

experience. Such traces are harder to discern on the Web, where books talk to one another of their own accord as their owners and readers scan them, tag them, annotate and hyperlink and mash them up, and blog about them. Not only Google and Amazon.com, but the Open Content Alliance (a group of libraries that have opted to digitize materials without Google), LibraryThing (a site where members make and share their personal electronic book catalogs), Project Gutenberg (a large collection of free electronic books), and a host of other initiatives ensure that books will enjoy a rich life in the digital age. The ongoing digitization of books promises an apotheosis of sorts, as the world's printed matter merges into One Big Book, an encyclopedic vade mecum.

Networked text is marvelously malleable stuff, and its ease of manipulation grants greater scope for invention and expression. Using the Internet, we're able to build vast personal libraries. They may lack the savor and heft of physical libraries, but they enrich and complicate the world of texts as a whole. On the Web, we're able to register the shifts in direction our sensibility takes as we move from book to book, and we find and delight in the

traces of migrations undertaken by others. Far from supplanting or destroying the kind of library Manguel values most highly—a private library that tastes of the universe—the Internet makes possible a multiverse of reading, knowing worlds.

But Manguel can be forgiven if he underestimates the value and beauty of the Internet. The strength of his book doesn't lie in scholarship and analysis, but in humane meditation. Like Montaigne, who had a tower-ensconced library of his own, Manguel revels in the possibilities of the word "essay." His chapters are tries, trials, takes. Reaching into the vast store of books in his shadowed memory, he pulls down volume after volume, trying the weight and feel of one against the other. The success of *The Library at Night* rests largely on Manguel's own fulfillment of a trope familiar from antiquity: the human mind as library. *The Library at Night* is the product of a mind made by reading, and the realization of its own essential argument: The library is a mirror in which we find ourselves and our world reflecting and interpenetrating.

MATTHEW BATTLES is senior editor at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the author of *Library: An Unquiet History* (2003).

Culture Clash

Reviewed by Colin Fleming

LINES WERE EVERYWHERE IN WEIMAR GERMANY—in radically chic art forms, in the façades of bold architectural designs, between political groups. And demarcations are what both defined and destroyed the Weimar Republic, as the German state during the period 1919–33 is popularly known. Though this interval is sometimes dismissed as an intermission between the country's ignominious defeat in World War I and the rise of Adolf Hitler, *Weimar Germany* presents us with a republic that unleashed enough developments on our modern world to rival those of fin-de-siècle Vienna or impressionist France at its height.

The story of the Weimar Republic is the story of Germany's journey from fallen Old World power to the ultimate symbol of modern horror—of cutthroat politics, lingering postwar resentments, new freedoms, and modernist art. Eric D. Weitz, a University of Minnesota historian, sorts through this knotty mass of narratives in order to describe how German consciousness was uprooted from the Bavarian forests and ushered into the ferocity—and beauty—of the machine age. The book focuses on Weimar's culture,

**WEIMAR
GERMANY:**
Promise and
Tragedy.

By Eric D. Weitz.
Princeton Univ. Press.
425 pp. \$29.95

rather than examine it merely as a bridge to the “juicier” subject matter of Hitler, as A. J. Nicholls does in *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler* (1968) and E. J. Feuchtwanger in *From Weimar to Hitler* (1993). But if a historian intends to fashion a book that is both a primer and a near-definitive single-volume account, he better be a master assimilator. Fortunately, Weitz has a knack for levelheaded synthesis.

After World War I, political factions in Germany’s nascent democracy grappled for power—veritable start-up groups, each with its own ideological “product.” Weitz makes it plain that this incarnation of Germany was doomed from the start, a battleground for agitproppers and conservatives so militant that the Right was often to the left of the Left, as though the political spectrum had lapped itself. The only thing the various factions of the Right and Left could agree on was that the victorious Western powers were greedily gouging the German economy (already struggling to adjust after the war) for reparations. The extreme nationalists—the branch of the Right the Nazis appealed to—preferred a kind of suicide course: “Let everything—economy, society, the republic—crash to smithereens rather than deal with the reality that Germany had started the war, had lost the war, and now had to pay for the war.”

Despite political and economic turmoil, Weimar culture blossomed. It is this paradox that binds the disparate elements of Weitz’s book. Sleek department store façades, photograms, cabaret smut, jazz, expressionist cinema, sex manuals—“all had their roots in the dual sensibility of the vast destructiveness of war and the powerful creativity of revolution.” In the cities, the factory became “a symphony, or perhaps a collage,” and the blinding colors emanating from nightclubs and theater houses replaced agrarian life’s “natural rhythms of sunrise and sunset.” Germany was cutting loose. This was fertile ground, of course, for a despot looking to leverage power with the right platform, but also fertile ground for the artist.

