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*Experiment Weimar. Eine Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands  
1918–1933* by Sabina Becker (review)

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(Review)

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we might supplement the dialectic of the body- and image space with a new concept of the body- and sound space. Here, Benjamin's concept of innervation might prove especially useful in conceptualizing the affective immersion of the human body in the fluidity and evanescence of the sonic overstimulation characteristic of digital culture.

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*Experiment Weimar. Eine Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands 1918–1933.* By Sabina Becker. Darmstadt: wbg Academic, 2018. Pp. 608. Cloth €69.95. ISBN 978-353470514.

Since our own century entered its “twenties,” complete with its own political and civilizational crises, the Weimar Republic's enduring popularity has acquired a new urgency. This is reflected in the wave of new publications about the period that have appeared in recent years. However, most of these books focus on Weimar's political crisis and, surprisingly, “Weimar culture” has been neglected until now. With the publication of *Experiment Weimar* by Sabina Becker, the culture of the Weimar era receives the attention it deserves. The book is a remarkable achievement by one of the foremost experts on the topic; it processes the vast amount of secondary literature that has been produced over the last fifty years while giving enough space to contemporary voices to keep it from becoming an all-too-dry, purely scholarly pursuit. The resulting synthesis is more than a guide to the different facets of Weimar-era culture: it is both a conceptual analysis, asking what made Weimar culture unique and different from other periods, and an apology that argues for Weimar's central place in the development of modern culture in general.

Following the major historiographical trend of the past decades, Becker argues for an open-ended approach to the period, rejecting the historical image of an all-enveloping crisis that inevitably led to Weimar Germany's descent into dictatorship. Only if we move away from the crisis narrative, she argues, can we appreciate the period's cultural innovation and Weimar's central position in the history of cultural and artistic modernity. It is debatable if this was ever in doubt, but this focus on Weimar culture in its own right, rather than on its relation to the era's politics, and on its democratic character in particular, is still a welcome departure from classic studies such as Peter Gay's *Weimar Culture*.

Becker rejects Gay's notion that most of Weimar culture was a culmination of trends that had started already at the turn of the century. Rather, it was the fundamental postwar process of democratization in all fields of society—and the positive embrace of this transformation by many artists and cultural producers—that gave the period's culture its uniquely open and experimental quality. In practice, this meant that traditional bourgeois “high art” embraced popular culture and the new mass

media. As a result, Becker claims, Weimar culture was both aesthetically modern and socially relevant; rather than autonomous and free-floating art, it produced “Gebrauchskunst,” easily accessible and attuned to social issues. These trends might have characterized interwar culture in general, Becker argues, but they were much stronger, more pronounced, and more consequential in Germany than anywhere else, making Weimar the cultural “laboratory of modernity.”

The perspective on the open, fluid, and experimental nature of Weimar culture is reflected by the structure of the book. The first five chapters are dedicated to contemporary debates about the role of art and culture in the Republic, and to broader sociocultural changes, such as the rise of white-collar work, the contemporary obsession with sport and body culture, and new gender images. The second half of the book covers several broad categories of cultural production, from literature to cinema and architecture. However, rather than confining these to their own chapters, Becker highlights their interplay from the perspective of mass culture, functional aesthetics, and intermediality. Only theater receives separate treatment, but still appears under the other headings.

Unsurprisingly, the book’s broad scope necessarily results in gaps and omissions. Music and philosophy, for example, are dealt with only fleetingly. While Becker stresses the fact that Weimar culture included more than just what happened in Berlin, her focus is firmly on the German capital. Furthermore, her synthesis is based mainly on the work of German scholars; English- or French-language research is used only very selectively. This means that some of the most innovative research of the past years—about race, sexuality, music, or political culture—has not found its way into Becker’s grand narrative of Weimar culture. She has also ignored the recent calls by both German and international scholars to “provincialize” the history of the Weimar Republic and to retrace its global interconnections. Against these trends, Becker’s notion of German cultural exceptionalism seems rather dated. Finally, considering the centrality of the concept of *Moderne* in Becker’s study, the fact that we never get a clear definition of it is a regrettable oversight. Over the course of the book, the term is used interchangeably for the modern age (a historical period), modernity (the result of political, economic, and social modernization), and modernism (modern aesthetics). This lack of conceptual clarity leads some of the book’s arguments into dead ends. Becker paints Germany’s “antimodernists,” such as the representatives of the “Conservative Revolution,” as the archenemies of a purely positive and democratic Weimar modernity rather than as part and parcel of modern culture. And while she rejects the overused metaphor of a “dance on the volcano,” she still adheres to the equally tired idea that Weimar was principally characterized by the contrast between its brilliant cultural achievements and its “political failure.” A more complex understanding of the concept of modernity would have shown these supposed oppositions as part of the struggle over what it meant to be modern—popular or elitist, democratic

or authoritarian—that was such a central part of Weimar culture. Its experimental character meant that the meaning of modernity itself was up for debate, and 1933 represented not its end but the fact that one definition had won out.

However, these weaknesses should not distract the reader from the undeniable strengths of the study. It is hard to imagine a more knowledgeable, sure-footed guide to Weimar culture than Becker. While she may lead us down a rather well-trodden path, the journey is extensive, informative, and often even exhilarating.

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*Sex, Politics, and Comedy: The Transnational Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch.* By Rick McCormick. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 356. Paper \$48.00. ISBN 978-0253048349.

Those of us working on Weimar film cultures have long awaited Rick McCormick's important study on Ernst Lubitsch's transnational cinema. Research for this book had previously been published in edited volumes and international scholarly journals beginning in 2010. As such, this work has already productively informed much of the recent scholarly discourse on Lubitsch. In *Sex, Politics, and Comedy*, McCormick's work is available for the first time in extended form. The book is part of Indiana University Press's German Jewish Cultures book series, which is sponsored by the Leo Baeck Institute London. Its place in the series signals the monograph's extensive investment in reading Lubitsch's aesthetic practices across a long career—one which began in 1913 in Berlin and ended in 1947, the year he died, in Hollywood—as those informed by the filmmaker's Jewish heritage. In fact, as McCormick persuasively demonstrates, much of Lubitsch's interest in “underdogs, outsiders, and marginalized peoples” across his long career is tied to his own experiences of marginalization as a Jew with an Eastern European Jewish background living in Germany and then as a German Jew living in the US (9).

McCormick's study is situated at the intersection of at least two subfields of German studies. On the one hand, the book's investment in Lubitsch's Jewishness is informed by scholarship—particularly by the work of Ofer Ashkenazi, Kerry Wallach, and Valerie Weinstein—that has yielded important methodologies to examine Jewish difference in Weimar Germany. This research is motivated by an approach to recognize Jewishness as an important analytical category to examine cultural history without drawing on or contributing to the long history of antisemitic tropes affiliated with identifying and studying Jewish cultural products or people. On the other hand, the book is firmly positioned along a trajectory of recent approaches to German film history, which have sought to challenge the qualifier “German” by foregrounding the transnational features, aesthetic interests, and global audiences of films or filmmakers