

The book cover features a stylized, expressionist illustration. A woman in a purple and pink dress with a large bow on her back is the central figure, looking over her shoulder. Below her, several men in suits are depicted, some smoking cigarettes. The background is dark, and the overall style is reminiscent of early 20th-century German art.

*Mila Ganeva*

# WOMEN IN WEIMAR FASHION

DISCOURSES AND DISPLAYS IN GERMAN CULTURE, 1918-1933

# Women in Weimar Fashion

## Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918–1933

Mila Ganeva

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M. G.  
September 2007



# Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: On Fashion, Women, and Modernity	1

## Discourses on Fashion

1: The Fashion Journalist: <i>Flâneur</i> or New Woman?	21
2: Fashion Journalism at Ullstein House	50
3: In the Waiting Room of Literature: Helen Grund and the Practice of Fashion and Travel Writing	84

## Displays of Fashion

4: Weimar Film as Fashion Show	113
5: The Mannequins	151
6: Fashion and Fiction: Women's Modernity in Irmgard Keun's Novel <i>Gilgi</i>	171

Epilogue	192
----------	-----

Appendix I: Biographical Information on Fashion Journalists and Fashion Illustrators	197
--	-----

Appendix II: A List of German Feature Films about Fashion from the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s	203
--	-----

Works Cited	205
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Index	227
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## Illustrations

1. Ola Alsen. <i>Reichshandbuch der deutschen Gesellschaft</i> , vol. 1, 1930	22
2. Elsa Herzog. <i>Reichshandbuch der deutschen Gesellschaft</i> , vol. 1, 1930	23
3. Illustration by Petra [Fiedler]. <i>Die Dame</i> , May 1924, no. 16, 15	59
4. "The Fashion Staff of <i>Die Dame</i> ." <i>Die Dame</i> , Nov. 1920, no. 4, 8	60
5. Fashion illustrator Vally Reinecke. <i>Die Dame</i> , Apr. 1921, no. 13, 16	61
6. Fashion journalist Lily von Nagy. <i>Die Dame</i> , Nov. 1924, no. 3, 5	63
7. Fashion illustrator Petra Fiedler in a sweater of her own design. <i>Die Dame</i> , Dec. 1927, no. 6, 58	64
8. Fashion journalist Anita [Anita Daniel]. <i>Die Dame</i> , Jul. 1930, no. 22, 36	65
9. Illustration by Ernst Dryden. <i>Die Dame</i> , Mar. 1926, no. 13, 5	75
10. Page from <i>Für die Frau</i> , 1928, no. 5, 11	95
11. Page from <i>Für die Frau</i> , 1929, no. 6, 8	96
12. Asta Nielsen in <i>Die Geliebte Roswolskys</i> (Roswolsky's Mistress, 1921)	115
13. The fashion salon in <i>Der Fürst von Pappenheim</i> (Prince of Pappenheim, 1927)	123
14. Brigitte Helm featured in <i>Vogue</i> (German edition), 27 Mar. 1929, 37	132
15. Brigitte Helm in <i>Die Yacht der sieben Sünden</i> (The Yacht of Seven Sins, 1928)	133
16. Hilde Zimmermann as a fashion queen. <i>Elegante Welt</i> , 12 Jan. 1927, 36	136
17. The Award Ceremony for Fashion Queen Hilde Zimmermann. <i>Der Querschnitt</i> 1 (Jan. 1927): 71	138
18. Brigitte Helm on the second cover in <i>Elegante Welt</i> , 16 Sept. 1929	140
19. Presentation of fashion for individual clients. <i>Scherl's Magazin</i> , Feb. 1930	155

20. Fashion show in the display window of a department store. <i>Scherl's Magazin</i> , Jun. 1930	157
21. Curt Bois surrounded by mannequins in <i>Der Fürst von Pappenheim</i> (Prince of Pappenheim, 1927)	164

## Introduction: On Fashion, Women, and Modernity

I was surprised to discover that the Berlin woman is less conservative [than the modern Viennese woman]. She quickly embraces the new fashions, likes to experiment, and has access to some of the best designer salons.

— Eva [Ea von Allesch], “Modespaziergang in Berlin” (1920)

The Berlin fashion season has gone mad — it is not a season any more, but a permanent wave.

