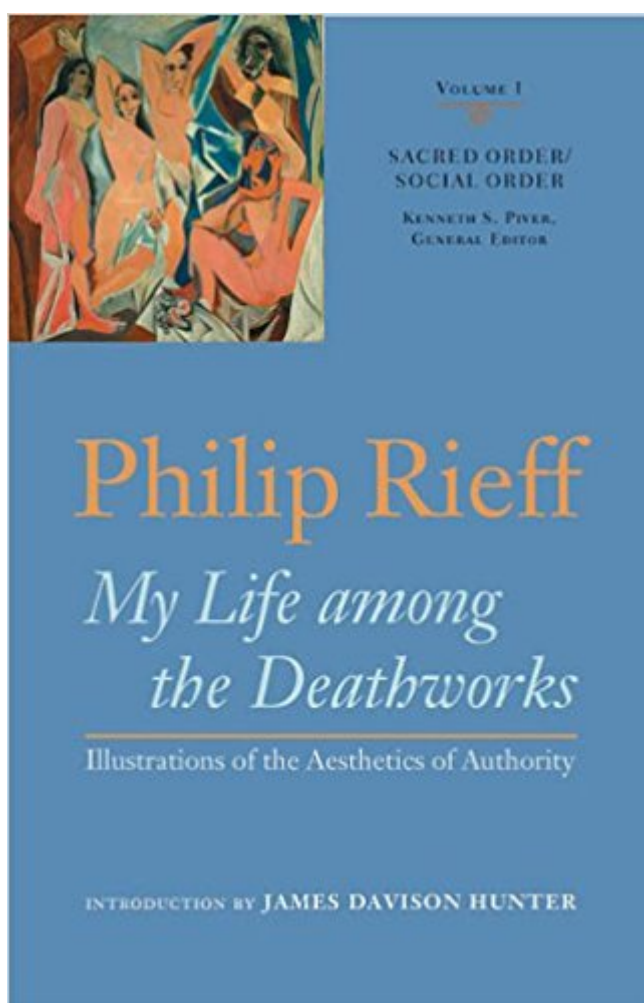


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My Life Among The Deathworks: Illustrations Of The Aesthetics Of Authority (Sacred Order / Social Order, Vol. 1) (v. 1)



Synopsis

With *My Life among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*, the renowned cultural theorist and Freud scholar Philip Rieff inaugurates a trilogy that signals the summation of his scholarly lifework. With this series, *Sacred Order/Social Order*, to be published in consecutive volumes, Rieff both continues and supersedes the lines of thought that characterize the earlier, influential works upon which his reputation was forged. Readers familiar with Rieff's distinctive oeuvre will recognize central themes and find final recitations on the cultural impact of Freud and his creation "psychological man" or "the therapeutic," which Rieff here renames the "new man." Whether conversant with Rieff's work or new to its unique interpretive power, readers of *Sacred Order/Social Order* will discover a series of provocative insights, illuminated by Rieff's wide-ranging expositions, theoretical advances, and stylistic innovations. In this first volume, Rieff articulates a comprehensive, typological theory of Western culture. Using visual illustrations and unique juxtapositions, he displays remarkable erudition in drawing from such disciplines as sociology, history, literature, poetry, music, plastic arts, and film; he contrasts the changing modes of spiritual and social thought that have struggled for dominance throughout Western history. Our modern culture—to Rieff's mind only the "third" type in western history—is the object of his deepest scrutiny, described here as morally ruinous, death-affirming rather than life-affirming, and representing an unprecedented attempt to create a culture completely devoid of any concept of the sacred. For Rieff, culture represents the "form of fighting before the firing begins" in a literal life-and-death struggle for a particular type of world-creation. Having concluded in this final phase of his career that there is no neutral ground in this struggle, Rieff takes aim at many of the most significant "deathworks" in modern literature, art, and history—from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Duchamp's *Etant donnés* to Hitler's death camps—in an attempt to undo them by using them against themselves. In so doing, he seeks to show the reader what really animates, and is ultimately at stake, in the contemporary "culture wars" raging over such issues as euthanasia, education, medical research, sexuality, race, class, and gender.

Book Information

Hardcover: 288 pages

Publisher: University of Virginia Press; 1st edition (March 14, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0813925169

ISBN-13: 978-0813925165

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 1.1 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,193,625 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #55 in Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Publishing & Books > Bibliographies & Indexes > Religion #248 in Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Publishing & Books > Bibliographies & Indexes > Science #1985 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Sociology

Customer Reviews

My Life Among the Deathworks is a hauntingly beautiful blend of poetry, ethical inquiry, and lament....Rieff ushers the reader into a world in which ideas and issues long ago deemed important suddenly matter again. (The New Republic)

Philip Rieff, Benjamin Franklin Professor of Sociology and University Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, is author of the classic works *Freud: Mind of the Moralist*, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, and *Fellow Teachers*, and the editor of *The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*. Kenneth S. Piver is a psychiatrist in private practice in San Diego, California. James Davison Hunter is La Brosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor in Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia.

