

Tristan Ireson-Howells, Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom

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“Imprecision, uncertainty, transience, incompleteness”: Gerhard Richter’s *October 18, 1977* and Don DeLillo’s “Baader-Meinhof”

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between Gerhard Richter’s *October 18, 1977* and Don DeLillo’s short story “Baader-Meinhof”. Richter’s depiction of the deaths of members of the Red Army Faction draws from original photographic sources. Richter blurs these images thereby questioning aspects of obfuscation and the paradoxical clarity of incompleteness. DeLillo’s story is centred on a discussion about the paintings which quickly transforms into a narrative of coercion and stalking. This paper considers how visual art can be represented in fiction finding parallels between Richter’s and DeLillo’s use of repetition, haziness and uncertainty to problematise the act of viewing.

Keywords: Gerhard Richter, Don DeLillo, “Baader-Meinhof”, terror, ekphrasis

In Don DeLillo’s short story “Baader-Meinhof”, a woman visits a gallery and is captivated by Gerhard Richter’s 1988 cycle of paintings *October 18, 1977*. Richter created the series of fifteen oil grisaille images depicting the imprisonment and deaths of leading members of the radical left-wing group the Red Army Faction (henceforth RAF). The RAF were a militant Marxist group operating in West Germany in the late seventies. The group became notorious for a series of assassinations, bombings and bank robberies. The title of Richter’s work is a reference to the deaths of three members of the group: Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe, who were found dead in Stammheim Prison on this date under mysterious circumstances¹. The nameless woman in DeLillo’s story feels compelled to return to the gallery several times; she is eager to learn more about the artwork and to understand her own emotional response. While viewing

¹ The RAF evolved from peaceful protest which gave way to progressively more extremism through violence and terrorist acts. Their agenda was formed by what they regarded as the continued legacy of fascism in German political institutions, the humanitarian crisis of the Vietnam War, and bourgeoisie elitism. The group were responsible for the deaths of more than thirty people.

Tristan Ireson-Howells, The School of Humanities, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, CT1 1QU,
tmi1@cant.ac.uk, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0705-4306>



the paintings she senses a man standing behind her and feels his gaze resting on her. The man instigates a conversation and they go to a café before a scene in her apartment. The sinister momentum of the story intensifies as the man makes sexual advances and the woman retreats, then shuts herself in the bathroom demanding that he leave her home. The man does eventually go before a final act, the following day, when they both return to view Richter's paintings once more.

The ekphrastic use of Richter's artwork demonstrates several ways in which visual art can both inform fiction and function in an exchange between artistic mediums. "Baader-Meinhof" not only uses an exhibition of *October 18, 1977* as a setting, but portrays Richter's conceptual ideas in literary form. DeLillo almost certainly visited the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City to see Richter's artworks, which were on display between September 2000 and March 2001 then again in early 2002². The story, first published in *The New Yorker* in April 2002, was DeLillo's first work of fiction after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. As such, and due to its subject matter, it is impossible not to read the piece without this context. The story engages with responses to terrorist acts and questions how artists choose to depict these events³. However, DeLillo addresses 9/11 obliquely; although set in New York, the story develops before a backdrop not of religious extremism against America, but of a German artist's reaction to the deaths of members of a very different terrorist group.

In the early sixties, Richter began experimenting with mixed-media by merging photographic images with painting. He started working from an initial photographic source by projecting its image onto a canvas and then tracing the outline in pencil before filling in details with paint. The final stage of the process involved Richter blurring these images by running the paints together with a squeegee before they had dried, or else scraping into the paint while still wet with a spatula (Godfrey, 2011, p. 52). Richter's methods embraced the notion of chaos in creating artworks beyond his conscious expression. Richter states, "with a brush you have control. The paint goes on the brush and you make a mark. From experience you know exactly what will happen. With the squeegee you lose control" (as cit. in Godfrey 2011, p. 27). In 1962 Richter produced the first work he would label "photo painting" titled *Table*. Richter draws much from Walter Benjamin by playing with concepts of the automated aspect of design taking precedence over the visionary artist as creator. Richter (2009) explains, "I was dissatisfied because there was

² Herren (2015) notes that DeLillo's manuscript of "Baader-Meinhof" is dated February 2002, which could mean the setting of the story is Richter's career retrospective on display in New York after 9/11 between February-May 2002 (p. 165).

