even with shifts from analog to digital photography, concerns with the social construction of truth remain central to modern critical theory, the ethics of spectatorship, and the uncanny relationship between photography and time, originally studied within the works of Walter Benjamin. This chapter ends with an analysis of Chilean artist Guadalupe Santa Cruz's *Quebrada* (2006). This visual examination involves the only photographic image in a chapter that would have been greatly aided by the use of more images, as the reader is left interpreting the author's often diligent work at describing photographs through words alone.

Chapter 4 locates the phonograph at the root of poststructuralist concerns with sound and inscription through the realm of media studies. The chapter centers on the early twentieth century work of Rainer Maria Rilke, who created a lasting thought experiment involving what sounds a phonograph would make when a needle crossed over a human skull. This extension of sensory potentialities through poetry offered students of poststructuralism in the later twentieth century a space to analyze the social construction of mediated perception. Following this primer, Bachner looks at poststructuralist theories of mediation and representation within

the work of Friedrich Kittler and Derrida, who has specifically offered speaking words and hearing sounds as central to markers of modern identity.

The Mark of Theory ends with a concluding analysis of the human/animal binary while nodding at many theorists through explaining how the inscriptive force of theory can positively alter the social construction of knowledge. For Bachner, thoughts on inscription from scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided poststructuralists a consistent space to analyze how meaning comes to be inscribed as an aspect of reality. In general, Bachner's focus on earlier scholars like Freud and Benjamin offers new ways to understand the emergence of poststructuralist theory and the role of inscription as both troublesome and formative for poststructuralism. The interdisciplinary analysis in *The Mark of Theory* also imposes new questions on whether literary scholars should retain disciplinary rigor in the face of consistent undertakings that combine literary studies into broader scholarship in the humanities. Bachner's work is intellectually intense, even for scholars who are well versed in deconstruction and materialism. Nonetheless, the work is rarely redundant and nearly always coherent, and should consequently be read by literary theorists and frequently assigned within graduate courses on critical theory.

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