Review of Tim Satterthwaite, *Modernist Magazines and the Social Ideal*

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Reviews

Tim Satterthwaite, *Modernist Magazines and the Social Ideal* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020). 312 pp. ISBN 978150134601

Drawing on two case studies from different countries in interwar Europe, Tim Satterthwaite's book addresses the ways in which modernist magazines projected the image of an idealized society, reflecting the blossoming of an optimism coupled with a belief in the promise of a machine-age future. This image marked the interwar period and began its decline at the dawn of the Second World War. Both the German monthly *UHU* and the French weekly *VU*, two market-leading magazines, relied on photography to convey a new aesthetic fitting these idealist views, a *patterning* based on repetition and geometry. Satterthwaite postulates that while these magazines did not shy away from the machine aesthetic, they simultaneously conveyed the shape of a new, 'organic' modernism throughout the twenties.

Divided into three parts, *Modernist Magazines and the Social Ideal* opens with a historical introduction to the aesthetic and social preoccupations of modernist magazines, followed by two case studies dedicated respectively to *UHU* and *VU*. The first part starts off by detailing the challenges brought by the industrialization of a changing society, and the ensuing difficulty for the subjective and the human to find a voice in a machine-like reality. In Satterthwaite's view, aesthetic sensibility provided a relief to various tensions underlying both French and German society by allowing the expression of human individuality within a world ruled by technology and mass production. Modernist magazines were a fertile ground for experimentation with form; the medium's flexibility made space for both a documentary and an artistic gaze on current events, mainly expressed through meticulously curated photographic pages.

Satterthwaite argues that during the twenties illustrated periodicals such as *UHU* and *VU* formulated a response to a post-war reality by tackling broader societal themes and adopting an idealist stance on life in order to project the idea of a harmonious society. The author's claim that this idealized vision of modernity found a form of expression in a patterning aesthetic calls for the use of an expanded definition of pattern as the 'perceptual grouping of repetitious elements, […] expressed in the viewer's visual consciousness as regular and irregular arrays' (p. 30). The book then goes on to lay out the methodological thinking behind the extended notion of pattern theory, referring to the Gestalt theory and its attention to the 'significance of the whole' as a perceptual model for the patterning occurring in these magazines.

The approach chosen by Satterthwaite is a historicist one. The author insists that a historical reading of the modernist aesthetic and its perceptual description need to go hand in hand in order for us to understand the relationship between the magazine and its place in society. This double analysis is one of the book's assets given the complexity of the subject at hand: the illustrated periodical, an ever-evolving object that mirrors the state of a continuously changing reality. The link between aesthetics, history, and society is clearly articulated in the book, which looks at pattern as an ontological unity, 'the expression of mutual relations, served as the symbolic figure of social order' (p. 42). A brief typology of different patterning models is then followed by a historical inquiry into the birth of patterning culture, which coincided with the rise of a predominantly visual culture and the shift to segmented reading that

was largely prompted by the growing popularity of magazines.

Satterthwaite argues that the symbolism conveyed by photographic patterns in *UHU* and *VU* took root in modernist society and remained legible to a core audience of these publications. The author pinpoints the birth of geometric patterning pre-1914, at the time of cubist experimentations, and postulates the emergence of a dialogue between mass visual culture and avant-garde movements, which led to the assimilation of modernism into mainstream visual culture. The first part of the book closes with the definition of the modernist social ideal, oriented towards a future society embracing a machine age. Pattern theory, writes Satterthwaite, responds to this future vision as well as to the realities of modern life by catering to an 'ideal subjectivity shaped by the collective' (p. 56). Modernist symbolism, then, is depicted by vectors and grids that spread beyond photography onto typography and page layout, making magazines the perfect vessel for the modernist aesthetic.

Satterthwaite's historical introduction is followed by a two-part case study, starting with the German magazine *UHU*. Aimed at a rather bourgeois and consumerist readership but adopting a 'popular' visual complex and providing content appealing to a mass audience, the bestselling magazine *UHU* offered a projection of an idealized society. In this second part of the volume, an account of *UHU*'s history is followed by a study of the magazine's singular aesthetic and photographic culture — a very coherent one that simultaneously made it stand out from its competition as it took on a blend of scientific and avant-garde photography, both based on repetition and reduction, rather than on the popular technique of photomontage. Majorly displayed throughout *UHU*'s general aesthetic, patterns used in these unmanipulated photographs provide a reflection of an 'organic' society, functioning as a whole according to a rationalist social order.

In Satterthwaite's view, *UHU*'s use of patterning led to a visual abstraction of forms which constituted the starting point of a quest for a universal aesthetic based on an objective reader response. The author argues that this tendency for abstraction was shaped by the war-time aesthetic of aerial views used in propaganda and built on the collective memory of a 'ritualised' (p. 94) conflict. Satterthwaite describes *UHU*'s visual culture as characterized by ambivalence: the *Neue Sachlichkeit* [New Objectivity] philosophy adopted by the magazine opened the possibility for a 'dialectical synthesis' between the old and the new and a temporal continuity between modernism and what came before. This synthesis was achieved through representation of the human figure: it prompted the birth of a 'humanistic, organic modernism' (p. 114), as an alternative to a technological utopia.