³ In 2005 Richter produced his own response to 9/11 in his painting *September*. It is a small canvas: the size of a standard TV screen depicting the image of the blast as the first plane struck the north tower. Once again Richter applies the blurring and distorting techniques he used in *October 18, 1977*.

too much paint on the canvas and became less happy with it, so I overpainted it. Then suddenly it acquired a quality which appealed to me and I felt it should be left that way, without knowing why" (p. 259). Richter has spoken about his initial dissatisfaction with *Table* and other pieces not as a source of regret, but as a vital aspect of its final composition. As a result, the painting represents Richter's self-criticism through reworking, overlaying, and thereby emphasising how essential uncertainty should remain in his creative practice. This aspect, where absence and obscurity take prominence, closely align Richter and DeLillo. DeLillo incorporates uncertainties at the heart of his works where an accepted interpretation of history, subjectivity and even the legitimacy of language fall into question. Both probe the very purpose of art whilst challenging official versions of history through the dominance of metanarratives.

In *October 18, 1977* Richter's technique of blurring softens the separation of lines and shapes into murky washes of greys and blacks, in what is described in "Baader-Meinhof" as an "ashy blur" (p. 108)⁴. The series of monochrome canvases with their opaque overlays make for an unsettling viewing experience. Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, another member of the radical group who died in prison a year before the others, are shown shortly after their deaths in *Erhängte* [Hanged] and *Erschossener 1* [Man Shot Down 1]. The effect of his photopaintings is particularly disconcerting as figures lying dead or hanging from a rope appear to melt into their backgrounds and a seemingly vital detail is obfuscated. By obscuring the image Richter draws attention to the photograph as a fundamentally imprecise representation of the reality we take for granted it has captured. For Barthes (1981), writing in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph "actually blocks memory, [it] quickly becomes counter-memory" (p. 91). Barthes gives the example of being with a group of friends who are talking about childhood recollections. As Barthes has been looking through his own family albums he is unable to summon memories with the same clarity as others can recall them. Rather than an inactive document of time and place, Barthes sees the power of an image to disrupt. He writes, "The Photograph is violent [...] because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed" (p. 91). Yet Richter does precisely this: he manipulates the original sources and complicates the possibility of a photograph being an irrefutable artefact while maintaining its essential violence. The truth of what happened in Stammheim Prison will never be known. The photographs taken by the police as official documents of the deaths create only uncertainties. Richter's aim, possibly in part to represent a hazy version of the past like a distant memory, also serves to destabilise the viewer's relationship between precision and truth. The techniques

⁴ All references to DeLillo's "Baader-Meinhof" are from the short story collection *The Angel Esmerelda: Nine Stories* (2011). New York: Scribner.

of sfumato, where colours are blended and outlines softened, particularly pronounced in pictures such as *Festnahme 1* [Arrest 1] and *Zelle* [Cell], offer an indeterminate subject matter and a lack of unequivocal interpretable intent. In an interview by Rolf Schon, Richter (2009) says, “I can make no statement about reality clearer than my own relationship to reality; and this has a great deal to do with imprecision, uncertainty, transience, incompleteness. But this doesn’t explain the picture. At best it explains what led to their being painted” (p. 60). Richter’s works are as much about the creative endeavour and imprecise process as the finished artworks themselves.

