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This volume represents Michael Kater’s attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of „Culture“ in Nazi Germany. Kater is not interested in culture in a broadly anthropological sense, but rather in „Culture“ in its more conventional, connoisseurial definition. Although mass media genres such as film and radio are treated in his book, he largely proceeds on the basis of an unspoken „common sense“ definition of Culture as „the arts“. As with his previous works, the book is strongly driven by a biographical approach, focused on leading political actors on the one hand, and cultural producers such as composers, directors, authors, or actors on the other. Through this personality-centered account he weaves many potted summaries of plots, scripts, or artistic creations.

The first chapter describes the destruction of Weimar’s pluralist, modern and experimental culture, offering a wide-ranging account of the violent disruptiveness of 1933 and the „purge“ of the modernist „establishment“ that the regime swiftly initiated. The various attempts to forge a National Socialist alternative form the focus of the second chapter, in which Kater’s stress is on the failure of the regime to develop much that was new and overtly „National Socialist“: the 1930s represented, in his words, the „failed grafting of a Nazi-specific ersatz-culture“ (p. 339), though what the difference, methodologically-speaking, between „culture“ and „ersatz-culture“ is, is not explained. A third chapter explains the impact of National Socialism on Jewish cultural actors, reminding the reader forcefully of just how viciously the regime attacked Jewish cultural actors, modernists or conservatives alike. The regime’s efforts to co-opt „Culture“ in the maintenance of morale during the war is explored in the fourth chapter, in which Kater underlines that no artistic efforts could bridge the gap between the regime’s promises and people’s everyday experience, especially in the second half of the war. In arguments that echo much older historiography, Kater emphasizes the traditions of high culture that survived by going into exile – Thomas Mann is an object of particular attention. Finally, in what is the most interesting of the chapters, the re-emergence of cultural life after 1945 is given extended treatment. Here, rightly, the emphasis is on the resentment shown towards returning emigrés, and on the presence of strong lines of continuity that are familiar from studies of other fields.

The account is heavy on anecdote and generally descriptive in tone. As for argument, Kater eschews the nuance of recent cultural histories in favour of reanimating the much less satisfying framework of totalitarianism. Unfortunately, he is beholden to a notion of culture under conditions of dictatorship that necessarily reduces it to expressions of propaganda aimed at „manipulating“ the population. His account is driven, in his own words, by the desire to show how „various branches of culture were utilized to control the masses“ (p. xiv), and argues that the various actors and institutions of German cultural life supplied Goebbels with material „in order to intimidate the masses, and ultimately to control them under his and Hitler’s tyrannical regime.“ (p. xv) Because he is comparatively uninterested in discussions since the 1980s that see culture in terms of practices of meaning-making, sense-making or world-making, he is unable to jettison the ingrained assumption that visual, material, literary or sonic culture produced under conditions of dictatorship has to be imagined simply as misleading propaganda produced on behalf of the state.

In common with many older accounts, Kater’s is generally too inclined to equate the Weimar era with modernism and the Nazi era with an anti-modernist drive that eventually destroyed everything of the former, even if some passages of the book, and the conclusion in particular, appear to argue something slightly different. For recent accounts that emphasise the continued presence of more conservative aesthetic positions in the Weimar era see, for example, Nicholas Attfield, Challenging the Modern. Conservative Revolution in Nazi German Music 1918–193, Oxford 2017; most recently

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Nazi aesthetic significantly understates the element of continued plurality that was a hallmark of Nazi cultural life. Where he does acknowledge the element of variety of cultural life under National Socialism, his explanation rests on the presence of those polycratic power structures inhabited by leading figures whose different personal preferences created a degree of aesthetic room for manoeuvre. Here, the historiographical framework draws more on the scholarly concerns and consensus of the 1990s, creating possible opportunities for a more complex reading. Again, however, his account of the conflicts between the proponents of modernist and conservative artistic traditions remains hamstrung by an inability to see properly beyond the top echelons of the Nazi polity when considering where political or cultural agency might lie. Confronted with his own evidence that modernist culture retained a considerably stronger presence in Nazi Germany that his framework permits, he resorts to describing this as „odd“ (p. 48) or „puzzling.“ (p. 52)

But when the evidence contradicts the argument it is customary to rethink the argument, and not to blame the evidence. The central problem with Kater’s argument, ultimately, is that it insists on seeing „the Nazi code of aesthetics“ (p. 26) as a singular thing, rather than as a field of open argument. The questions „what is a Nazi composition?“, „what is a Nazi painting style?“ or „what is a Nazi apartment?“ remained precisely that throughout the period of the „Third Reich“: questions, and not answers, or at best questions with several acceptable responses. Nor is it immediately obvious that those differences always had to be resolved. The expectation that they should have been reflects the lingering unspoken assumptions of historians about what cultural life under conditions of dictatorship should look like, rather than a demand of the dictatorship itself.  

As many studies have shown in recent years, there was much ongoing scope for a plurality of practices under a regime that channelled a wide variety of conservative and nationalist traditions and an equally wide variety of aesthetic idioms and styles. The capacity of National Socialism to connect to broad sections of German society rested precisely on its ability to appropriate so many broad traditions. The familiarity of these was what, in turn, enabled them to naturalise themselves within the broad National Socialist cultural cosmos so swiftly. They often took on only the slightest of obvious „Nazi“ inflections as they did.

If the argument is therefore mostly just unpersuasive, other aspects court the academically unacceptable. The repeated willingness to describe individuals as (for example) „quarter Jewish“ (e.g. p. 48, p. 186), or to make reference to „inherited disorders such as manic Depression“ (p. 192) suggests an occasional capacity to inadvertently reproduce Nazi-era ways of seeing born of absent critical distance to the sources. Crude speculations concerning who slept with whom in the „casting couch“ culture of the film industry are gratuitous and sit uneasily with the expectations of a scholarly book. Kater seems to struggle to mention a female actor without commenting on her physical appearance, as passing references to „Carola Neher, a beautiful German actress“ (p. 250) or to Richard Wagner’s „attractive granddaughter“ (p. 239) attest, and one does not have to inhabit a position at the cutting edge of third generation feminism to find glancing references such as that to „the weaker sex“ (p. 225) irritating. And while the casual sexism of Kater’s prose grates, one really wonders how, in the age of


3 That a more nuanced account of cultural life under conditions of dictatorship is possible (and desirable) is also shown, for example, by Elaine Kelly, Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic. Narratives of Nineteenth Century Music, Oxford 2014.

4 For a rich, nuanced recent discussion of the complex and multiple continuities that spanned the Weimar, Nazi and post-war eras whilst paying due attention to the specificities of Nazi rule see also Emily Richmond Pollock, Opera after the Zero Hour. The Problem of Tradition and the Possibility of Renewal in Postwar West Germany, Oxford 2019.

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#metoo, his comment on an „irresistibly attractive, seventeen-year old“ female actor (p. 186) ever got through the editorial processes of a serious university press.