A German Poet at the Movies: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann


Throughout the 20th century, cinema has fascinated modernist and avant-garde poets. Yet the ‘screen history’ of poetry is still largely unwritten. The following contribution is a small extract from a much larger study on that topic dedicated to French, American and German “poets at the movies”. Though it cannot be claimed that Rolf Dieter Brinkmann (1940–1975) was the first to introduce the cinema into German poetry, he was the first poet after 1945 to deal with the cinema in a radically innovative poetic style previously unknown in the German tradition.

I

Bringing together contemporary German poetry with the medium of film and the attraction of the cinema still seems to be a project out of the ordinary – at least for those readers unfamiliar with the writing of Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. Given that an avant-garde like that found in Apollinaire’s Paris, or in the postwar New York scene around Frank O’Hara, could scarcely be said to exist within the academic German scene of the 1950s and early 1960s that was dominated by Gruppe 47, Brinkmann may well have been the only real representative of his generation who attempted to create a literary avant-garde in postwar Germany in the manner of the early Parisian or the postwar New York authors. Due to his premature death in a car accident in London in 1975, much of his writing remains neglected, or is known to the public only through fragmentary scrapbooks and letters published by his widow between 1976 and 2005. However, most of the books he published during his lifetime are still accessible, at least through second-hand bookstores or in reprint versions, and it is these books that have helped to create an image of Brinkmann as an angry, outspoken young man who cannot be subsumed under commonplace literary criteria. The publication that made his name both popular and notorious was an anthology that contained none of Brinkmann’s own writing, with the exception of one major essay included as an afterword. Brinkman edited the book with his lifelong friend Ralf Rainer Rygulla, a bookseller and disc jockey, and they called it “ACID”, a word which was by then, in 1969, closely associated with the emerging American counterculture of the Beat generation and the New York School – the poets that Brinkmann and Rygulla wanted to introduce to a German audience with the book. What made “ACID” appear so provocative back then was the outrageous,
aggressive way the texts were grouped by the editors, rather than the actual
texts or authors – the texts appeared in a collage-like pattern that broke all the
rules of continuity and cohesion, and mixed images from American popular
culture (movies, pop stars, etc.) with representations of American countercul-
ture. Brinkmann and Rygulla celebrated the “Neue amerikanische Szene” (the
subtitle of the book) through such diverse figures as William Burroughs, Andy
Warhol, Michael McClure, Frank O’Hara, Taylor Mead, Ted Berrigan and many
others. They seemed to be avoiding any comparison to what poet and academic
Walter Höllerer had introduced as “Junge amerikanische Lyrik” in 1961, eight
years before, with the help of Gregory Corso. In the latter, new American poetry
was presented as something new and of interest to a German audience, but
within the range of international modernist writing. By contrast, “ACID” pre-
presented the “new” American avant-garde as the one and only possible paradigm
for innovative writing. It was no coincidence that Brinkmann gave the essay that
concluded the anthology the title “Der Film in Worten” (The Film in Words),
drawing on a statement about the cinematographic qualities of writing origi-
nally made by Jack Kerouac. Brinkmann’s highly eclectic text, now much cited
by those interested in tracing his poetological roots, contains his vision of a
postmodern literature that interacts with new media and technologies and pays
tribute particularly to film and cinema as patterns of perception in Western soci-
ety. As he puts it in his own words, “Kunst schreitet nicht fort, sie erweitert sich”
(Art does not advance forwards, it extends outwards). The medium of film,
based on images, movement and artificial light, leads to the creation of a new
type of literature that deals with the surfaces of our visual reality:

For literature that means: traditional ideas about form have to be broken down and
we have to put the usual addition of words behind us. Instead, images have to be pro-
jected – “Bookmovie is the movie in words” (Kerouac), … a movie, therefore
images, that is, projections, not the reproduction of abstract, imageless syntactical
patterns … Images that flicker and jump on highly sensitive film surfaces, surfaces
that sensibility sticks to […].

Although he rejects the traditional regard for the “avant-garde” as in itself too
academic, he would not deny that this vision of crossing the borders of literature
is itself largely indebted to Apollinaire’s avant-garde manifesto of 1918,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{‘Für die Literatur heißt das: tradiertes Verständnis von Formen […] aufzulösen und}
damit die bisher übliche Addition von Wörtern hinter sich zu lassen, statt dessen
Vorstellungen zu projizieren – ‘Das Buch in Drehbuchform ist der Film in Worten’}
(Kerouac) … ein Film, also Bilder – also Vorstellungen, nicht die Reproduktion abstrak-
ter, bilderloser syntaktischer Muster … Bilder, flickernd und voller Sprünge, Aufnahmen
auf hochempfindlichen Filmstreifen Oberflächen verhafteter Sensibilität […].’ See Rolf
Dieter Brinkmann: Der Film in Worten: In ACID. Neue Amerikanische Szene. Ed. by Rolf

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\]