Richter’s priority of highlighting uncertainty is not a failure of expression or a refusal to engage fully with the images he chooses to blur. In fact, the incoherence of Richter’s paintings is dialectically intended to open the possibilities of a viewer’s response by an absence of focused detail. In *Atlas* Richter writes, “You do not see less, by looking at a field out of focus through a magnifying glass” (as cit. in Jahn, 1989, p. 202). DeLillo’s thinly sketched characterisation and lack of narrative closure fulfils a similar purpose allowing a piece the creative space to oscillate between various subjective meanings without venerating any of them. Richter’s blurring technique could be interpreted to represent the possible cover-up of the deaths by the German authorities. The man in the story is well aware of the controversy; he says, “They committed suicide. Or the state killed them” (p. 106). Richter is drawing on a particularly traumatic period in German history which has had a profound effect on the national psyche. So shocking were those images that they created an outcry when first shown in Krefeld in 1989 (Danchev, 2010, p. 106). The very notion of presenting historical truth is problematised. Theodor Adorno defines how the culture industry “conserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist” (cf. Bernstein, 2001, p. 102). Richter’s blurring corresponds to the degradation of memory; the artist is intrigued by the mnemonic capacity of photography to distil cultural fascination and yet occlude a possible consensus of meaning.

Paradox is central to Richter’s aesthetic choices. His rationale is not to cloud his images to obscure, but in order to clarify he writes, “I blur to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant” (Richter, 2009, p. 33). As DeLillo writes from the perspective of the woman, the canvases show scenes “in nuances of obscurity and pall, a detail clearer here than there, the slurred mouth in one painting appearing nearly natural elsewhere” (p. 105). In the story the woman has some knowledge of the group’s genesis. She is diligent in her attempts to understand the artwork focusing on very specific details. She concentrates “on the differences, arm, shirt, unknown object at the edge of the frame, the disparity or uncertainty” (p. 106). The woman’s close attention is attracted by the painting *Beerdigung* [Funeral]. She demonstrates familiarity with Richter’s creative process: “She knew that these paintings were based on

photographs, but she hadn't seen them and didn't know whether there was a bare tree, a dead tree beyond the cemetery, in one of the photos" (pp. 108–109). The painting, generally considered to be the final in the series, depicts the funerals of the three members of the group who died on 18th October as their coffins are carried through a swathe of onlookers. The woman is convinced that there is a small cross at the top of the painting just left of centre: "She saw it as a cross, and it made her feel, right or wrong, that there was an element of forgiveness in the picture, that the two men and the woman, terrorists, and Ulrike before them, terrorist, were not beyond forgiveness" (p. 109).

She wonders whether Richter has embellished the photo to add a hidden iconographic symbol of Christianity, but does not want to share her insight with the man. Her interpretation of the funeral painting as an emblem of forgiveness will be echoed at the story's close. However, the blurring effect means the cross she finds could equally be the silhouette of a tree or a scratched brushstroke, rather than the redemptive sign the woman hopes to see.

In a number of the paintings, Richter obfuscates the image to the point of complete distortion. Van Schepen (2017) suggests that Richter's series risks failing to engage in political discourse due to its aesthetic qualities. He considers that the act of blurring anaesthetises the violence the paintings depict as opposed to reflecting the group's driving anger and the subsequent oppression of the authorities. Van Schepen asks, "Does Richter's seeming occlusion of the specifics of historical memory in the painterly blur pull a gauzily romanticised scrim over the brutal workings of the State?" (p. 12). However, Herren (2015) comments that the effect of presenting the pictures in such stark forms "thwart the spectator's efforts either to romanticize or to fetishize the figures on display" (p. 141). Richter refuses to present emotional or political binaries. The obscuring of the bodies and blurring of the images is perhaps more shocking and haunting than the original sources. Richter's canvases were completed in 1988, eleven years after the deaths of Baader, Ensslin and Raspe. Richter, deeply moved by the events, allowed time to distance himself and to reflect on the furore surrounding the members' deaths. His pieces were never intended to be reactionary or to evoke the radical ideology of the group; rather they appear a meditation on death, loss, memory, cultural amnesia and the process of erasure.