To set the scene, Weitz adopts the modus



So many modernist artists gathered at Berlin’s famed Café des Westens, shown here in 1931 and later destroyed by Allied bombs, that the place earned the nickname “Café Megalomania.”

operandi of Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, the canonical 1927 silent film that presented the German capital as modernist symposium, with all its attendant hubbub. In essence, *Weimar Germany* is a walking tour, with plenty of jump cuts to get us from one point to another, starting with Berlin. “Weimar was Berlin, Berlin Weimar,” Weitz writes. Paris had café society, but in Berlin life was found in the cabarets. Cabaret music deftly fused folk, Broadway, and jazz forms, exhibiting the same penchant for amalgamation that informed classic modernist Weimar texts—such as Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain* (1925)—with their chock-a-block layerings of plot and internal monologues.

Visual artists fed the scene as well. Hannah Höch, the creator of photomontages of vivisected animals, Hollywood starlets, sleek gymnasts, and newspaper cutouts, gets quite a bit of coverage as one of the republic’s newly liberated women. To the casual observer, much of Höch’s work possesses a disarming ambiguity—which is why this kind of imagery was easily pressed into the service of the Nazis. But Weitz defends works of hers

such as a collage titled *The Peasant Wedding Couple*, which some might call racist: “It can also be read as satirical commentary on racial ideology and on the right-wing idealization of the peasantry. Nothing could be more outrageous to German conservatives than a peasant wedding depicted as the union of an African man and a woman with a caricatured gorilla face topped with the quintessential braided blond hair.”

Weitz makes a case for Germany’s fragmentation as the source of this artistic bounty. Without any prevailing—or even constant—ideological or political viewpoint, thinkers, artists, and progressives were free to fashion new dogmas that would address the republic’s problems and shape its future. Savvy creators were open to inspiration wherever they could get it; continuous evolution—social, political, artistic—was the ultimate directive. Even in sexual matters, a good chunk of

Historian Eric D. Weitz makes the case that Weimar Germany’s fragmentation was the source of its cultural bounty.

German society was ready to tap into what were seen as fresh opportunities and to let the id have its day. “With so many men killed and ravaged by bullets, shells, and gas,” Weitz writes, “so many women left without

loved ones or reduced to caring for the seriously maimed—why not indulge life’s pleasures when possible? Why wait for the official sanction of marriage to sample sex?” You could make a mint in Weimar with a well-considered, quasi-scientific (for that hint of legitimacy) sex tutorial.

Perhaps no single medium in the Weimar Republic was more suggestive of this propensity toward ideological communion and shape shifting than expressionist cinema, and Weitz keenly probes its depths. Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the 1920 film about a somnambulist and a doppelgänger, is the “sterling example,” he writes. Just about everything Wiene did was supremely theatrical, and *Caligari* features sets of nothing more than painted cardboard. This movie of murder and madness “presented viewers with a

highly ambiguous picture of reality and motivation. . . . Are dream worlds more ‘real’ than ‘reality?’” The schema of the war front and the battlefield trench had shifted to the contours of the mind, where physicality came to die. A drawing room, a crypt, a psychiatric ward—all with painted backdrops—became projections of the overheated imagination. In Wiene’s pioneering work, Romantic art was cut with 20th-century brutality.

Internalization marked even the buildings of Weimar, down to its apartments and storehouses. Weitz delivers a capable overview of the work of architects who studied at the Bauhaus school, founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius, who believed that a modernist aesthetic would lead to a better life. The Bauhaus designers had a penchant for curvilinear patterns that de-emphasized bulk, and rows of recessed windows. This sensibility was to influence just about every school of architecture to follow—even if that influence was evident in a school’s highly conscious disassociation from the Bauhaus style—and has informed typography, graphic design, and even electronic music as well.

A discussion of Gropius leads Weitz to Hungarian-born photographer and montagist László Moholy-Nagy, an artist who, happily, will become known to more people with this book. Struck by some of Moholy-Nagy’s work he saw at an exhibition, Gropius hired him as an instructor at the Bauhaus school. In his own art form, Moholy-Nagy saw utopian possibilities. “A few more vitally progressive years, a few more ardent followers of photographic techniques,” he wrote, “and it will be a matter of universal knowledge that photography was one of the most important factors in the dawn of a new life.” His conception: Do away with the camera altogether—place objects directly onto photographic paper and expose them to light. The method produced line-based, ghostly x-rays of subjects that had never been alive—a superimposition of silhouettes and gaseous emulsions, as if some sprite had relayed a glimpse of the era to come.

COLIN FLEMING writes for *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Smithsonian*, *Spin*, and *The Nation*, and is at work on a novel.