— *Vogue*, German Edition (1928)

THIS IS A BOOK about women's fashions and the various ways they were displayed, worn, created, and discussed in the public sphere of Weimar Germany. It focuses primarily on the years 1918–33 and limits its scope to Berlin and its sartorial practices, because, as the two statements quoted above suggest, it was there and then, in the German metropolis of the 1920s, that the most dazzling spectacles and spirited debates about women's fashion took place. During that long decade Berlin's numerous department stores regularly staged lavish shows in their display windows (Modenschau), organized frequent contests to determine the best model (Modekonkurrenz), and invited their customers to weekly fashion teas (Modentee). If the Berlin woman wanted to look fashionable, she had more choices than ever. If she could afford it, she could place an order for something custom-tailored and imported from Paris or designed in one of Berlin's exquisite fashion salons. Or she could buy a mass-produced knock-off that was less expensive and thus more affordable for the growing numbers of the middle classes. Or — probably the most likely scenario — she could sew her own clothes with the help of sewing patterns and the cheaper synthetic materials that became popular in the 1920s, like rayon and acetate (known as *Kunstseide*, or artificial silk). Finally, whatever their fashion practices, Weimar women got plentiful practical advice, inspiration, and expert guidance: They browsed the dozens of new illustrated magazines to which many female fashion journalists were contributing, or went to the movies to watch films often scripted by fashion journalists and took notice of what their favorite actresses were wearing.

Writing about Weimar fashion means writing about Weimar women. Fashion became central to women's experience of modernity, not only by being such a ubiquitous presence in their everyday lives, but also by allowing them to participate actively in its variegated practices in record numbers,

both professionally — as journalists, illustrators, designers, photographers, models, and shop assistants — and for pleasure — as consumers, moviegoers, spectators, or simply window-shoppers. In Weimar Germany fashion was not only, as the conventional wisdom would have it, manipulatively employed by the various mass media — film, magazines, advertising, photography, and popular literature; it also emerged as a powerful medium for the autonomous self-expression of women. They were drawn into an already existing male-dominated philosophical and sociological tradition of debating fashion and modernity, a tradition associated with the names of Georg Simmel, Thorsten Veblen, and Werner Sombart. While the male theorists were abstractly interested in fashion's function within capitalism, their female counterparts in the 1920s were involved — through their writing — primarily in “self-fashioning,” that is, creating and interpreting their own fashionable images. In addition to being the principal consumers of fashion, women offered their own original definitions of the categories of fashion and modernity based on immediate experiences and practices of fashion in their everyday lives. For example, female writers and journalists engaged in a challenging self-reflective commentary on the current styles, and by regularly publishing on these topics in the popular press they transformed traditional literary and journalistic genres and carved out a significant public space for themselves. Thus Weimar fashion helped shape a public sphere within which the female practitioners were transformed from objects of male voyeurism into active subjects of the complex, ambivalent, and constantly shifting experience of metropolitan modernity.

Weimar modernity, of which fashion is a key component, is commonly associated with the conditions of urban life that became prevalent in Germany after the First World War. It had its roots in the rapid advance of rationalized modes of work, living, and transportation and was associated with the mass production and mass circulation of goods, services, and images. The increasing democratization of social life, advances in gender equality, and women's increased access to the public sphere also had a strong influence on Weimar modernity. When the monarchy collapsed in 1918, a pluralistic political order was established, a new constitution was passed, and women were granted the right to vote.<sup>1</sup> As a result of a number of economic and social cataclysms in the wake of the war, during the Weimar Republic women also began to enter the work force and public life in greater numbers than ever. According to Frevert, there were almost 1.5 million female white-collar workers in 1925 — three times as many as in 1907 — whereas overall there were over 1.7 million more women in full-time employment than in 1907.<sup>2</sup> Despite persisting patterns of overt and covert discrimination, work outside the home meant increased freedom of movement, as well as more disposable income to spend on personal needs and entertainment. Between 1924 and 1929, in the period of relative material prosperity and economic stability following the implementation of

the Dawes plan, women's presence in labor and leisure, in production and consumption, reached a peak.

Among the most visible manifestations of the impact of modernity on daily life were the radical changes in women's fashions. As more women entered into office and service-related professions, they needed clothing that would be both comfortable and presentable all day at the work place and that would also allow them to move around the city on foot or using public transportation. These modern demands were met by the functional styles that spread quickly, not only in Germany but also throughout Europe and North America. Women took off their corsets, cropped their hair, and fell in love with the pageboy haircut (Bubikopf); furthermore, they put on pants or wore dresses with lower waistlines, which suppressed the previously cherished features of sumptuous femininity such as large hips, a slender waist, and a lavish bust. The most provocative change in women's appearance was the shortening of the hem: by 1924, for the first time in the history of Western dress, skirts rose to knee level, and they remained there until the end of the decade. The shortened hemlines showed off legs in flesh-colored, transparent silk stockings, which was another fashion novelty that has persisted up till now. In short, it was during the 1920s that women began to live and dress in a way that we can identify with today. Anne Hollander's succinct characterization of these complex transformations of women's fashion as observed in Paris and New York applies very much to the Berlin fashion scene:

