

Cultural History: Where It Has Been and Where It Is Going

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THE very meaning of “culture” has gone through so many transformations over the last sixty years that it is necessary to take stock of developments in this field of cultural history before suggesting—with an eye to the promises and perils of earlier practices—what new possibilities might exist for the future of the field.¹ The post-1945 period witnessed a powerful impulse to understand culture as something more pervasive than just literature and the arts—and as something more socially and politically reverberant than the shibboleth of “art for art’s sake.” In 1957, at the very beginning of the modern practice of cultural history, Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* found the high and low hierarchies embedded in it. It focused on working-class culture (e.g., glossy magazines, films, “penny dreadfuls”), and on how reading was changing under the impact of mass media.² By 1976, Raymond Williams needed to draw attention to the complexity of the word *culture*, so extended had its purview become over the previous two decades. Linda Nochlin asked why they were no great women artists, and T. J. Clark, using a Marxist framework, sought to understand aesthetic modernism by interrogating the historic circumstances that had led to the breakdown of the academic system.³ *The New Cultural History*, edited by Lynn Hunt, came out in 1989. Its “models” for cultural history were the work of Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, Natalie Zemon Davis, E. P. Thompson, Hayden White, and Dominick LaCapra, and its “new approaches” came from Mary Ryan, Roger Chartier, Thomas Laqueur, and Randolph Starn.⁴ These scholars were legislators of discourse and narrative, of popular and working-class culture, of gender, epistemes, and thick description. With many other tendencies, often defined by their focus on theoretical explication and elaboration, these approaches had the effect of deterring scholars from reengaging with the traditional interests—even the *raison d’être*—of cultural history, namely, art, architecture, theater, dance, music, and literature. This turning-away also affected the very composition of humanities and interpretive social science departments, which added many new subjects of study but, inevitably perhaps, let others wither away.

¹At the 2017 meeting of the German Studies Association in Atlanta, GA, the authors participated in a roundtable discussion about the future of cultural history. The other participants were Marion Deshmukh, Suzanne Marchand, and Frank Trommler, with James Brophy moderating. These reflections incorporate the comments of all the participants. We have tried to indicate who said what throughout, but without using quotation marks.

²Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).

³Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983); T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989).

“Who needs fiction?” asked novelist Joanna Scott, in a provocative article that appeared in July 2015 in *The Nation* on “The Virtues of Difficult Fiction.” The answer she provided was everyone, of course: “fiction gives us knowledge.”⁵ Practitioners of cultural history seek to reengage with the products of human creative work because they also think that they give us knowledge. After the exhilarating, wearisome “turnings” (visual, semiotic, linguistic, etc.) of the 1990s and early 2000s, cultural historians would do well to look and listen again to what people have created over the centuries, with the goal of understanding them anew. Marion Deshmukh remembers being accused of “academic marshmellowism” when she began to integrate paintings and the lives of painters into a larger cultural history of Imperial Germany.⁶ Yet, her efforts to bridge history with art history yielded important insights, not least because these allied disciplines both took it as their mission to understand objects, whether on the printed or archival page or as an artistic production, such as a painting, print, sculpture, or architecture. They are all human enterprises and objects bounded by space and time. Scholars can achieve new understandings of even the most familiar works of art by asking different questions from those originally posed by the pioneering historians of art, music, and literature—and by taking on what the last decades of cultural history have undoubtedly added to our understanding of historical context: “art and act,” as Peter Gay pithily put it.⁷ We may need precisely what Clifford Geertz promised (but did not always deliver): a “thick description” of cultural artifacts, whatever shape or sound they may take. Art, he also suggested, provides us with a “social history of the imagination.” It is the means by which a culture’s “way of experiencing” its collective life comes “out into the world of objects,” where everyone “can look at it.”⁸ From the banal to the profound, every genre painting, every Viennese waltz, every porcelain shepherdess and Brahms symphony is a repository of knowledge about how people organized their circumstances and understood themselves. One may choose not to regard the “highest” of them, as our scholarly predecessors once did, as divinely inspired expressions of an individual or even of a nation, but instead interpret and investigate them along many different registers: economic, political, local, global, and transactional.