Richter intentionally conceals chronology in the cycle. In fact, for a visitor to the gallery there is no clear narrative flow, but a depiction of fragmented stills in which the viewer struggles to see clearly or extrapolate meaning. The visitor is surrounded by provocative images without explicit links. Likewise, DeLillo's scenes, as within much of his oeuvre, jump cut without clear cues or smooth narrative transitions. Nothing in the café scene suggests the woman will invite the man back to her apartment, but in the next sentence they are awkwardly together in her home. Richter muddies details specifically in his title due to its subversion of

historicity. The title evokes one specific date of the coordinated deaths of Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe, but the pictures cover a much longer period. Meinhof hung herself over a year before the deaths of these three men. The woman in the story is aware of this detail: “Ulrike dead in May, she knew, of 1976” (p. 108). Some of the pictures are of a much younger Ulrike. The picture *Jugendbildnis* [Youth portrait] shows a 22-year-old Ulrike Meinhof. The original photograph is from 10th October 1966 and is by far the clearest image of the entire cycle. The woman looks at this image recognising “Ulrike as a much younger woman, a girl, really, distant and wistful” (p. 109). Richter softens her face so that she appears innocent with an almost childlike expression.

In creating his series, Richter heavily researched the group and had an archive of material to draw on or, to be more accurate, to paint over. Richter decided to include and, equally importantly, omit very specific images. The depiction of the young Ulrike humanises her. Richter is drawn to explore how Ulrike’s leftist leanings could have turned to anarchistic violence and how the innocent girl of the portrait became a terrorist. There are three paintings titled *Tote* [Dead]. Each is derived from the same image of Ulrike’s body, her head angled backwards and her face jutting upwards. DeLillo writes, “She was looking at Ulrike now, head and upper body, her neck rope-scorched” (p. 105). The body of Ulrike lying as if on a predella conjures the iconography of centuries of religious art. In the composition there are echoes of Richter’s compatriot Hans Holbein’s painting *The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520–1522). Such an association with religious imagery is surely intended to be jarring by evoking ideas of martyrdom, theological iconography and the fascination with the group as a type of cult of the dead. In DeLillo’s story the man asks the woman how the paintings make her feel. When the woman answers, her response is empathetic, “I think I feel helpless. These paintings make me feel how helpless a person can be” (p. 109). She feels an affinity with Ulrike; her reaction ignores or negates political anger concentrating on the human tragedy of her death. This sense also foreshadows her own experience as she too will be placed in a position of helplessness by the man’s entrapment of her in her own home.

The man’s presence in the gallery creates an undercurrent of menace, but his opening question seems simple enough, “Why do you think he did it this way?” (p. 105). This query serves two functions, firstly the man is asking both the woman and the reader about Richter’s artistic choices. Why did he choose these particular fifteen images when his research had gained him access to hundreds? Secondly, the man’s question can be read as a meta-reference to the story’s function itself: self-consciously questioning why the author chose to write about Richter’s paintings through the story of stalking and furthermore as an indirect response to 9/11. In contrast to the woman’s fascination with the cycle, the man is dismissive of the paintings; he tells her that he only comes to the gallery to pass time before a job

interview. The reader is never sure if this is true. The woman chooses not to tell the man that she has come to the gallery for three straight days. However, during their conversation the man makes reference to her precise number of viewings with the implication that he has been watching her for much longer than she thinks. Yet the woman does not pick up on this detail. The man attempts to downplay both the artwork and the group's activities condemning them as terrorists who either kill other people or kill themselves. His interpretation intentionally simplifies a possible response to the fraught tension of radicalism, punishment and personal sacrifice that Richter's works convey. The man's lack of engagement with the art is contrasted to the woman's emotive response. Referring to the pieces, he repeats, "No color. No meaning" (p. 110). The man continues, "I don't feel anything" (p. 109). Yet the woman responds very differently as she desires to understand Richter's paintings. When the man claims that only those with artistic or historical knowledge can interpret the pictures the woman objects, "Just look. You have to look" (p. 107).

