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THE BOUNDARIES OF JEWISHNESS, OR WHEN IS A CULTURAL PRACTICE JEWISH?

I

Coming to Jewish history after having already worked for a long time on the histories of gender, race and class, and in the corresponding body of theoretical reflection, I have found myself often startled at Jewish Studies' conferences and workshops by the nature of the discussion about the boundaries of Jewishness and Jewish cultural practices. I was, therefore, particularly enthusiastic when Lisa Silverman proposed the panel at the Association for Jewish Studies meeting from which this Round Table emerged. That panel focused on the intersection between Cultural Studies and Jewish Studies, bringing together five scholars (four speakers and a commentator) all working, one way or another, with Jewish cultural history. We discovered in that session that our preoccupations overlapped *and* differed in productive ways.

The intersections and divergences were multiple and complex. Two of us (Lisa Silverman and myself) were engaged in analyzing forms of cultural practice in which Judaism or Jewishness was not explicitly thematized. Two of us (Darcy Buerkle and Na'ama Rokem) presented work on materials whose Jewishness was inescapable. Darcy Buerkle's paper and mine were linked, however, by their shared preoccupation with the specificity of something that can be called "Jewish" relations to culture in the Germany of the Weimar Republic. Buerkle focused on the question of the Jewish spectator, and I on the Jewish consumer, but both engaged the questions of what it meant to live "Jewishly" in that time and place. Lisa Silverman sought, by contrast, to encourage us to move away from efforts to define a specifically Jewish relationship to culture—whether as spectators or consumers—and to turn rather to what Jewishness signifies in particular contexts, or, as she puts it, using "Jewishness as an analytical framework". Na'ama Rokem's work had a different orientation. Perhaps because she was interpreting and analyzing a set of texts and debates clearly central to Jewish cultural history, hers was the only paper not to tangle explicitly with the problem of the relationship of Jewishness and culture. Finally, Buerkle, Silverman and I recounted earlier experiences of quite dramatic misunderstandings of our work. Those episodes are significant, revealing of both the challenges of analyzing Jewish cultural history and, in their starkness, provoking us to think again about how to do this better.

All those misunderstandings seemed to turn around a struggle over the possibility of defining “Jewishness”—a struggle that resembles those over what it has meant to be a “woman” or what it has meant to be “black”. Scholars working on all of those identity formations have worried about labeling social actors with, or even imprisoning them in, a category not necessarily of their own choosing. That concern has led theorists and historians to try to think through new and productive ways of conceptualizing these categories. Many of those efforts have eschewed the concepts of “identity” and “experience”, arguing that they are both impoverished, inadequate.¹ Some scholars have attempted to resolve the difficulties by arguing that people *perform* rather than *inhabit* their social identities (and that those identities are necessarily plural).² Others have abandoned the question of how individuals engage these identities, finding it more productive to reveal the social and political work done by the categories.³ All of the participants in the Round Table were familiar with these debates, but we located ourselves differently with respect to them.

The choice to focus on Jewishness as an analytic category or on the effects of Jewishness on an individual’s mode of being forms the boundary line between the two complementary but distinct approaches represented in these papers. Lisa Silverman’s contribution follows the latter path, using Joan W. Scott’s conception of “gender as a category of analysis” as a model for thinking “Jewishness”. I concur with the utility of this move, but it is not one that I find sufficient for thinking through my central preoccupation with understanding how being raised in a Jewish (sub)culture might have shaped people’s tastes and identifications. I am less worried about “falsely” labeling someone a Jew, or wrongly attributing behaviour to an individual’s Jewishness, than I am about a too-narrow definition of Jewishness. That worry has grown from the realization that many scholars of twentieth-century European Jewry have been so scarred by the racialization of Jews under fascism that they have become excessively reluctant to define behaviour as Jewish. That reaction is understandable; under both the Third Reich and Vichy even those who had *no* contact with Jewish culture, Jews or Judaism as a religious practice to say nothing of self-identifying as Jewish found themselves labeled (and of course condemned as such). Yet while great care in making causal attributions is always salutary, too great a caution can, paradoxically, lead to an under-evaluation of Judaism’s importance in Europe in the decades preceding the Second World War.

I argue, by contrast, that Jews are not only Jews when they say they are, or when they feel they are. To say that Jews can behave like Jews, just as women can behave as women, or blacks as blacks, at moments when they are thinking about something else entirely is not to be antisemitic or to think like Hitler (as I was once told I did in a conference). My argument emerges out of the position that Judaism is a set of cultural practices and, like all other cultural practices, it is transmitted, reproduced and transformed even when the people doing so are not consciously acting as Jews. I thus share, although from a different perspective, Lisa Silverman’s discontent with Michael Brenner’s decision, in his book on the Jewish Renaissance in Weimar Germany, to limit “Jewish culture” to moments when Jews are explicitly producing culture they themselves label as Jewish.⁴ I find that boundary limits our capacity to tangle with the messy problem of what being a Jew is all about.