Yet, even today, as a number of historians urge us to turn to cultural history, their own definitions of the pursuit suggest that they are not quite ready to acknowledge the work of arts’ scholars as relevant—or, at the very least, they are not quite ready to familiarize themselves with the large body of work that historians of the arts continued to produce by sticking to more traditional routes (most notably in the unrelenting production of life-and-works studies of canonic authors, artists, and composers). Michael Geyer and Konrad Jarausch made such an appeal in 2009 in their important book *Shattered Past*, proposing that “cultural history explores the ways and means by which individual and social bodies constitute themselves, how they interact with each other, and how they rip themselves apart.” Such an

⁵Joanna Scott, “The Virtues of Difficult Fiction,” *The Nation*, July 30, 2015 (<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-democracy-of-difficult-fiction/>).

⁶See Marion Deshmukh, “Max Liebermann: Observations on Painting and Politics in Imperial Germany,” *German Studies Review* 3, no. 2 (1980): 171–206; idem, “German Impressionist Painters and World War I,” *Art History* 4, no. 1 (1981): 66–79.

⁷Peter Gay, *Art and Act: On Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

⁸Clifford Geertz, “Art as a Cultural System,” in *Aesthetics*, ed. S. Feagin and P. Maynard (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

approach, they continued, was particularly important for understanding how *German* society had managed to rip itself apart in the modern era.⁹ They did not address, however, how one would actually pursue such a cultural history. In approaching Holocaust historiography, Dan Stone, Alon Confino, and Amos Goldberg offered similar manifestos in their 2012 collection, *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*. Confino postulates that the dominant methods in Holocaust scholarship have outlived themselves, and that a promising new direction could be found in treating the problem of the extermination of the Jews as “a problem of culture.” He outlines his proposed cultural approach as “a diverse body of approaches and methods that in the last generation emphasized the social and the cultural as interpreted in forms of representation, experience, subjectivity, negotiation, agency, shifting relationships, and the importance of memory.”¹⁰ Dan Stone makes an even more emphatic pitch for cultural history, but one he distinguishes “from the history of cultural production (whether elite, such as opera, or popular, such as food) because it does not trace changes in their production or content.” He leans toward a definition that regards cultural history as “a history of meaning and feelings broadly defined, as embedded in expressive practices widely observed,” and challenges it even further to “show how meanings in society are made manifest in power relations, for example, as expressed in gender, racial, or class relations.”¹¹ Amos Goldberg, for his part, summarizes his take on cultural history as “history that does not focus on empirical reality, but rather on the reality of consciousness and the modes of its production via collective institutions.”¹² Although these approaches are presented as new and promising, they still seem to embrace much from the trends of the 1970s through 1990s discussed earlier, i.e., those established by scholars who had sought to understand culture as something more pervasive than “just” literature and the arts. In the process, they may have inadvertently retained something of the “reactionary” elements that had prompted those movements in the first place: resisting the dominant cultural history of the time that had limited its scope to elitist art-for-art’s sake. In the meantime, Geertz’s “thick descriptions” of culture remain just a phrase.

A very different set of strategies for future cultural historians is necessary—one that acknowledges but does not wholly accept the species of “wind-chill” history (not how cold it *was*, but how cold it *felt*) adumbrated in the previous paragraph. Focusing on the question of agency in culture, Frank Trommler urges us, for example, to attend to public actors who supported or regulated artistic production. Invoking Antonio Gramsci and his concept of hegemony, he argues for regarding arts and culture as a factor in politics—a potentially very important one, both inside and outside of a particular society.¹³ The path between the political/social sponsorship of artistic production and its effect on society are something scholars can map out and analyze, including elements of suppression and opposition within the creation of political and social identities. Successive German governments practiced a

⁹Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 15.

¹⁰Alon Confino, “A World Without Jews: Interpreting the Holocaust,” in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 34–35.

¹¹Dan Stone, “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History,” in Stone, *Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, 45–46.

¹²Amos Goldberg, “The History of the Jews in the Ghettos: A Cultural Perspective,” in Stone, *Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, 86.

¹³See note 1.

Kulturpolitik that did more than just project a national identity: it actively defined it. In modern domestic and international politics, objects of “high art” have assumed a presence, one they rarely had in earlier times, as objects of soft diplomacy. Moreover, we can enrich our analysis of specific historical events or predicaments by examining the discourse of their cultural production, within either the aesthetic or the political and social agendas of the time.

