



Kathleen James-Chakraborty, ed. *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. xix + 246 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-4687-6.



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Histories and Mythologies of the Bauhaus Reconsidered

Discussions of the Bauhaus today almost inevitably begin with a recitation of the ways in which it has become exemplary of the modern, its designs epitomizing the “new” not only in its Weimar home, but also in the history of architecture and design more generally. The nature of this Bauhaus influence is often left rather unclear, however, the name serving as a talisman for a vague commitment to newness and progressive aesthetic and political values. At the same time, few cultural movements have been more studied than the Bauhaus, leading to a paradoxical situation in which the proliferation of material tends to feed conceptual and historical mythologies as much as it brings them down to earth.

It is in this overdetermined context that the present volume stakes out its positions. It does not seek to provide an historical overview of the Bauhaus; this has been done elsewhere. Rather, *Bauhaus Culture* is primarily a work of revisionist history, a provocative and stimulating collection of essays written by art and architecture historians that, with varying degrees of success, challenge dominant readings of the Bauhaus and trace the histories of its mythologization. While not a comprehen-

sive history, it is nevertheless ambitious in scope. Essays consider not only the Bauhaus in Weimar, but also its Wilhelmine pre-history and echoes in Nazi Germany and the Cold War. The combination of detailed historical study and historiographical debate is the great strength of the book. An attention to material-historical and social contexts is notable here, an approach characteristic of the meticulous scholarship of the editor, Kathleen James-Chakraborty, more generally; the volume is given shape through her short introduction and two essays.[1]

James-Chakraborty’s introduction situates the work in relation to debates in Bauhaus scholarship over the role of the artist in industrial design and production, as well as the central role played by the Bauhaus in debates over art and politics. The purpose of the book, she says, “is to describe the scope of the reforms that occurred at the Bauhaus, while calling into question the degree to which the school should continue to symbolize an uncomplicated relationship between art, modern technology, and progressive politics” (p. xii). This uncomplicated relationship was put forward both during the Weimar period and after by a number of Bauhausers

themselves, an often self-serving perspective that has influenced academic debates inordinately. The result is an overstatement of the novelty of the Bauhaus in relation to earlier movements and the extent of its postwar influences on art, design and architecture (particularly in the United States) and an un-interrogated assumption of political progressiveness. It is to these contexts that this volume provides a response, one that will prove useful not only to scholars of the Bauhaus, but also, because of its broad focus, to those who study twentieth-century art and politics more generally.

The first two essays take up the prehistory of the Bauhaus. Normally seen as representing a break with the past, the product of the postwar period of upheaval and revolution, these essays argue that the Bauhaus needs to be understood in relation to its prewar influences and antecedents. Essays by John V. Maciuka and James-Chakraborty address the different influences of and debates around the Werkbund. In the context of rapid turn-of-the-century German industrialization, issues of crafts and design took on a new prominence for both artists and the state. In this context Maciuka traces the role of Hermann Muthesius and the Werkbund as influences on the Bauhaus, in particular on debates over the relationship between artistic and creative independence and the growth of rationalized production. James-Chakraborty takes up similar issues, but focuses on the role of Henry van de Velde. Skillfully weaving together post-World War II arguments between Walter Gropius and van de Velde over the roots of the Bauhaus with a rereading of van de Velde's influence (he had run the Grand Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar which, along with the Academy of Fine Arts, became the Bauhaus), she offers a new account of the early history of the school at the same time as she draws out the ways in which Gropius's later interventions served to cement a view of the Bauhaus as radically new, one that foregrounded his own role in its development.

The next four essays deal with various aspects of the Weimar Bauhaus itself. The first, by Rose-Carol Washton Long, looks at the growing importance of photography in relation to painting in the curriculum of the Bauhaus, as well as the conflicts generated by this shift. Especially interesting here is the connection between art and political consciousness, with proponents of the two media (Vassily Kandinsky the most influential in relation to painting, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy to photography) seeking to show their role in generating new, transcendent, and potentially revolutionary consciousness. Wallis Miller also takes up internal Bauhaus debates, looking instead

at architecture. She traces the shifts in the history of the school, and gives an interesting account of the difficulties of fulfilling the school's goal of integrating theory and practice, arts and crafts in architecture.