In contrast to the man, the woman's repeated visits, and even her discomfort, show how engagement and focus are rewarded as details and feelings emerge. She says, "I realize now that the first day I was only barely looking. I thought I was looking, but I was only getting a bare inkling of what's in these paintings. I'm only just starting to look" (p. 109). As Kauffman (2008) notes, "Richter and DeLillo confront us with myriad forms of misrecognition and unknowing: ignorance, amnesia, blindness, denial, disavowal" (p. 359). Through forms of visual denial, both Richter and DeLillo are able to open a plethora of meanings in their works. "Baader-Meinhof" is centred on forms of vision, whether the voyeuristic stare of the man watching the woman, or the uncomfortable nature of looking at images of the dead mediated for mass public viewings. In the scene in her apartment, the woman comes into the kitchen to find the man looking out of a window onto nothing but "dusty masonry and glass" (p. 112). The woman observes the man looking "as if waiting for a view to materialize" (p. 112). It is the same experience he has complained of in the gallery when he was unable to make sense of the paintings. Kauffman interprets aspects of the story in relation to sight and blindness as recurring themes. A group comes into the gallery led by a guide, before a woman with a cane enters the space. The woman looks across at the picture of Gudrun, and her eyes pass over the man watching her: "She only glimpsed him. He was looking at her, but she was looking past him to the figure of Gudrun in a prison smock" (p. 107). The woman later tells the man that what the group did was not "blind and empty" (p. 110). In her apartment there is the most chilling moment of all when the man's advances become more extreme as he observes "her so levelly, with such measuring effect [...] He was ranking her, marking her in some awful and withering way" (p. 115). She will eventually escape the man with her "head down, [like] a person marching blindly" (p. 116).

The repetition in the story, as the man echoes certain phrases, matches the repetition in Richter's art. Richter's cycle makes use of triptychs and diptychs where images are duplicated with subtle changes to form or tone whereas DeLillo reflects acts of double-seeing in his writing. This theme also relates to the woman's lack of agency. Her actions and motives are mysterious even to herself: "She wondered whether she wanted him to miss his interview. That couldn't be what she wanted" (p. 114). In the café the man tries to label the woman by guessing that she teaches "art to handicapped children" (p. 110). Even at this point she does not feel her own response, but witnesses her emotion in a reflection: "She didn't know whether [his remark] was interesting or cruel, but saw herself in the window wearing a grudging smile" (p. 110). No longer viewing canvases, she is watching herself and is detached from truly experiencing events. In fact, it is only when she looks at Richter's paintings that she feels an emotional response in contrast to the anaesthetised sense she exhibits in the rest of the story. As Herren (2015) comments, "what one sees in *October 18, 1977* becomes secondary to how one sees it, how that perception is refracted through multiple mediating gazes" (p. 114). As soon as the man leaves the woman's flat her perceptions are altered: "She saw everything twice now. She was where she wanted to be, and alone, but nothing was the same. Bastard. Nearly everything in the room had a double effect –what it was and the association it carried in her mind" (p. 117). Initially, it appears the man's presence in the woman's flat has caused her sense of double-seeing, yet it is perhaps as much Richter's paintings that have subtly altered her sensory perceptions.

Crawford (2009), Kauffman (2008) and Herren (2015) have all critiqued "Baader-Meinhof" in terms of verisimilitude, but an alternative interpretation may question if the man is real at all. Could he instead be a figment of the woman's imagination, a manifestation of her psyche given form by Richter's paintings, or an apparition? The opening of the story, after all, reads like the start of a ghost tale, "She knew there was someone else in the room. There was no outright noise, just an intimation behind her, a faint displacement of air" (p. 105). The man's spectral presence serves to challenge the woman's readings of the artworks. It is no coincidence that DeLillo's previous novel was *The Body Artist* (2001), a postmodern take on the ghost story. The ghostly quality of the story is signalled from the first page as the woman sits "as a person does in a mortuary chapel, keeping watch over the body of a relative or a friend" (p. 105). Both "Baader-Meinhof" and *The Body Artist* evoke grief and the solace of art for women in transient states. The woman in "Baader-Meinhof" tells the man she has only been in her flat for four months, prior to that she has "been a nomad [...] Sublets, staying with friends, always short-term. Ever since the marriage failed" (p. 113). This turn of phrase, with its passive voice, provides a clue to her backstory, but also dislocates her from her own past just as she is displaced by her earlier sight of

herself in reflection. Her self-description is key to the story's theme of transience portrayed too in the man's shadowy presence and puzzling words. In his attempt to seduce her, the man says, "This is not a major moment in the world. It'll come and go" (p. 114). Whether the man is real or not the woman experiences trauma.