Let me make the point differently with an anecdote. A few years ago I walked into a bakery in the small Norman resort town of Trouville with a French Jewish friend. It was Christmas Eve (which happened that year to coincide with Hanukka) and we were

there to buy her *bûche de Noël* (cake in the form of a Yule log) for that evening's meal. The customers ahead of us in line—whom neither of us had ever seen before—selected and purchased their *bûches* and were politely wished a Merry Christmas by the clerk to whom they replied in kind. On their way out of the shop, they turned to Jacqueline and me and warmly wished us a *hag sameah* (in Hebrew) and a Happy Hanukkah (in French)! We'd clearly been identified as Jews, but I had no idea how. I asked my friend what she thought and she said: "Look at how we're dressed, and how we carry ourselves! Of course they knew we were Jewish, just as I knew they were." I, too, if I were honest, would probably have identified them as Jews. None of us thought we were acting as Jews—quite the opposite given the nature of our errand—and yet we clearly communicated our Jewishness, at least to other Jews. It is, however, more than likely that the non-Jewish clerk did not; to her we were simply, like most of her customers, secular French people with some connection, close or distant, to Christianity.

In the modern, post-emancipation, world, clothes and carriage allow Jews to recognize each other while allowing them to "pass" among those not raised in a Jewish milieu. It would, however, be inaccurate to attribute necessary intentionality to either the identifiability or the passing.⁵ Jews use the stuff of everyday life to both fully participate in their dominant culture and to create a kind, at least, of subculture. This, I would argue, is both not surprising and not trivial. In modernity, people read strangers' use of things to determine whether they are like or unlike, with whom they are at home or not and, at times, whether they are friends or enemies. The mechanisms of that reading, like the use, are most usually not fully understood by those making the judgment. Understanding where those taste-systems come from, and how they are passed on, has been a longstanding preoccupation of mine.

However, I have also come to be interested in the reactions generated by analyses of such practices, ranging from outrage and accusations of antisemitism to simple denial. I am equally fascinated by the aporia between academic and informal or intimate knowledge. While such observations at conferences often generate allegations of essentialism and worse, many of those who raise critical voices, if they themselves were brought up as Jews, will regularly, in the context of private conversation, acknowledge that they can often distinguish a Jew from a non-Jew. This is not because Jews have essentialist tendencies (although some, of course, do) but rather because Jewishness is not only in the eye of the beholder. Even in post-Holocaust Europe, Jews, not just antisemites create the Jew.⁶ If European Jewish culture is still alive at the beginning of the twenty-first century, then it certainly was in Germany of the 1920s—the moment upon which my contribution to this Round Table focuses.

II

This article argues for the existence of a distinctively Jewish mode of life in Weimar Germany through a return to the old and familiar controversy over whether or not Jews were particularly attracted to modernism. Rather than reconsider the usual sites of modernist culture—art galleries, theatres, cabarets and literary salons—I have turned to domestic interiors. After having spent a number of years studying inventories, images and descriptions of long-disappeared homes, including hundreds of early Nazi-era auction records (of both so-called "Aryans" and "non-Aryans"), memoirs, photographs,

restitution documentation and family papers, I am in a position to make some generalizations about how bourgeois Germans chose to frame their domestic daily lives.⁷

Most bourgeois Germans in the Weimar period—both Jewish and non-Jewish—sat on chairs and ate at tables in French, English, German or Italian styles of the Renaissance through the nineteenth century; they walked upon carpets imported from the Ottoman Empire (or occasionally on antique French rugs); they scattered knick-knacks from East Asia through their living rooms; had busts of classical scholars on their bookshelves; and ate off fine porcelain made in Germany, England or France with silver crafted in those same three nations. From my extensive sample of interiors, people's choice of tableware appears to have been the most tradition-bound of any of the objects contained in their home. Although innovative patterns of china, table linen and silverware were certainly being designed and distributed in Weimar Germany, they do not appear to have been popular among bourgeois consumers.⁸ The paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints in those homes ranged even more widely than the furnishings and decoration, from the classical to the contemporary eras throughout Europe, and Japanese, Chinese, North African, and in some cases, sub-Saharan African, objects having a significant presence. There was a clearly discernible pattern in the goods connoting the past (including antique, pastiche, second-hand and reproduction) and goods connoting the present or future (modernist, *avant garde*, industrial in aesthetic form) in the homes of bourgeois inhabitants of Weimar. A very substantial number of urban dwellers chose to live surrounded by a combination of antique or historicist furnishings, china, rugs, lighting fixtures, on the one hand, and the latest in modernist art on their walls or standing on pedestals or coffee tables, on the other. A few, but only a few, households chose a single stylistic framing for their entire dwelling. Others divided the stylistic repertoire differently—by room rather than by object. The dominant pattern, however, was what one may characterize as an amalgam of consistently historicist material culture and modernist visual culture.

A few examples may provide a firmer foundation for this argument. In the library of the well-known collector and gallery owner, and promoter of modernist art, Alfred Flechteim, for example, on Bleibtreustrasse in Berlin in the early 1930s, one finds an impressive array of cubist paintings including Juan Gris's "Geige" (1913) and Fernand Léger's "Still Life" (1918), along with oil paintings by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. There are also sculptures by Renée Sinenis, Aristide Maillol and Max Schmeling. By contrast, the furniture is all in Biedermeier and Empire styles.⁹

Even more striking, perhaps, is the home of Paul and Lotte Mendelssohn-Bartholdy on Alsenstrasse, also in Berlin. Their plan for their home was drafted by Bruno Paul—a leading designer first of Jugendstil and then Art Deco in Germany. Unlike much of his other work, however, the Mendelssohn-Bartholdy home was in an (albeit modernized) eighteenth-century French style and furnished and decorated accordingly. All the woodwork, furniture and tapestries in this dwelling had been produced (or were good copies of objects crafted) during the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI. It made a very striking contrast to what was the largest collection of Picasso and cubism in Weimar Germany.