Juliet Koss's essay on the "Bauhaus Theater of Human Dolls" is in many ways the most conceptually daring and wide-ranging contribution. Dolls served not only Bauhausers but also many others in the Weimar period as a figure of modern subjectivity: "Vessels of empathy and estrangement, they expressed and encouraged a reciprocal relationships between performers and spectators, increasingly exemplifying the bond between gender and mass culture, to provide models of mass spectatorship for the Weimar Republic" (p. 91). Koss thus reads the experiences of the Bauhaus, from the more formal theatrical and photographic experiments to the famous costume parties and festivals that marked the social life of the school, in relation to broader Weimar practices. In the Bauhaus, dolls and doll-like human forms provided a key theatrical trope tied to the utopian search for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but at the same time they also characterize the experience of modern mass spectatorship so familiar from the work of Siegfried Kracauer. Dolls expressed the alienated and lifeless qualities of modern life, but their playfulness sustained a critical ambivalence that had a subversive potential in relation to dominant norms of subjectivity and politics. Koss's rich and complex essay thus provides a powerful rereading of Bauhaus practices, in particular in relation to the dynamic contexts of Weimar modernity.

The final essay on the Weimar period, "Utopia for Sale," by Frederic J. Schwartz, tackles the role of the Bauhaus, its products and its image in the marketplace. The Bauhaus's dream of creating products accessible to the masses is well known. Schwartz looks behind the explicit commitments of the Bauhaus and asks how their products actually fared in the marketplace. What emerges is a fascinating account of commercial naiveté in the face of copyright and patent law and the subsequent failure of Bauhaus products themselves to achieve any significant market profile. Instead, "Bauhaus" became a kind of shorthand for the new or the modern in the culture of the period. In this way, then, the image of the Bauhaus slipped out of the control of the Bauhaus itself, becoming a brand that could be leveraged by many others.

The next three essays all deal with aspects of the post-Weimar Bauhaus. The first, a translation of a 1993 Winfried Nerdinger essay on architects in the Third Reich,

challenges the post-World War II assumption that the Bauhaus and its members were anti-Nazi, tracing the varied accommodations many made with National Socialist rule. Important in challenging common myths, the essay also points out the limits of the biographical approach. That architects, like so many others, made compromises should not be particularly surprising, nor does this information offer much systematic insight into the political implications of the Bauhaus movement. Nerdinger's mention of Mies van der Rohe's collaborations with the Nazi state and aesthetics offers a glimpse of a more interesting perspective. Nerdinger argues that in his case, this choice reflected his view that "modern forms were transferable to any context" (p. 144) and hence could be deployed unproblematically in various political contexts. To what extent this apolitical modernism might have been more broadly the case is left unanalyzed.[2]

Nerdinger's piece is followed by two essays on the Cold War period. James-Chakraborty argues against the widespread view that the Bauhaus, in particular Gropius and Mies, transformed post-World War II American architecture. Greg Castillo, on the other hand, looks at the forgotten Cold War legacies of the Bauhaus in Germany, both East and West. James-Chakraborty's essay is especially interesting for its engagement with the complex social, political, and economic contexts that gave rise to the myth of Bauhaus influence, arguing that the work of Gropius and Mies was integrated into American culture primarily because it conformed to the dominant corporate capitalist ethos and aesthetics. A brief but rich discussion of the textile designers Anni Albers and Marianne Strengell illuminates the complex interplay of commercial and artistic demands, bringing in elements of a gender analysis as well. Castillo, who stresses the ideological indeterminacy of the Bauhaus, shows how, in a fashion similar to developments in the United States, it became central to a liberal nationalist genealogy in West Germany. Especially fascinating here, though, is his discussion of the twists and turns of Bauhaus reception in East Germany. Early attempts to create an explicitly socialist and modernist design academy on the lines of the Bauhaus—Mart Stam is a key figure here—bore little fruit because they were incompatible with the aesthetic and political demands of socialist realism. Gradually, though, the Bauhaus and its iconic Dessau building were rehabilitated as a GDR symbol, a process that involved its physical reconstruction as well.

