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Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism. Erhard Bahr. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007. Pp.xvii + 358. \$30.00 (cloth).

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Between 1933 when Hitler came to power and the end of World War II, Los Angeles became the (mostly temporary) home of an illustrious set of German and Austrian émigré writers (Thomas Mann, Berthold Brecht, Lion Feuchtwanger, Alfred Döblin), film directors (Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder), composers (Arnold Schoenberg, Hanns Eisler), and intellectuals (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer). Many of these settled in Brentwood and Pacific Palisades—lush wooded areas, then on the city's periphery, whose ocean setting evidently reminded the refugees of the beauties of the Italian Riviera or the Swiss lakes. Here, amid the pine, eucalyptus, and purple bougainvillea, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote their Marxist classic, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Brecht his *Galileo*, Mann, *Dr. Faustus*, Schoenberg, *Moses and Aaron*. The refugees formed a fairly tight-knit German-speaking cenacle, even though, as Erhard Bahr's chronicle tells us, there was also a good deal of friction among its members.

Unlike its New York counterpart, most of whose members soon began to assimilate into American life and became U.S. citizens, "Weimar on the Pacific," as Erhhard Bahr euphemistically calls it, kept aloof from the indigenous culture of Los Angeles, a city they took to be the very emblem of the capitalism most of them despised. These émigrés had come to LA largely for practical reasons; no sooner was the war over, then Adorno and Horkheimer returned to Frankfurt, Brecht to East Berlin, and Mann to a Switzerland he took to be more congenial than Pacific Palisades. Consequently, although there is no doubt that this important refugee circle had a transforming effect on Los Angeles culture, especially in the realm of experimental music, *film noir*, and Frankfurt school aesthetics and politics, the question remains whether their Los Angeles sojourn had any significant impact on their own cultural views.

Oddly, Bahr never asks this question. His wide-ranging and absorbing book is essentially an historical reconstruction of a fascinating chapter in exile history, in particular, a largely sympathetic exposition of some leading German émigré texts. He is particularly skillful at tracking the heated debates in 1943-44 on the future of a post-War Germany, with Mann and Brecht on opposite sides (Chapter 9), and in detailing the role both Adorno and Schoenberg played in the genesis and conception of *Dr. Faustus* (Chapter 10). Indeed, Bahr's reading of *Dr. Faustus* as

Mann's final and definitive statement on the splendors and miseries of German history and culture is especially valuable.

But, as the subtitle of Bahr's book suggests, his is a book with a thesis: namely, that the German émigré community in Los Angeles embodied "the crisis of modernism":

Modernism had always been divided, although this division did not become apparent until 1933. Prior to that year most modernists had associated their movement and its goals with a general progressiveness, but the political events of 1933 made clear that a progressive modernism had failed and a totalitarian modernism had triumphed. Vladimir Mayakovsky, Pablo Picasso, Ignazio Silone, and Brecht had supported communism, while Gabriele d'Annunzio, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Ernst Jünger, and Gottfried Benn had moved toward fascism. . . . Los Angeles became the battlefield for the wars of German exile modernism in the 1940s" (11).

This passage is somewhat murky. For one thing, it assumes that 1933 is the key date, not only for Germany, but for the world. For another, even within the European frame, it conflates the Utopian avant-garde of the pre-World War I period (Marinetti, Mayakovsky) with a later much more Establishment "modernism" that had, by the 1940s become something quite other. Mann's 1947 novel *Dr. Faustus*, for example, has less in common

with, say, Joyce's *Ulysses* than with the mandarin, mid-century symbolism of Malraux's *Man's Fate* (the title itself is indicative); it deploys elaborately coded narrative and emblematic characters in the service of Big Ideas. In *Dr. Faustus*, each character *stands for* something, and each incident is allegorically charged, reflecting on the larger history, ethos, and politics of twentieth-century Germany. Consequently, Bahr's account of the playing out of the culture wars between, on the one hand, the increasingly kitschy and conservative novels of Franz Werfel and the political allegories of Alfred Döblin, and, on the other, the Marxist-inflected poems and plays of Brecht and the films of Fritz Lang, is not much of a contest: we all know who produced the superior works. More important: however influential Frankfurt School theorems have proved to be in the contemporary academy, Adorno and Horkheimer brought these doctrines with them when they came; indeed, their collaboration on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would not have been appreciably different if they had lived in Cleveland—or even in Mexico City—rather than in Los Angeles. True, the “culture industries” were more developed—and hence riper for attack—in Hollywood than elsewhere, but the theoretical and critical thrust of the *Dialectic* was a European product. Bahr himself notes that, whereas Hamid Naficy's study of Iranian exile formation in LA in the 1990s speaks of the “utopian and euphoric