This melding of traditional furnishings, rugs, and tapestries with modernist painting may also be seen in the home of Senta and Erich Goeritz in the Schlüterstrasse in Berlin's Westend. The paintings here include a portrait of Senta Goeritz by Max Liebermann; prints by Lovis Corinth, Ernst Barlach, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Gustav Adolf Schaffer-Chemnitz and so on.

There was a pattern (and, I will argue in a moment, a logic) to what was in which style. Before I move into an explanation for these design choices, however, I want to emphasize that these Berliners had actively, if not necessarily consciously, chosen the style of these dwellings and particularly of the objects they contained. The evidence of advertisements and directories listing shops supplying antique, second-hand, reproduction and modernist furniture, draperies, rugs, tableware and china indicates clearly that consumers could select goods in a large variety of styles and prices. The major department stores carried some modernist lines of table linen, silver, china and furnishings, as did some of the furniture shops.¹⁰ There were of course, also stores committed exclusively to a modernist aesthetic. That range of available goods is, furthermore, thoroughly documented by the collections of the Bröhan, Bauhaus and design museums in Berlin, as well as the very substantial literature on design history in Germany, and evidence from memoirs and inventories.¹¹ Herbert Strauss, for example, described his youth as a series of “haphazard voyages of discovery into literature, the theatre, museums, modern art”. He also frequented “the only store specializing in modern art and decorative objects and fine reproductions for the young or the impecunious [in Würzburg]—Laredo’s on Bahnhofstrasse”.¹²

Bourgeois households did not simply inherit the goods that furnished their homes. Berlin’s housing stock included old and new, traditional and *avant garde* buildings. (Most people established independent households long before their parents’ deaths brought another generation’s things into their lives.) Likewise gifts of major items were generally made only after consultation. Objects inherited or given could, and were, sold or given away again. One should assume, therefore, that bourgeois Berliners were living in a dwelling and with a *décor* that they had chosen and not passively acquired. These choices were, of course, influenced by books and magazines on decoration, which, in this period, often advocated this particular *mélange* of the historical and the contemporary. However, the advice of taste professionals was not blindly followed, and more importantly, neither the taste professionals who advocated such mixtures nor consumers who chose to combine past, present and future within their homes were doing so because greater temporal homogeneity was difficult to achieve. The taste professionals advocated and consumers chose to live in this particular form of temporal eclecticism because it worked for them.

Domestic interiors were, furthermore, emotionally and socially significant, but also multivalent. Unlike clothing, for which the audience is all passers-by on the street, only those invited come into the home. Homes were, therefore, in some ways a freer space in which people could express their tastes. Yet homes were otherwise complex; they were simultaneously collective and individual. They were the key site of transmission of values from one generation to the next, and the goods furnishing them sometimes came from previous generations or were bought or given with the whole household, rather than its individual members, in mind. Those goods were, furthermore, often durable and often relatively expensive; their selection was rarely made hastily or casually. Homes also housed many different kinds of objects within each room. Each genre bore a particular burden and possibility; acquiring a drawing was not the same thing as acquiring a bed, nor was acquiring silver analogous to acquiring books, nor table linen like rugs. All rooms were, furthermore, not alike; some rooms were shared and open to guests (dining and living rooms); but others (bedrooms, studies, *Damenzimmern*) could be quite individual and often private.

The evidence from two different kinds of memory-work—donations of personal papers made to archives and memoirs—underscores further that not only were people making active choices among a wide range of goods, but that those choices were laden with meaning to them and to their children. All memoirs contain descriptions of successive homes (from earliest childhood onwards) and of their contents. Albert Jakob Phiebig, for example, included a long discussion of his childhood home in his quite short text in which he explained his father's choice of dwelling: "The choice of the apartment, as well as the subsequent one reflects my father's efforts to be progressive."¹³ Inga Deutschkron described her family's difficulty in deciding what furniture to take into exile and what to leave behind: "Every piece of furniture held a special meaning. ... We decided to leave the disposal of the things we couldn't take with us to a 'specialist', someone who had no emotional ties to our possessions."¹⁴ And, Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, in one of numerous passages evoking his childhood home, provided an extraordinary detailed image of his dining-room table as set for dinner:

It was laid with a damask cloth, a cloth covered with embroidery which shone on the smooth fabric that had been ironed to perfection. The plates in fine porcelain bordered with gray arabesques held equally delicate flat bowls; it was all accompanied by heavy silverware engraved with a "G" in a modified Gothic style. All was marked with the family initial.¹⁵

Key to understanding the highly varied contents of these homes, as well as the tendencies for particular classes of objects, is the distinction in the affective work done by material and visual culture—work that perhaps became particularly necessary in the Weimar period. I am using the term "material culture" here to refer, first of all, to those three-dimensional objects that have a purpose beyond stimulating reflection or pleasing the senses and, second, to those objects that are not just seen, but also felt and touched.¹⁶ I would like to argue that this pair of constraints marks the boundary between visual and material culture. I am not, of course, unaware that, in part, it reproduces the much-criticized traditional division between the fine and the decorative arts. When thought of, however, not as a status distinction, but one of a kind of engagement of the senses and of embodiment, it becomes a useful way to reconfigure that distinction; useful because objects that have a job to do, cooking, serving or conveying food from the plate to the mouth, keeping the body warm, providing a comfortable place to sleep, or lighting a room—to offer only a few examples—are at least necessarily double in purpose. They must effectively accomplish their task, but they are never simply functional; they are always also modes of communication, or memory-cues, or expressions of the psyche, or extensions of the body, as well as sources of aesthetic choice, involving pleasure, distress or conscious indifference.