The end of the Cold War did away with many of the political contexts shaping Bauhaus reception, enabling the development of new perspectives evident in this

book. In some areas (feminist analyses of the Bauhaus is one notable example) the socially grounded approaches evident in this volume have already been tested.[3] In many respects, though, the book breaks new ground, in particular through the systematic consideration of the complex interconnections between the historiography and actual practices of Bauhaus architecture and design. The emphasis on the place of the Bauhaus in relation to broader contexts of industrial and consumer capitalist culture, an approach highlighted in the introduction as one of the two key axes of the book, is also valuable.

While shifting the terms of a number of key debates, in other respects the volume is perhaps less successful than it might have been. Some key figures are unexpectedly absent, Johannes Itten most notably, as are some newer debates; questions of gender and the Bauhaus are touched on at times here, for example, but not developed systematically, although the work makes no claim of comprehensiveness. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the contributors tend to keep the focus on the main figures of the movement (Gropius, Hannes Meyer, Mies, Oskar Schlemmer, Moholy-Nagy) and close off potentially fruitful alternative readings that draw on less canonical participants and perspectives. The essays by Koss and Castillo are exceptions in this regard, but, in an explicitly revisionist work, it would have been fruitful to open up the discussions further.

The most significant shortcoming of the volume, however, is in relation to politics. A reconsideration of art and politics in the Bauhaus was, as I indicated earlier, one of the two key themes of the book highlighted in its introduction. The collection makes important contributions to many aspects of this, but not in relation to the socialist engagements of the Bauhaus. Views of the Bauhaus that echo Schlemmer's 1923 contention that the Bauhaus "becomes the rallying-point of all those who, with belief in the future and with sky-storming enthusiasm, wish to build the 'cathedral of Socialism'" are easily questioned.[4] However, none of the contributors, with the exception of Castillo, offer a substantive reconsideration of what is of course the most consistent theme in the history of the Bauhaus itself, an engagement with various forms of leftist politics. This is not a plea on my part to restore the Bauhaus's radical status. Rather, a more sustained reconsideration that takes seriously the material and ideological links with the Left, from the postwar revolutions through to the late-Weimar battles against the rise of the Nazis, would seem to be needed for a more comprehensive rethinking of art, politics and the Bauhaus. This volume is by no means alone in this re-

gard; serious accounts of the significance of the radical Left have unfortunately dropped off the radar in many other areas of Weimar scholarship as well.[5] If, as this volume stresses, the Cold War gave rise to very particular and distorted readings of the Bauhaus, post-Cold War revisions have themselves displayed a strong unwillingness to rethink the place of the radical Left in the period.

Despite these reservations, however, this work is an important addition to the scholarship on the Bauhaus. In its primary aim of bringing the study of the Bauhaus out of the realm of myth and into history it is generally successful, and many of the essays also offer insightful, original and richly illustrated analyses of the development and influence of the school. The collection also manages admirably to combine detailed studies that will interest specialists with an accessibility and attention to context that makes it a valuable source for a broad range of scholars. Those interested in the connections of art and politics, the development of consumer culture, modernity and modernism and attendant historiographical debates will find stimulating reading here.

Notes

[1]. Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1997).

[2]. Nerdinger offers somewhat more contextual and analytical discussion in his other contribution to the work from which this essay is drawn, but there too his argument focuses on individual personalities. See Winfried Nerdinger, "Modernisierung. Bauhaus. Nationalsozialismus," in *Bauhaus-Moderne im Nationalsozialismus. Zwischen Anbiederung und Verfolgung*, ed. Winfried Nerdinger (Munich: Prestel, 1993), 9-23.

[3]. Anja Baumhoff, *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus: The Politics of Power at the Weimar Republic's Premier Art Institute, 1919-1932* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001); and Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, *Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994).

[4]. Oskar Schlemmer, "Manifesto for the First Bauhaus Exhibition," in *Programs and Manifestoes on Twentieth-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, tr. Michael Bullock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 69.

[5]. One example of an exception to this generalization is Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). This particularly relevant work also deals with questions of aesthetics and politics in Weimar, including many of the contexts and figures discussed in *Bauhaus Culture* as well.

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