The case of World War I provides a good example of this. For all the scholarship that appeared in the recent centenary publications, the cultural mobilization that characterized Germany, France, Great Britain, Russia, and the Habsburg Empire has received little new attention. Aspects of cultural life rarely appear in Great War encyclopedias and multi-authored compendia—or, if they do, they are set off in splendid isolation from everything else. The fact that the mobilization of peoples and their fantasies was accomplished mainly by mobilizing cultural identity—including a great deal of high culture—has not received the attention it deserves. Invoking Expressionism and the turmoil of intellectuals, as Wolfgang Mommsen did more than twenty years ago, is not enough.¹⁴ We need a rethinking of the war as its own type of cultural production, and of cultural production as a central component of modern-day politics—not merely as propaganda.¹⁵ Continuities that transcend the ruptures in modern history also emerge through a study of cultural production. This is not a matter of trying to demonstrate the persistence of and an attempt to define that most elusive of creatures: national identity. It can be a matter of following the uninterrupted successes of more concrete enterprises, such as continuities of production and design, which were important for an exporting country like Germany. The *Werkbund* principles of industrial art production exerted a powerful influence not just in the 1910s and 1920s but even in the Third Reich (if somewhat disguised), and then were fully embraced again in both West and East Germany. *Werkbund* modernism and modernity help us to define the German twentieth century across all its ruptures.¹⁶

The issues and meanings of mass-producing decorative physical objects have become central to Suzanne Marchand’s cultural-historical work on the German porcelain industry. She notes that many scholars—including herself—have allowed the power of the concept of *Bildung* to distract them from attending to pertinent questions about what things cost and who paid for them. The act of counting things gets us beyond a certain kind of cultural history that focuses too much on fashionable subjects or on anecdotal evidence—or, as Marchand recently characterized this approach: “here is one interesting novel or play; let’s pretend it is typical!”¹⁷ Bernard Porter, a historian of the British Empire, notes that “high culture is almost entirely bereft of references to empire—and didn’t reach all that many British subjects in any event.” With regard to popular culture, one study of English fiction covering the whole Victorian period cites only three adult novels focused on empire and published before the 1880s, with a few more famous ones (e.g., ones by G. A. Henty and

¹⁴Wolfgang Mommsen, “Culture and Politics in the German Empire,” in *Imperial Germany, 1867–1918: Politics, Culture, and Society in an Authoritarian State*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Bloomsbury, 1995), 119–40.

¹⁵Two possible models for such cultural history are Glenn Watkins, *Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Regina Sweeney, *Singing Our Way to Victory: French Cultural Politics and Music During the Great War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

¹⁶See Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

¹⁷See note 1.

Rudyard Kipling) coming afterward; the main themes of the novels were instead “love, social relations, crime, and adventure.” There were popular, patriotic songs, but most of them were maudlin-sentimental or paid tribute to the monarch, British liberties, and roast beef, not imperial conquest. The pub favorites—many of them humorous or sentimental—dealt with drink, comradeship, courtship, policemen, mothers, the seaside, betrayal, and the like. Popular prints rarely depicted imperial settings, favoring instead religious or romantic scenes, or fluffy animals, the monarch, or Napoleonic escapades.¹⁸ This suggests that most people were thinking about love or longing for spring, at least when they were gathered together in music halls or around pianos. Much emphasis has been placed, in studies of the Central European porcelain industry, on its “orientalism”: caricatures of Turks or Chinese mandarins in porcelain. But manufacturers also made much plainer porcelain, as well as porcelain decorated more commonly with flowers than with orientalist motifs, with far more Zeuses, shepherdesses, and kissing babies than Turks or Mandarins. We need to be able to explain the banality of taste, including the banality of exoticism, if we are to place all such manifestations of popular taste, from Straussian waltzes to porcelain Chinese mandarins, in a meaningful and comparative context.

Cultural historians of German-speaking Europe have performed much less research than their counterparts studying the British, French, and American history of marketing, shopping, and “selling” culture—i.e., the economic history of culture and its objects.¹⁹ “Populuxe” industries, such as porcelain, musical instruments, and sheet music production, produced rich (if dispersed and unwieldy) sources to investigate, and such research could prove revelatory, shedding light, for example, on how craft practices persisted, on how the state intervened and supported certain cultural industries, and on which products succeeded and which failed to catch on. What were the real costs of creating artifacts—or instruments, books, or theatrical productions? How exactly did one make a living as an architect, as a graphic artist, or as an ensemble player or composer for the amateur market? One might also find that the social-scientific concepts that have shaped histories of professionalization in the nineteenth century need revision when considering those employed in creative businesses. Did their training and career paths involve specialization and standardization comparable to those of doctors and lawyers—especially in light of the forces of corporatism in modern Europe?

