

# On Habits and Habitation Cultural Accommodations in Two Works by Miriam Bajtala

Jens Kastner <sup>1</sup>

I.  
"I inherited the cliché from my parents," Miriam Bajtala writes in *dichtegeschichte in 18 Räumen (densestory in 18 rooms)* [WVZ 120 / 2020]. "We act according to templates. It's about outward appearances. Everything is done the way it should be. It gives us orientation. We gain a sense of stability." The book has no continuous page numbers, the text sections are assigned to the apartments in which Bajtala lived, the passage just quoted can be found on page 5 of the third apartment (3/5).

A history in fragments. The history of the subaltern, wrote Antonio Gramsci, is "necessarily fragmentary and episodic."<sup>2</sup> These stories and histories are generally left untold. But they are not in principle inaccessible; they can be entered like rooms. Each section is introduced by the floor plan of the 18 rooms and apartments that Bajtala lived in until the beginning of her life as an artist.

After now 20 reprintings of the German-language edition of Didier Eribon's *Return to Reims* (2016), we can appreciate how important it is for many people to understand that we are profoundly shaped by where we come from. We carry our collective

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated by David Quigley.

Translator's note: Throughout the essay the author plays with the different meanings of the German word "Einrichtung" which can mean furnishings, interior and institution. As a verb it can also mean set up, establish, arrange and institutionalize. In this case I have used the word "accommodation" because it hints both of an institution and a place to live and its furnishings. Throughout the essay I try to use the English word that fits best to the specific context.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is first mentioned in Notebook 3, §14 dated to c. 1930. See also: Antonio Gramsci, *Gefängnishefte*, Bd. 9, Hefte 22. bis 29, (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2012), 2191.

history around with us in our bodies. These bodies, how they move in the (socio-historical) space they fill, are also the subject of Bajtala's works. The family migrated from what was then Czechoslovakia to Austria when Bajtala was seven years old. From Bratislava they moved to Pasching and Traun in Upper Austria. "We have to integrate as quickly as possible. We incorporate ourselves into the norms and beliefs around us. It's a question of being as ordinary as we possibly can." (4/7). "Habitation" and "habits" are obviously linguistically related, and not by chance do they share the same etymology. The sought-after cultural integration, also as an 'accommodation' to the circumstances, remains difficult. The required templates are scarcely available for the daughter. All children try to adopt the templates that their parents consider legitimate, but they also move around and within them – and, not least, against them.

The change of location becomes an opportunity to reconstruct one's own history. Although this history describes personal details and uses concrete outlines as a basis, it is at the same time emblematic and characteristic (albeit fragmentary). After all, migration almost always implies such things as a change of language, political systems, working environments, leisure activities and so on. Orientation towards the ordinary has the function of protection and security. But it is also demanding and has its price. In order to be able to visit relatives in Slovakia, for example, the parents have to write an apology to the country from which they originally fled.

Laid out on top of each other and differentiated by color, the eighteen floor plans become a jagged bundle, a collage in large-format that becomes a work of geometric art.

Cultural institutions are an unconscious alignment to the prevailing norms and procedures, the established forms of interaction, the diverse ways of speaking and thinking that appear legitimate. Cultural institutions are ambivalent because, on the one hand, they create order and stability. But on the other hand, they only create more security for as long as very many things remain very much the same. They promote a relentless orientation towards what already exists and therefore always have something affirmative about them. This negative connotation of accommodating oneself to given circumstances has long dominated Critical Theory and philosophical debates about culture. For Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, the "materialistic acceptance of the status quo and private egotism"<sup>3</sup> appears above all as a structural compulsion: participating in order not to perish. For Herbert Marcuse, too, it is the "the new technological work-world" that forces a "weakening of the negative position of the working class."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum 1989), 214.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (London and New York: Routledge), 35.

Nevertheless – and precisely because such constraints are not seen as natural in either cause or effect – there is no doubt that there is also a failure here. The "social and cultural integration of the laboring class with capitalist society"<sup>5</sup> was also the work of the working class itself. The process of accommodation and integration as process and work never completely escapes the responsibility of the subjects.

## II.

The cultural institution is a question of dealing with norms and a question of positioning in social space. But this also takes place on a small scale and can be reflected in such things as interiors and furnishings. The fact that cultural institutions can also be a question of concrete home furnishings is not yet as evident in *dichtegeschichte (densestory)*, although we still see the folding couch and a plastic Christmas tree. But the (residential) spatial dimension of the cultural institution is more evident in the multi-part photo series *Family* [WVZ 80 / 2010]. Where just like children playing as ghosts the adult figures stand there covered in sheets in their respective living rooms, bedrooms and dining rooms. And as the ghosts that they are, they do not engage in everyday activities. They merely stand in their interior, with their furnishings reflecting their dreams, regardless of the role they play in these dreams, whether they have been realized or not. They are ghosts.<sup>6</sup>

The false ceiling decorated with pseudo-stucco in the bedroom, the red-orange wallpaper on the wall behind the marital bed with the fantasy motif, the laminate flooring in what is most likely the dining room, the traditional decorative plates hanging on the kitchen wall, the IKEA mugs on the cup stand – all these furnishing details are the congealed consumption of cultural goods. And then the contrast of the daughter standing in a room amidst piles of books with all the shelves filled to the brim, her bare feet are on wooden parquet instead of laminate, a repurposed toolbox as a side table, a laptop on a modern desk. No trace of her parents' taste. The furnishing motifs change, both in form and content.