A swansong of prophetic proportions--impossible to read without it becoming part of one's permanent intellectual template. In this, his final work, Rieff rises above mere commentary and social critique into something like prophetic utterance--lyrical and compelling--a truth-telling as well as a warning. Any who hunger for genuine insight will be well fed here. His expository analysis of world/culture(s) is an extremely articulate moral compass presented to a civilization embracing its decline; even so, his erudition never veers into arrogance (as with many others), nor does his undertone of lament ever point toward despair. This is an essential, indispensable read for anyone seeking to read the modern/postmodern West correctly, and a healing purgative for the children of the Twentieth Century. This work is important. It's hard to imagine anyone reading/digesting this without having their mind and life seriously reformed. 5 stars are not enough.

This is a strange difficult book. I can't say Rieff is a great literary stylist. He is absolutely

incomprehensible at times. Still, DEATHWORKS is a powerful, brilliant and surprisingly moving book. If you have a sense that the world is no longer at ease and it isn't just you, Rieff is apt to speak directly to you. He doesn't give you a cure but he does come up with a fairly persuasive diagnosis. The world we live in has been consumed by a kind of cultural anti-matter, whose function is to delegitimize everything that has gone on before it. He believes the transvaluation has taken place and that is the world we live in now, a third world that is post monotheistic. Freedom is formlessness and power is central. The sacred is dead as a doornail. Any reversion to paganism (the first world) is pure contrivance. We are essentially living in the world of the hollow men. I was struck by how personally Rieff takes what has happened and by his willingness to say, I don't like it. If that doesn't sound like much, consider the fact that most commentary you read on almost every topic is in some sense a paen to nothingness. Think of how many articles you've read explaining to you that the purpose of art, even though itself is to be transgressive and subversive of the existing society. Which always means, not the existing society but what Rieff calls the second world. I have grown extremely weary of reading that kind of recycled banality posing as thought. What is funny, maybe, scary is you'll read this kind of warmed over dreck in reviews of TV shows. My point being that this has long since stopped being the province of elite culture. Everyone can now be Foucault. In that context Rieff's rather brilliant yelps of protest are salutary. Also salutary is Rieff's embrace of his own roots as a Jew. In the transition to modernity, Rieff has witnessed in his own life what has gone. What has replaced it? A handful of dust.

Although he would never have put it in these terms, I believe Philip Rieff's lifework came to be to show the ways in which works of art and literature can be read to reveal what Catholics call 'heart'. Every work of art is an expression of the acceptance or the rejection of God or, as Rieff would say, has a place in the 'vertical of authority', representing an affirmation of the community of faith's 'commanding truths' or 'interdicts', a transgression against those commanding truths, or a relaxing (remission) of them. Erudite, passionate, and moral, I know of no better place to start than the first volume of Rieff's trilogy for understanding the moral and spiritual dimensions of art and literature.

America's lowest-profile sociological genius reestablishes himself as the critical critic today against the unraveling of social order. That order, Rieff shows, is coming apart because it is being picked apart hungrily by academic and art elites -- who have turned against not simply "our" culture but against culture itself. My Life among the Deathworks is striking in its accessibility. This is not "easy" reading -- then again, no one visiting this page is on the hunt for that -- but it is Rieff with pictures.

His incursions, made as they are against mounted attacks on culture (the titular "Deathworks"), feature the images of the Deathworks themselves. Rieff is more humane and introspective than ever, in the service of an ontology that takes the lead in Rieff's taking of sides. Gone are the days of Rieff's academic reticence to dirty his hands with the fleeting passions of culture. Those fleeting passions are now the battlefield upon which the fleetingness of culture itself is being determined. Perhaps the central Deathwork in Rieff's analysis is Marcel Duchamp's "Being Given," which depicts a decayed female body lifting a lighted lamp. Rather than spoiling the depth and power of the analysis, suffice it to say that Rieff declares against the zombification of society: a culture of death as violent as it is erotic. My Life among the Deathworks is the first salvo of a three-volume series. The next takes aim at the knights of the living dead themselves -- those Rieff calls "the officer class" of the anti-culture. As for the present volume, it is the most important book written by the most important sociologist writing -- because it reaches to the heart of the central cultural issue of our time. Rieff has written for any reader with patience and literacy -- and a deep disquiet over the rot that can often be sensed creeping over the world. Rieff is not anti-art or anti-artist. His is not a reactionary philosophy. He has no use for the old church civilization, which he pronounces exhausted. But by the same token, Rieff declares himself an honorary Christian, and hews as close as one reasonably can today to the 10 Commandments. His work is, in essence, a discursus on Commandment 2. What Rieff is for is God -- permanent authority that is fixed but not fossilized -- and the social order he terms in his system of lowercase acronyms "via" (vertical in authority). What his enemies are for is an obliteration of that vertical, and its replacement with an amoebic horizontal of social flesh -- rather than God, one could say, "god" (games on demand). Anyone inclined toward the preservation of wisdom and order across generations and repulsed by the new pop cult of trans-hood ought scroll back up and order this book at once. Anyone uncertain about what is happening to the progress of western civilization should do the same. Rieff's latest is probably the best entry-point into his whole literature, and beyond that is a vital tool for feeling intellects everywhere.

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