Janet Ward: Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany
$ 19.95

Weimar Germany is often seen as the epitome of modernist thought, art and culture. It is then fitting that Janet Ward’s book *Weimar Surfaces*, which works on redefining modernity, would focus on this era. Ward proposes that “we reenact the surface terrain of Weimar Germany as one of the most dazzling examples of the modern period and reassess it according to its own merits” (p.2). While she
acknowledges the impossibility of removing ourselves from our present moment, she believes that there are ways to see modernism in a different light. Ward suggests that we stop considering modernism and postmodernism as solely chronological phenomena. Instead, we should look for the “interconnectedness” of the two so that we can understand “those modern elements that still underpin postmodern expression” (p.3). This approach provides a new understanding, not only of Weimar culture and modernism, but of visual media as a whole.

The text focuses on what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the “pictorial turn” (p.8), more specifically the visual, everyday aspects of Weimar culture. With this emphasis, Ward maps the journey from “modern street-based surface” to today’s more abstract electronic stimulation through internet and television, showing us the relationships between modernism and postmodernism.

Ward explores four aspects of surface culture: architecture, advertising, film and display windows. To each of these topics she brings extensive archival research that take us closer to the everyday experience of surface culture. She then uses these concrete examples to historicize theories about modernist culture, including the works of Simmel, Kracauer, Benjamin, Debord and Baudrillard. Put into historical context, the theories can be re-read and ‘re-enacted’, giving us a better understanding of how the abstract and the concrete are interrelated.

Ward’s methodology is particularly effective in her reading of film. Siegfried Kracauer’s attitude towards the pro-Film/anti-Kino dichotomy allows one to celebrate film while simultaneously criticizing the exhibition practices and the dangers of film as propaganda. By emphasizing the subtlety and complexity of Kracauer’s texts, Ward pushes his work in new directions and away from binary oppositions. She brings together analyses of film production, exhibition practices and film itself—thus showing us how much can be gained by re-embedding film in its socio-historical context.

Weimar Surfaces not only looks at each of the four themes separately but also explores the connections between them. One of the threads through the topics is the impact of city street advertising on popular culture and ideas of mass psychology. With the introduction of electricity, “modern advertising was the first textual presence on the street to give expression to the very power of mass culture…” (p.98) Advertisers used “psychotechnics” (p.98) in order to find out how to captivate the people walking by and how to encourage them to buy their products. Movie palaces used their constantly changing facades to lure people inside. This form of street advertising was considered critical to the film’s financial success and an integral part of the film itself. Ward also looks at display windows and the window dressers who acted as what Mike Featherstone calls “cultural intermediaries” whose job it was to bring the latest styles and aesthetics to the masses on the streets (p.223).
Ward gives an insightful and critical look at the topics she covers, all the while showing us how they are interrelated. Her sophisticated analysis achieves a delicate balance between past and present, examining culture from the everyday level while never losing sight of the larger theoretical framework. *Weimar Surfaces* is an excellent example of an interdisciplinary approach to cultural phenomena.

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**Hinweise**


Filmuseum Berlin (Hg.): Musik zum deutschen Film. Vol. 1. 1900-1945. Berlin 2001, 45 S. + CD.