The Weimar aesthetic, according to Satterthwaite, was characterized by polarisation as well as consensus; in parallel, *UHU* managed to reconcile nature and technology, or 'modernism of the body and of the machine' (p. 117). In a detailed analysis, the author points out that the magazine's vision of bodies creates a continuum between the living body and its mass visibility through pictures of urban crowds. The final chapter recounts the manner in which *UHU* responded to social and political changes up until its end, prompted by the rise of Nazism. Satterthwaite shows that in the early thirties the magazine seemed to have lost its faith in the purpose of objective photography following political turmoil, and resorted to the use of photomontage in its depiction of society, getting closer to the aesthetic of 'popular' magazines and shifting from the ideal of documentary photography towards escapist visions of a fantasy world. Such a shift made the magazine's identity crisis apparent.

While *UHU*, a publication whose years of glory span the twenties, represents the ideal of a progressive and tolerant modernity, the French magazine *VU*,

discussed in the third part of the book, is seen as the embodiment of a modernity in crisis. *VU* was launched four years after *UHU*, but went on to be published in the thirties and was not discontinued until the very beginning of the Second World War. At the start of the next decade, writes Satterthwaite, *VU* proposed an idealized representation of modernity similar to the one previously discussed in the case of *UHU*, but this time in the context of the traumatic social climate of the early thirties.

Although in the introductions to Part II and III Satterthwaite does point to certain differences between the defining ideologies in German and French society and their repercussions on both magazines' aesthetics, by analysing *VU* in historical continuity with *UHU*, the author seems to implicitly postulate the existence of a kind of universal model of the illustrated magazine in Europe, according to which one *revue* could be seen as the other's successor. To stress both periodicals' specificities within their own cultural contexts, this approach perhaps could have benefitted from a more nuanced analysis of *UHU* and *VU*'s similarities and differences during their early years, while they were published simultaneously. That is not to say that the author does not draw any distinction between the two magazines: the first pages of Part III show that whereas *UHU*'s aesthetic hinged on consensus between nature and technology, *VU*'s initial editorial line promoted a technocratic society in the name of progress. Through its patterning aesthetic, *VU* aimed to project the image of an inclusive, harmonious society in order to attain convergence between ideal and reality. The third part of the book shows how this ideal collapsed in the later years, following the rise of Hitler's Germany, and how this disillusion is reflected in *VU*'s photographs.

VU, a magazine that sought to unfold 'like a beautiful film' (p. 210), introduced a new type of pattern with a temporal component: series of successive pictures multiplying their object in a cinematic fashion. Rather than embedded within the urban crowd, the modern body presented by *VU* is an individual in motion, subjected to continuous changes. *VU*'s editorial content thoroughly matched its aesthetic: the publication's striving for a politically neutral stance mirrored its ideal of an objective photography. This impartiality, however, was challenged during the thirties, giving way to political inconsistencies: the magazine's anti-Nazi stance did not exclude, among others, an open embrace of colonialism and a sympathetic approach to Mussolini.

In its manifesto, *VU* placed advertisements on a level similar to art, fashion, scientific discoveries, political events, etc. By doing so, it embraced the dominance of the American consumerist ideal, while similarly acknowledging the advertising medium's cultural and aesthetic potential. The visual language of *VU*'s advertisements reflected not only its consumers' profile, but also an idealized society where technology provides the answer to conflicting social and political stances. In the later chapters of this third part of the book, Satterthwaite shows how the magazine's advertisements started to mirror the anxiousness and uncertainty that marked the depression of the thirties. The usual patterns went from an optimistic and harmonious portrait of society, such as previously shown for *UHU* and the early *VU*, to a depiction of the rise of totalitarianism through a different use of the same visual techniques. Eventually, the pessimistic advertisements, along with *VU*'s entire changing photographic aesthetic which went on to display 'demonic grid patterns' to paint the picture of a fragmented and conflicted reality, bore witness to a loss of faith in the machine age, and the supposition that society's decline during the Depression era was 'the fault of modernity itself' (p. 223).

In line with the patterns emerging on the photographic pages of *UHU* and *VU*, *Modernist Magazines and the Social Ideal* renders a clear picture of these

pioneering periodicals' response to man's relentless quest to find a place in society. Cleverly bridging the historical analysis of interwar society with a perceptive reading of the modernist aesthetic, Satterthwaite offers the keys to understanding a period of great upheaval through a medium intrinsically linked to the rapid changes, rising hope, and final disillusionment that characterized the twenties and early thirties in Europe.

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