



BOOK REVIEW

PETER BEXTE: *KONJUNKTION UND KRISE*

[Peter Bexte: *Konjunktion & Krise. Vom ›und‹ in Bildern und Texten.*](#)

Berlin: Kadmos-Verlag 2019. 188 Seiten, 17 x 24 cm, broschiert, 17 Abbildungen, ISBN 978-3-86599-407-3

For many of us, merely the title of Peter Bexte's new book - *Konjunktion und Krise* [Conjunction and Crisis] is sufficient to prompt a puzzled frown. Amongst all the crises of the contemporary world, we may well assume that any associated with parts of speech and syntax will rarely impinge on our everyday lives. Even the highly contentious Oxford comma is more likely to provoke irascibility than a crisis.

Peter Bexte, Professor of Aesthetics in Cologne, was likewise unfazed by conjunctions until by chance two items landed on his desk simultaneously: a postcard reproduction of Kurt Schwitters' *Unbild*, and *Zweistromland*, a collection of essays by Franz Rosenzweig, both dating from the 1920s and both offering a profound meditation on the ultimately meaningless word 'and'. Thus begins Bexte's entertaining, informative and often humorous investigation into a lowly conjunction that is elusive as it is common. It was, as he soon discovered, not an easy task. His research was hampered by the fact that indexes and search engines favour nouns and give short shrift to other parts of speech, let alone conjunctions. For the common reader, the ever-present *and* is to all intents and purposes invisible. But when it came to indexes, at least Rosenzweig and Schwitters obliged. *Zweistromland* lists eleven entries under *Und* (capitalized!) - the same number as Bexte found when he searched for visual and written works by Schwitters with the word *Und* in the title.

Schwitters and Rosenzweig were not acquainted, but for each, as Bexte soon realizes, the word 'und' touched a raw nerve in their lives during the Weimar Republic. For Rosenzweig an inner conflict arose from the repercussions of what *and* means when one declares oneself both German *and* Jewish. The *and* needs investigation: are these identities unrelated, or parallel, or indivisible, or amalgamated, or is some hierarchy implied? Thus *and* takes on political dimensions: as Bexte points out, Rosenzweig's enquiry lost all validity in 1933. No less complex are the questions implicit in the hodgepodge of scruffy materials and multifarious processes of accretion, linkage and juxtaposition that make up Schwitters' *Unbild*. For Bexte Schwitters is the artist of inclusion par excellence and he regards *Das Unbild* as a key work of its epoch. His extensive analyses of its finely balanced composition are particularly revealing, and crop up at various points in the book; in effect, the *Unbild* provides the warp and weft of the otherwise wide-ranging content of *Konjunktion und Krise*. Surely nobody has ever taken the title of *Das Unbild* so earnestly and at its face value (though Bexte's proud disclosure that he counted 'over 50 nails' leads one to wonder just how long it took before the staff at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart intervened.)

Bexte notes that Schwitters himself never wrote of collage, only composition, and his exploration in Chapter 8 of the similarities and differences between the two provide a fascinating adjunct to his thoughts on the more theoretical aspects of *and*. *And* is also a useful pretext for digression, distraction and detour, but no matter—Bexte's whimsical meanderings around his already circuitous route are often as instructive as his main text. He is possibly the first to note that one of the first readers of *An Anna Blume* was Hermann Hesse, and without doubt the very first to wonder (via a more devious path) whether after his nervous breakdown in Margate, T.S. Eliot drew inspiration for *The Waste Land* from Schwitters' *Der Zwiebel*.

The ruminations of Schwitters and Rosenzweig on the potential and the ramifications of *and* were shared by many of their contemporaries. In the course of his research, Peter Bexte came across an

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astounding number of further references to the conjunction in the early 20th century. Franz Werfel's perceived 'rebellion of the *and*' in 1914 was a prelude, as Bexte sees it, to the major crisis of *and* that arose at the end of the Great War, when the binding principle of loyalty to king and country that had sustained the empire and the war effort fell apart for ever. Freud saw *and* as a characteristic of the blur of dreams, where a location can be two places at once, a person two people. Eisenstein used a telling shot of *and* in his film *October: Ten Days That Shook the World*. Kandinsky wrote of the 20th century as dominated by the sign of *and*, publishing an article on the subject in the avant-garde magazine *io* in 1927 (whereby Bexte's discussion centres on what Kandinsky can have meant by describing *and* as a sign); Heidegger assessed the meaning of *and* in a lecture on the concept of liberty.

The Weimar Republic saw itself as a disjointed society, in Bexte's opinion, and he considers it no coincidence that the era was also the golden age of collage and montage. With this in mind, he admits that he tried to limit the historical framework of his study to that of the 1920s, but with little success. Philosophers, writers and miscellaneous figures from Ancient Rome to the present sidle into his researches and edge their way into the different chapters: not only Adorno *and* Max Wertheimer *and* Siegfried Kracauer *and* Anna Blume *and* Robert Musil, but also Cicero *and* Luther *and* August Stramm *and* Herbert Read *and* Umberto Eco, *and...and...* - while of course it would have been a major omission to ignore Richard Wagner's *Isolde* reflecting on her own and her lover's radically different perceptions of *and* when she sings of *Tristan and Isolde*.

The wealth of information about *and* that came to light in Bexte's investigations soon exposed an unforeseen difficulty for him: how do you organise *and*? Not so easy, he says, for all its apparently serial characteristics, the mutinous conjunction refused all his determined attempts at moulding his book into a continuous whole or even into a satisfactory sequence of chapters. As he pursued the will-o'-the-wisp of *and* through history, he rapidly concluded that the conjunction is rarely as straightforwardly additive as one might first assume, being associated less with clear-cut relationships than with relationships in crisis - hence the title of his book. Of its own accord, it seems, *Konjunktion und Krise* took on the nature of a collage, though perforce a collage with pagination, so that you can dip into it as the whim takes you, rather like a magazine or a periodical.

The comparison is an appropriate one, because Bexte soon realized that, unexpectedly, newspapers and magazines made up a large part of his sources. It is all too easy, he reminds us, to view the exuberantly pluralistic 1920s through the grim filter of the black-and-white Nazi era. It was not the classic cumulative series (as in *The Collected Works of...*), but journals such as *Der Sturm* and *Der Querschnitt*, with their multitude of disparate voices, that provided the most insights into the significance of *and*. (In 1933, Bodo Rasch's short-lived magazine [Zirkel](#) even included an article by Adolf Hitler along with contributions from Baumeister, Doesburg, Moholy-Nagy and Schwitters, though the latter was writing under a pseudonym and Hitler's relatively tame article dealt with modern town planning as a symptom of decline.)

In conclusion, the debates of the Weimar Republic are, in Bexte's view, disquietingly repeating themselves in the 21st century, in a fractured world where our accustomed bonds and allegiances are increasingly undermined and called into question, and where the spectre of Weimar's wretched finale haunts our thoughts ever more frequently. Straining against the *and* is always the counterbalancing *either/or*. As such, we would do well to pay attention to the nature of the *ands* that underlay and inspired the Weimar Republic, for they are equally pertinent today. Indeed, those of us who have read *Konjunktion und Krise* are unlikely to be able overlook the ostensibly modest but eternally ambivalent *and* ever again.