The larger reward that results from scouring business archives or trade journals would be to reconstruct more fully the visual, aural, and sensual horizons of people of the past, and to appreciate better the real barriers to creativity, as well as the opportunities, that they faced. The challenge is the acquisition of new skills, such as understanding double-entry bookkeeping, credit mechanisms, or the complexities of copyright law and royalty payments. Cultural historians might productively tackle so-called old-fashioned or boring subjects—most urgently, business history and military history: what did painters and photographers

¹⁸All these examples come from Bernard Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150–53.

¹⁹A notable example of how this might be done is David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Work on popular music has been more extensive. See, e.g., Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided German* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Julia Sneeringer, *A Social History of Early Rock ‘n’ Roll in Germany: Hamburg from Burlesque to The Beatles, 1956–69* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). By contrast, work on entertainment music in the nineteenth century lags far behind.

contribute to the war experience and its aftermath? What was the impact of all those military musicians on musical experience and musical careers in German-speaking Europe?²⁰ One might also profitably revisit labor history, the history of banking, the history of urbanization and infrastructural development (e.g., roads, canals, railroads, and airports), and the history of reading and the book.²¹ As James Brophy has found by taking a fresh look at the hoary subject of the public sphere in the nineteenth century, German “markets of knowledge” encompassed myriad transactions that forged the era’s transatlantic book market, from credit-based negotiations and the creation of local bookshops, libraries, and reading societies, to the way in which publishers worked as cultural brokers and political actors. Censorship was, it seems, a more transactional than authoritarian matter, with book producers maneuvering around official guidelines, and readers sampling literature and politics from many different nations.²² The touring orchestras, conductors, and solo performers of the nineteenth century built their careers through infrastructural developments, such as the telegraph, without which all arrangements would have been much more difficult. New careers also emerged in the course of producing and selling culture. Just as the burgeoning of museums and galleries enhanced the professional standing of curators and art dealers, Hermann Wolff, whose telegraph handle was MUSIKWOLFF-BERLIN, invented the profession of the modern concert agent, combining in one genial, highly musical, and well-connected businessman the many roles that are now divided up among talent and booking agents, producers, and impresarios.²³ The royal road to the invisible history of culture may lie in the fusty and old-fashioned, the balance sheets and the banks, the businessmen and the influence brokers.

The interdisciplinary nature of cultural history hovers over all these observations. Yet, a gap still persists between scholars working within the arts disciplines and historians as such. The way the cultural history of the Third Reich has been written is instructive in understanding and potentially bridging this gap. As noted earlier, historians of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Germany have challenged us to engage in a form of cultural history, especially as a way in which to integrate the Holocaust into the rest of German history. Their definitions seem to continue to insist on an unbridgeable gap between “high” and “low” culture,

²⁰On the music profession and the impact of the military music establishment, see Martin Rempe, *Kunst, Spiel, Arbeit: Musikerleben in Deutschland, 1850–1960* (Habilitationsschrift, University of Constance, Germany, 2017); Celia Applegate, “Men with Trombones,” in *The Necessity of Music* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 211–37.

²¹The study of reading and of the book in particular has already made distinguished contributions to cultural history, starting with Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and continuing through studies of German literacy and reading; see, e.g., Rudolf Schenda, *Volk ohne Buch: Studien zur Geschichte der populären Lesestoffe, 1770–1910* (Frankfurt/Main: V. Klostermann, 1970), as well as the many influential publications by Roger Chartier, including, most recently, *The Author’s Hand and the Printer’s Mind: Transformations of the Written Word in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). Most groundbreaking work in the history of the book and reading focuses on the early modern period.

²²James M. Brophy, “The Second Wave: Franco-German Translation and the Transfer of Political Knowledge, 1815–1850,” *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 71 (2016): 83–116; idem, “Grautöne: Verleger und Zensurregime im Mitteleuropa 1800–1850,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 301, no. 2 (2015): 297–346.

²³In a lively memoir about her father’s career, Hermann Wolff’s daughter shed light on this nearly invisible (at least in existing historiography) aspect of musical culture; see Edith Stargardt-Wolff, *Wegbereiter großer Musiker* (Berlin: Bote & Bock, 1954).

however, and tend to favor the latter over the former. This can be attributed, in large part, to a lack of familiarity with the tremendous strides that the arts fields have made toward expanding their scope beyond elitist high culture, turning their attention to a much more diverse range of what one might call “low” or “popular” culture, or “utilitarian” or “applied” arts.

