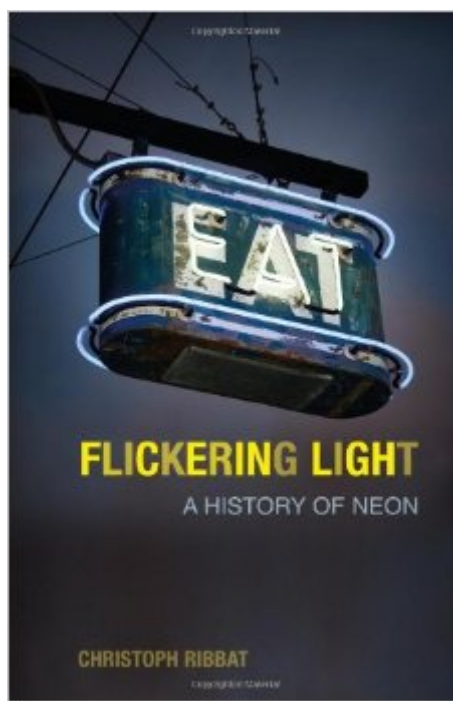


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Flickering Light: A History Of Neon



Synopsis

Without neon, Las Vegas might still be a sleepy desert town in Nevada and Times Square merely another busy intersection in New York City. Transformed by the installation of these brightly colored signs, these destinations are now world-famous, representing the vibrant heart of popular culture. But for some, neon lighting represents the worst of commercialism. Energized by the conflicting love and hatred people have for neon, *Flickering Light* explores its technological and intellectual history, from the discovery of the noble gas in late nineteenth-century London to its fading popularity today. Christoph Ribbat follows writers, artists, and musicians "from cultural critic Theodor Adorno, British rock band the Verve, and artist Tracey Emin to Vladimir Nabokov, Langston Hughes, and American country singers" through the neon cities in Europe, America, and Asia, demonstrating how they turned these blinking lights and letters into metaphors of the modern era. He examines how gifted craftsmen carefully sculpted neon advertisements, introducing elegance to modern metropolises during neon's heyday between the wars followed by its subsequent popularity in Las Vegas during the 1950s and '60s. Ribbat ends with a melancholy discussion of neon's decline, describing how these glowing signs and installations came to be seen as dated and characteristic of run-down neighborhoods. From elaborate neon lighting displays to neglected diner signs with unlit letters, *Flickering Light* tells the engrossing story of how a glowing tube of gas took over the world "and faded almost as quickly as it arrived.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is hard to imagine our cities without neon lights; everyone is familiar with the neon glow in the hand-blown glass tubes. They are still around, but they are of another age. In movies, shots of neon signs of nightclubs date the film to the 1930s. Neon was ultramodern, and then became passé, and has now had a boom in nostalgia and avant-garde light art. *Flickering Light: A History of Neon* (Reaktion Books) by Christoph Ribbat, a professor of American Studies in Germany, explores the use of neon in art and advertising and its surprisingly widespread cultural legacy. Neon is showy, but Ribbat's book (translated from the German by Anthony Mathews) is a sensible and, well, enlightening view of neon's many facets. The noble gas neon was discovered in 1898, and Parisian chemist Georges Claude found ways to make glowing tubes of it a going commercial concern worldwide. "Cinzano" was spelled out over a Paris roof in 1913; the next year there were 160 neon signs over Paris, and by 1927, over 6,000. In the US, neon started in Los Angeles in 1923 when a car dealer purchased neon signs spelling out "Packard" in Paris for his store back home. It wasn't long before the roofs of service stations and other businesses were sporting neon. Neon crosses were erected over churches. Small businesses in small towns could afford the new signs, and in big cities, there were huge, animated versions. Then the glow faded. Ribbat draws on an astonishingly broad range of neon in popular and artistic culture. He reminds us that in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), when George Bailey gets his vision of Bedford Falls as it would have been if he had never been, it is far from the little town heavily scented with sweet Americana.

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