Peter Gay, writing in his memoirs of leaving Berlin in the 1930s eloquently expresses this:

Just before we left I had another shock, very personal and, most people would say, trifling. Yet it remains among my memories and must have held some special meaning for me. Our buffet, the repository of my favorite secrets and my favorite food, my silent companion through the years, turned out to be less monumental than I had always imagined it to be. I learned to my dismay when the two men from the

moving company quite unceremoniously lifted off the top and carried it out on its own that it was not a single, truly massive whole. I felt as though an old friend had betrayed me. Apparently nothing was stable or reliable in my world.¹⁷

The power of these goods derives also from their doubled relation to the human body: First of all, they, like humans, are embodied, they occupy space and cannot be in two places at once, and they are mortal, although their life-span may be much longer or shorter than those of the people using them. Second, goods directly touching the body, whether jewelry or clothes that are worn, food or drink that is ingested, or furniture or housing that shelters, carry special weight in all societies. Furthermore, people do not acquire paintings, etchings, books, linen, silverware, china, furniture, rugs and jewelry in the same way or for the same reasons. In German society, particularly bourgeois German society, much of the material culture of domesticity was acquired at the point of marriage and then renewed, replaced or maintained over subsequent years as households inherited goods, had changes in fortune, and expanded or contracted. Visual culture and books could also be wedding gifts, included in the trousseau, or part of an inheritance, but were more often acquired in youth or early adulthood and would be moved from one home to another across the lifespan. Visual culture was often, therefore, a more individual and less familial-oriented acquisition and less often a gift than a purchase.

I would like to suggest that urban bourgeois domestic interiors in Weimar Germany expressed and reproduced ambivalence about change and about modernity. Those inter-war urban Germans who had thoroughly modernist, even *avant-garde* collections of visual culture—particularly paintings, drawings and prints (and also sculptures) and historicist material culture—were not being in any sense incoherent and they were not simply keeping what they had inherited or been given, following what the taste professionals advocated or purchasing what stores offered. As they sat in a historicist or antique or simply old chair, they were anchoring themselves in the past, literally touching that past while they gazed at the future. That past was, furthermore, often a personal past in contrast with an abstract universalizing future. They were holding onto the familiar, the reassuring, with their sense of touch, while moving into the future with their eyes. The visual world was a more cerebral one—one at a greater distance from affective engagement. And even those more thoroughly comfortable in the present and future, those who had not only modernist paintings but modernist chairs, often had traditional china and tableware. Mealtimes, among the most ritualized and cathected moments of life, were brought back to the familial/familiar past.

By contrast, modernist material culture and historicist visual culture did not often co-habit the same space because anyone who wanted or could tolerate the rupture with the past, with memory and familial affect represented by modernist material culture would be very unlikely to seek such an aesthetic in the emotionally more distant world of the visual.

The story is, however, even more complicated than this. Modernist painting, prints and sculpture were not only engaged in dialogue with modernity—with new organizations of time and space, of labour, of war, sexuality and gender—but were often in a critical relation to it. It fully acknowledged that the world had irrevocably changed, changing perception itself, as well as the objects of representation, and it most often visually expressed the dangers and costs of those transformations; only rarely was it

utopian. Modernist furniture, tableware and textiles, by contrast, took advantages of new technologies and new materials, delighting in their possibilities. Many modernist designs of furniture and tableware required that one sit differently, move differently, eat differently and converse differently. It is hardly surprising, then, that one finds very few dwellings with historicist visual culture and modernist material culture. Being forced into a modern body by one's furnishings while surrounded by forms of representation from an earlier moment would have been dissonant and painful in this moment of liminal modernity. The choice of living in a modernist building, consistently furnished with modernist things, gazing at modernist painting, was a choice to live simultaneously with a critique and acceptance of the changes modernity had wrought. That appears to have been a choice few, in Weimar, could tolerate. By contrast, living in a dwelling that kept a peaceable contact with the past while challenging the present may have suited the ambiguities and ambivalences of Weimar better.

III

Having now established a general pattern of a melding of modernism and historicism in Weimar, I would like to return to the specific question of the relationship of Jews and modernism. Those who argue that *Jews qua Jews* did have a distinctive relationship to modernism tend to base those claims on Jews' sociological experience. That is, both antisemitic and philosemitic explanations for a Jewish attraction to modernism usually emphasize Jewish cosmopolitanism. Modernism with its universalist impulse was well suited to a migratory and historically marginal people whose ties to particular nation-states were limited. It was also well suited to a dynamic in which successive waves of diaspora had carried families across continents.¹⁸

I think that there is a great deal of truth to these arguments—arguments that are, furthermore, reinforced by the fact that this period saw minority groups in a variety of contexts from Jews in Berlin to African-Americans in New York's Harlem, and Africans in Paris, Haiti and Brazil actively engaging the question of what it meant to be a minority culture in a modernizing, globalizing world. These minority diasporic groups with very different histories and present experiences all adopted modernist aesthetic forms and melded them with contents defined as traditional or authentic to produce distinctive subcultures.