In studies of the Third Reich alone, we have seen a breathtaking expansion into graphic arts, advertising, popular music and film—even porcelain. How these works are organized in recent cultural histories of the Third Reich reveals a cautious attempt to bring together the “high” and “low.” Lisa Pine’s *Hitler’s “National Community”*: *Society and Culture in Nazi Germany* and Jost Hermand’s *Kultur in finsternen Zeiten* both examine literature, architecture, painting, sculpture, music, and theater alongside radio, film, and the press.²⁴ Both authors make an attempt to break down the walls between “high” and “low” by devoting at least some attention to the media, especially by including discussion of the press and radio. But why the press and radio, specifically? Is it a mere coincidence that what is categorized as the “culture” of the Third Reich in these and other studies mirrors the very categories delineated by the structural organization of the Reichskulturkammer, with its seven chambers devoted to music, visual arts, theater, film, writing (*Schrifttum*), press, and radio?

Future studies should go beyond this surface acknowledgment of the Nazis’ own, somewhat more inclusive definition of *Kultur*, which embraced mass media. They should also look closely at the internal composition of those very chambers. Indeed, the creation of the chambers was a full-scale attempt to break down the divisions between high and low culture by dissolving not only the aesthetic, but also the social and economic barriers in German cultural life. Each chamber was a vast and inclusive union that brought together the composer and the publisher, the instrument maker and the amateur chorister, the stage director and the stage hand, the builders, architects, painters, art dealers, and graphic artists, all under one umbrella organization. The Kulturkammer was not even a Nazi invention but rather the culmination of a lengthy lobbying campaign motivated by what Alan Steinweis has identified as a neo-corporatist impulse.²⁵ At the same time, it strove to provide a gathering spot where the quarreling, fragmented cultural community could come together to work for the supposed good of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The basic ingredients for constructing a thick description of culture lie right there in the configuration of the Reichskulturkammer, where the arts and media were mobilized to create a culture that could be shared by Germans from all walks of life. They were celebrated as well—with fanfare and rhetorical sleight of hand—as the culture of the New Germany and of the Aryan race (even if there was nothing distinctively Nazi or German about it). Culture was and is a collective activity, and the distinctions between “high” and “low” have proven over and over again to be artificial constructs. Close analyses of cultural products have frequently undermined assumptions about the supposed differences between “popular” and “elite,” revealing an ever-present cross-fertilization between the two.²⁶

²⁴Lisa Pine, *Hitler’s “National Community”*: *Society and Culture in Nazi Germany* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2007) (Bloomsbury Press published a new edition in 2017); Jost Hermand, *Kultur in finsternen Zeiten: Nazifaschismus, Innere Emigration, Exil* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2010) (the latter has also appeared as *Culture in Dark Times: Nazi Fascism, Inner Emigration, and Exile*, trans. Victoria W. Hill [New York: Berghahn, 2013]).

²⁵Alan Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

²⁶See, e.g., Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2009); idem, *What is Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

Leaving aside the irony of finding a methodological guide in a Nazi institution, the future of cultural history lies in an exciting and intense engagement across the many disciplines. This will still face a challenge that vexes all things interdisciplinary in an academic culture that still continues to recognize only monographs and single-authored articles as “real scholarship,” while giving far less value—if any at all—to collaborative works. No probationary faculty member in a history department would dream of “squandering” those six years on the tenure track on collaborations, no matter how enriching, rewarding, and crucial to the growth of the discipline they might be. Moreover, there are only two major funding sources in the United States that support collaboration in the humanities: the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council for Learned Studies. Unlike our STEM counterparts in the United States, who work almost exclusively within a system of collaborative research and multiauthored publications, scholars in history and the other humanities find themselves in the frustrating position of knowing full well the importance of the multidisciplinary depth that can be achieved only by working with experts in partner disciplines—but receiving little, if any, encouragement from the larger academic ecosystem. European colleagues, by contrast, stick much more closely to the STEM model in leveraging the bountiful opportunities for large-scale collaborative projects that take the form of editions, museum exhibitions, conferences, and publication series. Financial support plays some role here as well, and North American scholars are at a disadvantage, especially when compared to STEM scientists in the United States and cultural historians in Europe. But they also confront different sets of priorities, something that future cultural historians *do* have the power to change.

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