DeLillo's story culminates in anti-dramatic climax, the pun here is intended, as the man's final actions in the woman's apartment are hidden from both the woman's and the reader's sight. The man's behaviour becomes slowly more predatory. At one point, she finds him suddenly approaching her: "She drew away and stood up, and he was all around her then [...] for a moment, she seemed to disappear, tucked and still, in breathless hiding" (p. 115). The woman manages to escape fearing that his sexual aggression will escalate and shuts herself in the bathroom. The man will not vacate her apartment. Protecting herself, she can hear him moving towards her bed; behind the closed door, she hears, or assumes she hears, him undoing his belt. While there is the implication that he has masturbated on her bed, his actions are not certain. The woman listens carefully: "When he was finished, there was a long pause, then some rustling and shifting" (p. 117). Crucially: "He was sitting on the bed, unbuckling his belt. This is what *she thought* she heard" [emphasis added] (p. 116). A sexual act is only implied, she imagines what has taken place: what she has not seen. It is equally possible that the man is sitting on her bed in dejection.

The woman and reader are both denied narrative closure of witnessing or being certain of the man's final act. The door that the woman stands behind, but chooses not to lock, tantalisingly hides whatever is happening in the adjacent space. Just as with Richter's distortion of his images to both occlude and reveal more, so too does DeLillo's refusal to portray the man's possibly perverted behaviour add to the uncertainty of the story. In the closing paragraph, the paintings themselves draw both characters back to the original scene. There is a symmetry to the piece in its play-like form. The story begins with the man watching the woman from behind as she contemplates Richter's canvases. By the close, there is a reversal of vantage points. In this reframing, the writer is toying with the points of perspective an observer might adopt to view a painting and how this can potentially change its meaning. It now appears to be the man who is vulnerable. Initially, the man was the aggressor, but by the end he is viewed seated in front of the last canvas of the cycle. He has asked for forgiveness before he leaves the woman's apartment and, in this final scene, he sits before the painting the woman has already associated with repentance. Just as in Richter's cycle, shock and horror give way to the possibility of redemption.

This article has argued that DeLillo has not only been inspired by the content of Richter's artworks, but by the theoretical ideas fundamental to their creation. The themes of imprecision, uncertainty, transience and incompleteness are integral to a reading of "Baader-Meinhof". DeLillo and Richter are drawn to the fundamental imprecision of art itself to portray an event. Richter (2009) argues that paintings

can show the “infinite variety that preclude the emergence of any single meaning and view” (p. 33). Likewise, DeLillo’s ekphrastic choices represent the limits of both visual art and fiction to portray historical events with anything other than ambiguity. The story is premised on a fleeting encounter between two drifting characters. It is a minimal piece so effective for its brevity and its omitted closure. The story ends prior to the scene the reader assumes will be the concluding interaction between the man and woman. Although I have referred to the redemptive possibility in the final image of the story, the closing sentences leave little sense of resolution. The reader is left to wonder if the woman will choose to confront the man or simply linger and watch as he views the paintings. If they do speak, will the man again ask to be forgiven and has the woman revisited with the expectation he will be there? The reader is forced to question the motivation behind her decision to return to the gallery. The story is unresolved in several ways and the narrative’s absent denouement reflects Richter’s proclivity for incompleteness and uncertainty. DeLillo replicates Richter’s aesthetic motif into literary form as the blurred and foggy effect of the paintings mirrors the narrative’s lack of clarity. Finally, the story’s obfuscation refuses to satiate our strained attempts to understand its relationship to 9/11.

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