I am not, however, fully satisfied by these arguments, for two reasons: First, they cannot account for which forms and genres of modernism were appropriated or for differences in those appropriations from one minority diasporic group to another. Second, they rest on the assumption that there was nothing distinctively *Jewish* about the Jews who engaged modernism and produced eclecticism. That was, they presume that it is Jews' minority, diasporic and urban condition that caused the attraction to modernism, rather than something specific to Jews, something in the Jewish tradition that inclined them in that aesthetic direction. Or, to put it another way, there is often an implicit or explicit assumption that Jews were divided into two groups. There were those who continued to believe and practice (who are assumed to have been neither producers nor consumers of a modernist aesthetic) and those who had "assimilated". The Jewishness of the assimilated is thought either to have been relevant only in that it provoked antisemitism or in the diasporic, minority experience.

In parallel, those who argue that Jews were no more attracted to modernism than others (most famously, perhaps, the historian Peter Gay) assert that modernism was a bourgeois taste and insofar as Jews chose that aesthetic for their homes they were acting as bourgeois rather than as Jews.¹⁹ However, a taste for modernism was not limited to the bourgeoisie (there were many bourgeois Berliners who found the aesthetic abhorrent). Furthermore, Berlin's Jews were not neatly dichotomized into the observant, segregated and aesthetically traditional, on the one hand, and the non-observant, assimilated and aesthetically modernist, on the other. The research of historians of German Jewry over the last thirty years has demonstrated that very few German Jews were, in fact, assimilated in the sense of having lost all contact with Judaism. In the larger project of which this research is a part (in which I further discovered that Parisian Jews also had a taste for the modern and for this particular juxtaposition) I have sought therefore to understand the reasons for this taste for modernism. That empirical work and theoretical reflection has led me to the conclusion that their Jewishness was deeply relevant to that taste and that an adequate explanation for that aesthetic must look beyond Jews' generic status as a diasporic group.

German Jews did, of course, share experiences with other diasporic, marked, groups, but they also had a particular history. That history included a late moment of political emancipation that followed fifty years of increased economic prosperity, partial integration into German society, and limited civil and political rights—all of which created the conditions for the possibility of extraordinary creativity in Jewish thought, arts and religious practice. Building on and modifying the work of David Sorkin and others on Jewish subcultures, I argue that the paradoxes generated by bourgeois Jews' acceptance and rejection in Weimar Berlin, in the context of a dynamic, urbanizing, commercializing culture, enabled and encouraged them to create a subtle and complex subculture.²⁰ That culture used the repertoire of the dominant cultures in which they lived and combined it with specifically Jewish traditions and sensibilities.

The home occupied a particular place for Jews, both because of its privacy and because within Judaism the home is, along with the synagogue, a central site of religious ritual practice. Scholars have suggested that European Jews in the period from emancipation to the Second World War tended to express their Jewishness in the "private" rather more than the "public" sphere. Historian Marion Kaplan has argued, for example, that in the Imperial period (from 1871 to 1918), women in Jewish households in Germany created a distinctively Jewish mode of being German in everyday life.²¹ The women Kaplan studied worked at inculcating bourgeois German norms in their children, but at the same time were a force against complete assimilation. She suggests, however, that that work did not extend to the furnishings of the home which were, simply, bourgeois. While it is true that the domestic interiors created by Berlin Jews were bourgeois, the story does not end there. Consumer culture by its nature produces multiplicity and diversity (even if there are underlying homogenizing tendencies). As noted above, there were, therefore, many bourgeois styles during Weimar. It is the choice within that range that is important.

Before I turn to what I think is a more persuasive explanation for this attraction, let me turn back to the second part of the puzzle: the particular combination of historicist and modernist objects within individual homes. While this melding of historicism and modernism has not drawn as much historiographic interest as that of modernism *per se*, it, too, has certainly been noticed. The explanation I have encountered for this hybridity

is, first of all, the statement that it is false to characterize it as a juxtaposition of historicism and modernism because even if the material culture was historicist in referent or actually antique, *it was arranged in a modernist fashion*. The second explanation is that it was a style promoted by decorating magazines under Weimar, and Jews, like other bourgeois consumers, simply followed the model offered them by the decorating magazines. They were, in other words, expressing their bourgeois sensibility and this had nothing to do with Jewishness. Neither explanation is fully satisfying. While it is certainly true that the furniture in the rooms I have described is arranged very differently from what it would have been in an earlier period, or even in a self-consciously historicist room (like the Rothschild's), people's choice to not acquire the available modernist furniture and create interiors is significant. And, while it was true that decorating magazines touted this aesthetic, other aesthetics were also proposed. So what was the appeal of this in particular? I would like to suggest that both the attraction to modernism in general and to the particular melding of modernism and historicism was a result of a Jewish sensibility, shared by many German Jews (and Jews beyond Germany, but that is more than I can get into here). But what was this "Jewish sensibility"? And what about it encouraged a taste for modernism in certain genres but not others, as well as a juxtaposition of historicism and modernism?