possibilities," of exile, such an idea "was absolutely alien to Adorno" (30). On the contrary, Adorno "resisted adjustment and socialization . . . as a methodology of research. . . . he wanted to 'alienate' [American] phenomena so that they might reveal elements essential to them that were hidden to the American observers" (35). But so "alienated" did these phenomena become, that the *real* Los Angeles might as well not have existed.

The Dialect of Enlightenment, which, as Bahr explains, gives his book its basic structure, is an extraordinarily pessimistic document. The actual fight *against* fascism on the part of Britain and the United States is wholly subordinated to the analysis of the deeper cause of fascism and war, which Horkheimer and Adorno take to be the inevitable failure of Enlightenment thought. Once fascism was understood as the "perversion of enlightenment," it was easy for Adorno and Horkheimer to maintain that the German fascists were not anti-Semites, but rather "liberals who wanted to express their antiliberal opinions"-- a statement that even Bahr takes to be "perverse" (52). But his critique of this and related Frankfurt School texts is largely muted, his being an exposition of an ethos he has largely internalized. Thus Horkheimer and Adorno are said to "clearly understand that films and radio are simply 'business' The products of the culture industry are

subject to the same criteria as those of the automobile industry" (61). Even as these formulations were being codified, a few blocks away from d'Este Drive, where Horkheimer had his bungalow, a Schoenberg student named John Cage was beginning to produce some of his great and remarkable musical compositions. Where does this American exceptionalism fit into the dark picture of the "new barbarism"?

Then, too, when Bahr gives us a précis of a particular work, he often construes it, contra Adorno's complex *Aesthetic Theory*, as a simple vehicle for ideas. He reads Brecht's *Galileo*, for example, as if it were a political tract. "The play," he writes, "was written to confront the audience with the conclusion that if Galileo had not given in to the Pope and the Inquisition, the modern world would have been spared the horror of the atomic bomb" (117). But the great feat of *Galileo* is precisely that it shows no such thing, that it provides no easy answers to the relation of science and politics at key moments in history. The dramatist's attitude toward his protagonist has been hotly debated since the play's inception; it is, in any case, much more than "the earliest and most thought-provoking literary protest against the nuclear age" (126).

The "crisis of modernism" thesis is also called into question by the discussion of modernist architecture in Chapter 6--a discussion largely (and openly) potted from Thomas Hines's

fine studies of Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler. These justly famous avant-gardists came to America as immigrants in the 1920s, prompted by their admiration for Frank Lloyd Wright; the climate of Southern California provided a wonderful opportunity to produce new architectural forms, and both remained in Los Angeles the rest of their lives. Accordingly, when Bahr notes that, unlike Mann or Brecht, Neutra and Schindler "represented a modernism that was decidedly avant-garde and optimistic" (171), he is acknowledging that there was, two decades before "Weimar on the Pacific," a rich and productive Los Angeles modernism that had little in common with the "crisis" modernism of the 1940s and its obsession with the return of barbarism to Europe.

And therein lies the rub. For me, *Weimar on the Pacific*, well-informed and richly textured as it is, and poignant as is its account of the difficulties the refugees dealt with, is finally flawed by its largely unquestioning acceptance of the perspective put forward in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a study whose refusal to differentiate clearly between American democracy and German Fascism makes its assessment of its adopted country less than useful. Indeed, it is Germany, with all its failures and problems, that remains, for Bahr as for his authors, the standard whereby modernity is to be judged.

Weimar on the Pacific thus has its own German problem. But Bahr is to be commended for uncovering a wonderful subject--one we will be discussing for years to come. His appendices, containing street addresses and chronology, are a special bonus. Myself a resident of Pacific Palisades, I was fascinated to learn that Vicki Baum, the author of the legendary *Grand Hotel* and one of the few women writers discussed by Bahr, once lived next door at 1461 Amalfi Drive: subsequent owners have included David Niven and, more recently, Whoopi Goldberg.