## III.

In this way we are not condemned to accept the way we live and furnish our world as given. We may be their heirs, but we are not at their mercy. The anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker wrote in *Nationalism and Culture* (1937): "However fully man may recognize cosmic laws he will never be able to change them, because they are not his work. But every form of his social existence, every social institution which the past has bestowed on him as a legacy from remote ancestors, is the work of men and can be changed by

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>6</sup> Editor's note: See images in this catalogue [WVZ 80/1] on pp. 131-133, as well as images [WVZ 80/2 - my mother's family] on page 144, note 11.

human will and action or made to serve new ends."<sup>7</sup> One way to start the transformation is to continuously re-appropriate what we have inherited. The inherited templates can be twisted and turned, at least for the time being. Perhaps then they can also be used for new purposes. This process is roughly what Pierre Bourdieu described as the "appropriation of cultural products,"<sup>8</sup> which is full of preconditions and tends to reproduce the social, but always also harbors new potential. It is an active process. It is described, discussed and communicated in sociology, but in a different form also in literature and art. Artistic works are not only consumed as cultural goods themselves, but can also demonstrate the consumption of (other) cultural goods, making this comprehensible and experienceable in a different way, mediated by their own methods, forms and procedures.

Bajtala's works are distinctly close to what has been described in recent years as auto-fictional and auto-sociobiographical literature, which to some extent was recently given official cultural recognition with the Nobel Prize awarded to the writer Annie Ernaux. The narrative is *sociobiographical* through its explicit embedding in social processes and movements shared with others (here, for example, the flight to the West, system change, or, in the case of Eribon and Ernaux, the change of class and milieu); it is fictional in that it is presented as a specific story of people who are not necessarily real figures, like ghosts, but who are nevertheless grounded in reality, firmly standing on the linoleum tile of facts. Moreover, such episodes can always be about an appropriation of the "fragmentary history" that Gramsci observed (which Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse perhaps underestimated).

But it was not only Ernaux and Eribon who linked literary forms with sociology and sociological analysis. Honoré de Balzac also used "a form of description based on small things and details, that aims at a general characterization of the figures."<sup>9</sup> In Balzac's work, biographical traces are interwoven with pop-cultural patterns, and concrete objects and furnishings with general descriptions of milieus, and so on.<sup>10</sup> This is the foundation of a tradition of artistic appropriation of the world that assembles and mixes, combines style, content and perspectives. (In this respect, one could think of Balzac along the lines of hip-hop and conceptual art). Art can create a new level of comprehensibility through constructed and pictorial comprehension.

Indeed, Bajtala's works often do this, as did some of Allan Sekula's earlier works. In his photo-text work *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), the US-American artist depicts, among other things, fragments of the furnishings in his parents' living rooms and describes the entire series of black and white images in the accompanying text as "photographed ideology." A worldview illustrated in image-text variations. The Swiss artist Ariane

---

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, trans. Ray Chase (Los Angeles: Rocker Publications Committee, 1937), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 228.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Mayer, "Nachwort," in: Honoré de Balzac: *Theorie des Gehens*. [1833] (Berlin: Friedenauer Presse/Matthes & Seitz), 175–248, here 191.

<sup>10</sup> Compare: Jens Kastner, "Bourdieu mit Balzac. Impulse für eine kritische Soziologie in der realistischen Literatur" in: *WestEnd. Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 18. Jg., Heft 1/ 2021, S. 185–200.

Anderegggen (together with Ted Gaier) has also undertaken a journey into her own past in her film *Klassenverhältnisse am Bodensee* (2022). This too is a story of origin that dissects the social milieu and reconstitutes it in images from the past (and mixes them with other 'moving' pictures and poignant images). We constantly encounter people who have settled into a system of relationships "in which their instinct tells them where they belong" (Anderegggen/Gaier).

#### IV.

Paradoxically, artists like Sekula, Anderegggen and Bajtala break through the structural individualism that prevails in the field of art, at least on one level, by artistically processing their own history. Their practice does not involve purging the artistic work of all that is external to art. The concentrated elaboration of abstract colors and forms upon which modern art had established itself plays a subordinate role. The effect is paradoxical because it is precisely through reference to the self that liberal individualism is rejected. For in the socio-biographical narratives and visual languages, the narrated ego is integrated. It is accommodated and accommodating, in both a personal and an institutional sense.

As part of an exhibition at Kunstraum Weikendorf, Bajtala had quotes from *dichteschichte (densestory)* printed on signs that were placed around trees and streetlamps like election advertisements in public spaces. There is one such sign in front of the Raiffeisenbank in white lettering on a black background, which reads in a very location-specific (as well as milieu- and gender-specific) way<sup>11</sup>: "My father spends the money. He invites everyone at the pub for a drink. My mother and I don't order anything. We save wherever we can." (4/5). Transferring the interior spaces of one's own past into the small-town exterior space is a way of using art to constitute a contemporary public sphere that embraces and realigns cultural institutions.



12

---

<sup>11</sup> Editor's note: See image in this catalogue on p. 259

<sup>12</sup> *Family 2* [WVZ 80/21, 6 photographs, my mother's family, 2010

I see the sea for  
the very first time  
at the age of eigh-  
teen. I see the  
horizon, hear the  
waves, get sunburn.  
Life is beautiful.

(room 4 / 9)