I think that a key source for this Jewish sensibility was a distinctive Jewish relationship to the senses, to time and to place. This idea came to me after reading the philosopher Catherine Chalier's *Sagesse des sens: Le regard et l'écoute dans la tradition hébraïque* [*The Wisdom of the Senses: Sight and Hearing in the Hebrew Tradition*], in tandem with the historian Yosef Yerushalmi's classic text *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. *Sagesse des sens* makes a powerful argument, based in part on the work of the philosopher Michel Emmanuel Lévinas, for both the particular importance of hearing in that tradition, but also, and this is more important for us here, *for a refusal within it of a hierarchy of the senses*. Unlike the ancient Greeks and the thinkers of the Enlightenment who valorized sight above all, Hebrew texts insist on the *division of labour among the senses*. An implication of this work is that while those who, like historian Martin Jay, argue for the hegemony of sight in modernity and its dominance over all the other senses may be right in general, but not for all of the groups who make up society.²²

Chalier argues that the particular relationship to the senses found in Hebrew texts is reinforced and transmitted through everyday religious practice and the ways in which those practices engage the senses. Prayer most often engages the senses of touch and smell, as well as that of hearing. In daily prayers, for example, not only is the *Shema* (a prayer that emphasizes hearing) recited, but leather boxes containing liturgical texts are strapped onto the forehead and upper arm (the *tefillin*) and the body is wrapped in a prayer shawl (*tallit*) made of particular fibers. Men pray standing, moving the body in particular ways. The Sabbath is both welcomed in and ushered out, on a weekly basis, with all of the senses and its twenty-four hours filled with embodied requirements and prohibitions. This pattern of sensory, bodily, engagement is to be seen throughout the Jewish year on each of the many festivals and holidays. These rituals inspired the creation of decorative and evocative ritual objects—*kiddush* cups, special *hallah* knives and woven covers, spice boxes and candlesticks, to name only a few—that would be possessed by many households, reminding members of those rituals at other moments of the week and year. One important variant of Judaism, Hassidism, further encourages bodily engagement through the chanting of wordless tunes (*niggun*) and dancing (and

sometimes alcohol) to reach a transcendent state. The emphasis here is on emotion rather than intellect.

It is not, furthermore, the synagogue that is traditionally central to these practices, but rather the home and everyday life beyond the home. Most of the hundreds of laws that govern the lives of the observant concern bodily practices outside the walls of the synagogue. Finally, not only does Judaism engage the whole body and encourage the creation of particular objects in connection with religious practice, but it also has a specific relation to time and space.

First let me address the question of time. Yerushalmi argues that there is a particularly Jewish relation to time and space—a relation characterized by synchronicity and fluidity. The need to endlessly re-narrate and relive the past, not conceived of as necessarily linear, is inscribed in Jewish religious thought. In the Hassidic tradition, for example, Abraham and the founder of the Hassidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760), are understood to have been alive at the same time. This echoes a more general conception of synchronicity; when the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt is repeated every year at Passover, the point is not to remind participants in the ritual, the *seder*, of an event that took place long ago, but rather for them to *live* that event again.²³ There is here a melding of the past, present and future, but also a melding of the originary home (Palestine), the diverse sites of the diaspora and one's actual home in the diaspora. This temporal and spatial melding happens not only in the space of the synagogue, but most emphatically in the family and within the family home. A final melding, this time not at all the consequence of Jewish religious tradition, and in fact, in contradiction to it, is the social melding that resulted from the diaspora and particularly from Emancipation. Jews living as minorities, and increasingly less isolated minorities, necessarily had to negotiate multiple roles, identities, possibilities.

I am, therefore, making the argument that German Jews had a Jewish sensibility—a Jewish relationship to the senses, to time, to history, to the home and to the material world. Yet they also always lived in interaction with a wider world from which they borrowed regularly. Those raised with familiarity with Jewish texts and liturgical practices, or—and this is crucial—those who were raised within families and social worlds in which there had been familiarity, in the context of a diasporic minority population, might have a different relation to their bodies and to aesthetic forms from those raised in other traditions.

That Jewish sensibility was acquired *directly* through religious practice, the Jewish Renaissance of the 1920s, contact with the much larger Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, and Jewish education dispensed at school. It was *indirectly* acquired through parents and grandparents who had themselves been raised within the tradition, and through continued patterns of sociability and networking among Jews.²⁴ While substantial numbers of German Jews no longer completely observed the Sabbath, appreciable numbers continued to have a Friday night dinner and attend services on the major holidays.

Many others were eclectic in their practice; as Eileen Erlund described her childhood in Augsburg:

We had fish on Friday as did our Catholic friends, we found eggs in hidden places at Eastertime, and we decorated the Christmas tree and received nice gifts like any other good Christian did! But we did not forget our Jewish traditions. We had

Mazzo at Pesach, celebrated Rosh Hashana, fasted on Yom Kippur, and enjoyed lighting the candles at Hanukka to commemorate Israelite victory over the Macca-beans [sic] many years ago when strong belief conquered the enemy.²⁵

In addition to occasional or frequent participation in religious ritual, Jewish traditions were transmitted through schools. As Herbert Strauss put it:

My school was a peculiar German/Jewish hybrid, a government-administered parochial school offering both Jewish religious education and Hebrew language instruction and the full curriculum of a public school. Originally a private school offering religious instruction only, it added a full curriculum, and in 1921 it was incorporated into the Bavarian state school system, a combination not unusual in German education.²⁶

All German children received a religious education at school—Catholic, Protestant or Jewish—according to ascribed community. Thus all children of Jewish origin, unless their parents had formally converted, received some education in the Hebrew tradition. And some of the traditionally observant also sent their children to Jewish, rather than public, schools in which the focus was Talmudic study.

The dynamic world of Eastern European Jewry also proved a source of Jewish sensibility during the interwar period. To the already strong influence through both migration and intellectual, political and artistic exchange with centres of Judaism in Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Soviet Union earlier in the century, were added increased immigration from 1916 to 1920 and contact between German-Jewish soldiers and Eastern European Jews during the war.²⁷

The most salient aspects of this contact, for our purposes here, was the transmission of the Jewish Renaissance from Eastern Europe to Germany. This Renaissance was multifaceted, including a reinvigoration Jewish scholarship, of the Yiddish theatre and press, development of explicitly modern forms of Jewish book art, and a religious revival.²⁸ Part of a generation born around the turn of the century, whose parents had moved away from active religious practice and conscious participation in the Jewish community, reacted against what they perceived to be the aridness of their parents' choices, and found in the Renaissance a more dynamic and satisfying life and, not coincidentally, a life that melded the old and the new. This was a life in which the revival of Yiddish theatre would take, for example, the form of S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*—a thoroughly modernist play.²⁹ The modern attraction to tradition can be seen in the greeting cards printed in Berlin in the 1920s to celebrate the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana. Most often the families were shown in anachronistic dress, and the homes in which they were depicted were archaic, but the idea of a greeting card for a Jewish holiday was itself very modern.

Not all families moved away from active practice, and even among those that had there were often extended family and friends who continued to transmit a Jewish sensibility. In part no doubt constrained by antisemitism and in part attracted by affinity, Jewish Berliners (and even formerly Jewish Berliners—those who had converted) tended to socialize with other Jews.

My family was a typical Jewish German middle class family, and the society I grew up in was almost exclusively Jewish. Though ghettos had been abolished a long time

ago, and in Berlin Jews did not actually live very close together, they preferred certain parts of the city. In spite of not living very near other Jews, my family mixed socially almost exclusively with Jews.³⁰

Both real and fictive kin sometimes provided education in a Jewish sensibility to children whose parents had moved further from the tradition. Thus, Frederic Zeller recounts, in his memoir, that although his own parents no longer practiced Judaism, he had two Orthodox uncles (Ignatz and Max), whose presence was important (along with that of the Third Reich's antisemitism) in pushing him into a more intense relation to Judaism than his parents had:

I'm sure that it was largely due to Uncle Ignatz, and Hitler, that at twelve I decided to have a bar mitzvah, started to wear a *yarmulke*, and went so far as to remove the ham from Mother's Hungarian noodle dish. Delicious Prague ham. I was sure that God would be pleased with me, He knew what a sacrifice that was.³¹

Thus, in the interwar period, I would suggest, the majority of Berliners of Jewish origin were not divorced from Jewish sensibility, whether or not they were believers, practicing, or defined themselves as Jewish. However, inevitably as a result of their minority status, sense of themselves as Germans and everyday experiences of antisemitism, they were also experienced in hybridity.

I would like to suggest that both the Jewish attraction to modernism and the particular kind of eclecticism demonstrated in many Jewish Berliners homes were the product of this particular Jewish sensibility. Judaism, in its traditional version, was a wholistic, law-bound practice embracing and using all of the five senses and all moments of the everyday. Modernism, with its principles of creating a whole new aesthetic and practice of everyday life, contained the same possibilities. Yet one could also take modernism piecemeal (just as German Jews had long been doing with aspects of mainstream German culture and aspects of Jewish culture). Perhaps Jews could also be comfortable combining modernism and historicism because they were used to accommodating different, even conflicting or apparently contradictory, systems.

IV

Let me conclude with a return to my point of departure—with the question of how Jewish Studies might profit from a dialogue with African American and Women's Studies. Scholars working in those fields have, like those in Jewish Studies, also been haunted by what Louis Althusser famously called the problem of interpellation, or hailing, on the one hand, and that of the creation and transmission of group-specific cultures, on the other. Whether in W. E. B. DuBois's classic account of his sudden coming to awareness as a child that he was "black" to Denise Riley's analytic account in "*Am I That Name?*" of a person walking down the street utterly unconscious of her gender until harassed by a passer-by and thus reminded that she is a woman, any number of women and blacks, and any number of scholars working on the analysis of gender and race, have commented on the violence of those moments—the moment of loss of the joy of feeling simply human, unmarked.³²

Yet it is important to emphasize here that it was a *feeling* of being simply human and unmarked. All people are, in fact, shaped by their historical circumstances, by the systems of categorization of their times, but also, and very powerfully, by the intimate, quotidian worlds of family, friendship, neighbourhood, school and, later, workplace. Let me underscore that I am not arguing for a simplistic vision of a single dominant, determinate identity. Given that everyone inhabits social roles, no one cultural location completely saturates of an individual's mode of being. I would, however, agree with scholars who argue that both because we live in a world in which gender and race are marked categories, and because women and African-Americans have created cultural forms not widely shared by men or non-African-Americans, that all of our behaviour, tastes, all of our cultural practices are inevitably shaped by gender and race, even when the historical actors or ethnographic subjects are not conscious of it mattering.

Part of the scholar's job is, in fact, to determine how gender, race or Jewishness may have mattered even when the subjects of research thought it irrelevant. Here the scholar's goal and the activist's or individual's goals may well diverge. In the case of African-Americans or women and, of course, of Jews, that process of interpellation has most often been punitive, constricting, damaging and sometimes cost people their lives. The goal is, therefore, escape from classification and the claims by scholars that a particular practice may be associated with femaleness, blackness or Jewishness is viewed with deep and perfectly understandable suspicion.

Despite that suspicion, however, in the case of the study of women and African-Americans, scholars are generally only critiqued when the behaviours they claim have emerged from those categories are negative, or when they are understood to reproduce false stereotypes (even if positive). Thus it is not possible to say that a person is not good at math because she is a woman. It is also not possible to say that someone is a good athlete because he is black. It is, however, possible, to have engaged and serious intellectual debate about whether or not women may tend to value communication more than men because of both the historic role of women in society and because of practices passed down from mothers to daughters, practices that are reinforced in the larger world. It is possible to have that discussion even though no woman would say that her communicative patterns have anything to do with her being a woman until she reads the scholarly literature on the subject. It is also possible to have engaged and serious intellectual debate over the forms and practices of African-American language use, in which connections to African languages, conditions of slavery and post-emancipation, and later urbanization and segregation, are studied—again even though the vast majority of African-Americans would say that their race has nothing to do with the way in which they use language.

Equivalent statements (e.g., that the combination of transmitted Jewish cultural traditions in combination with a diasporic, minority history might encourage certain aesthetic practices) are highly inflammatory in the context of Jewish studies. I would argue that it is no more racist or essentialist to try to understand what might be Jewish about modernism or a certain kind of eclecticism than it is to try to grasp what in the African-American experience has shaped jazz, or what has been masculine about engineering. The reason it appears to be so, as the analogy made to Hitler by one of my critics indicates, is because the extermination of the Jewish people as a race was a constitutive element of the Third Reich. That particular history has made it extraordinarily difficult for scholars in the field to accept that someone may have, in fact, been

influenced by their Jewish origins without being in any way conscious of that influence. They might, in other words, may have been Jewish, behaved as a Jew, without knowing themselves to be doing so. I would like to suggest that this reactive policing of the boundaries of Jewish culture is unproductive and is inhibiting our understanding of prewar European Jewish life. While the reaction is understandable, it is crucial that we not make all modern European history the prehistory of the Shoah, that we not allow the racial classifications of the Third Reich to impoverish our analytical imagination and therefore the history of prewar European Jewry.

Notes

1. The bibliography here is immense. See, notably, Riley, “*Am I That Name?*”; Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, 363–387; Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’”.
2. Most famously, Butler (*Gender Trouble*). See my review of Butler and Riley (Auslander, “Feminist Theory and Social History”).
3. Scott, “Gender”.
4. Brenner, *Renaissance of Jewish Culture*, 5; cited also in Lisa Silverman’s contribution to this round table.
5. Sometimes, of course, that identifiability is very intentional, as in the phenomenon know as “Chalala” in contemporary France, astutely analyzed by Arkin, “*It’s the French and the Arabs*”, esp. Chapter 6.
6. *Pace Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew*.
7. For a thorough discussion of those sources see, of my earlier articles, Auslander, “Jewish Taste”; “National Taste?”.
8. For availability and designs, see Riezler, *Das deutsche kunstgewerbe*; Buddenseig, *Industriekultur*; Campbell, *The German Werkbund*.
9. These examples are drawn from Huth, *Berliner Lebenswelten*.
10. Berents, *Art Déco*; Ladwig-Winters, *Wertheim*.
11. For the Bröhan, see Bröhan Museum, *Porzellan and Modern Art of Metalwork*; Bröhan, *Sammlung Bröhan*.
12. Strauss, *In the Eye of the Storm*, 39–40.
13. Phiebig, *My Story*, 3.
14. Deutschkron, *Outcast*, 54.
15. Goldschmidt, *La traversée des fleuves*, 260–261.
16. This is an argument I have developed at greater length in Auslander, “Beyond Words”, 1015–1045.
17. Gay, *My German Question*.
18. Klein, “Assimilation and Dissimilation”, 152–165.
19. Gay, *Freud*.
20. Sorkin, *Transformation*.
21. Kaplan, *Jewish Middle Class*; see also Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation*.
22. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.
23. Wieviorka and Niborski, *Les livres du souvenir*, 9.
24. Memoirs contain much evidence about both the influence of schooling and older relatives, see Strauss, *Over the Green Hill*; Zeller, *When Time Ran Out*.
25. Erlund, *Early Days*, 5.
26. Strauss, *In the Eye of the Storm*, 12–13.

27. Wertheimer, *Unwelcome Strangers*; Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers*.
28. On the Jewish Renaissance, see Brenner, *Renaissance*; Bertz, "Eine neue Kunst für ein altes Volk".
29. Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-ski*.
30. Liebmann, "We Kept Our Heads", 4.
31. Zeller, *When Time Ran Out*, 45.
32. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; Riley, "Am I That Name?".

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