It was during those brief four years [1924–29] that the new feminine image acquired its final perfection and lasting frame. All the “modern” possibilities for female looks were at last firmly indicated: the visual possibilities for simple, abstract shapes in the design of women's clothes, analogous to those used in male dress; and the possibilities for reduction of the bulk of flesh and hair as well as of fabric, for exposure of skin and indication of bodily movements. The late twenties set the standard for all these, a standard to which subsequent fashion still refers, despite variations in feminine fashion since then.<sup>3</sup>

While the visible changes in fashion during the 1920s have been thoroughly examined by costume historians, another new, “modern” phenomenon of that period has often been overlooked. Hollander calls it “society's heightened self-consciousness and self-descriptiveness” in matters of fashion and defines it as a “new knowledge that the way clothes looked was central to the way life was lived” (110). Indeed, the new styles not only served a functional purpose in the daily lives of the thousands of Weimar women working outside of their homes but also became part of their modern identity as independent subjects and, to a certain extent, a necessity that they could not ignore even if they wanted to. As Siegfried Kracauer emphasized in his 1929 sociological study *The Salaried Masses* (*Die*

*Angestellten*), quotidian practices such as fashion and sports were shaping the culture of salaried employees in the last years of the Weimar Republic. Without a “pleasant appearance,” which included stylish attire, tasteful makeup, and an up-to-date haircut, female office and store employees could not hope to get promoted or even keep their jobs.<sup>4</sup> At the same time women were able to indulge in the new fashions, since they now had income of their own and leisure time to spend at the new venues of mass entertainment — the cinemas, cabarets, dance halls, and beaches in and around Berlin. These changes in work and entertainment patterns help to explain not only why a huge 25 percent of the average income in Weimar Germany was spent on clothing, but also why highly visible 1920s fashions became a central issue in unprecedented public discussions.<sup>5</sup>

The specificity of women’s experience of modernity in the Weimar Republic cannot be understood without considering the unique role of Germany’s garment industry in the production and dissemination of fashion. If France was best known for its *haute couture*, Germany became famous worldwide for its thriving *Konfektion*, the ready-to-wear clothing industry that was centered in Berlin. As early as the mid-nineteenth century the idea of wearing fashionable clothes spread among the middle and even the lower urban classes, which were growing rapidly in Germany’s biggest metropolis. Following the Emancipation Edict of 1812, which granted equal civil rights to Jews in Prussia, trained tailors and salesmen from Brandenburg, Pomerania, Silesia, and East Prussia moved in droves to Berlin in search of employment or to start their own garment businesses. Jewish-owned companies such as Valentin Mannheimer, David Leib Levin, Rudolph Hertzog, and Herrmann Gerson launched a rationalized manufacturing process for men’s and women’s clothing; they opened salons and department stores that sold not only high-fashion but also mass-produced clothing at fixed sizes and prices.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-1920s Berlin’s *Konfektion* was an essential branch of Germany’s economy, a leader in domestic sales as well as exports, especially in the area of female clothing (*Damenkonfektion*).<sup>7</sup> In 1927 there were around eight hundred firms in Berlin specializing in the manufacture and sales of women’s ready-to-wear, and *Konfektion* employed over a third of the city’s work force, producing fashion for the masses along with exquisite designer clothing. Most of the exports went to the Netherlands, Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark, the USA, and France.

Since the fashion-conscious public liked to take its cue from France, the salons of Berlin’s *Konfektion* were geared not only to creating their own lines of high fashion but also to importing, emulating, and adapting Paris styles. Berlin companies sent designers to Paris to observe what women were wearing in fashion shows, on the streets, at the races, and in the theater, and upon their return to Germany, they transformed expensive *haute couture* creations into more affordable, mass-produced, off-the-rack

garments with French flair. As it broke down the aura of the unique high-fashion item into the multiplicity of mass-manufactured products, the Berlin *Konfektion* of the 1910s and 1920s came to epitomize many of the commercial, cultural, and national tensions of Weimar Germany — between creativity and business, between elitist exclusivity and mass appeal, between individuality and uniformity. These tensions were also present in other spheres of cultural production credited with democratizing the experience of modernity, such as film, the illustrated press, and popular literature.

If the term “modernity” refers to the material context of the Weimar years, “Weimar modernism” refers to the unique cultural production that came to flourish during the period. Modernist literature, art, photography, film, architecture, and design articulated a wide variety of aesthetic responses to the dramatic effects of modernity on people’s lives. During the last twenty years or so the field of German Studies has produced numerous insightful investigations of Weimar modernity and modernism;<sup>8</sup> however, the emphasis has rarely been on fashion alone, because it is generally considered a superficial or ephemeral phenomenon, not a serious expression of modernity like other creative practices such as literature, architecture, film, or fine art.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, fashion is so multifaceted that it is difficult to determine which scholarly discipline may claim the primary right to study it.<sup>10</sup> Fashion can be many things at the same time — an object, a piece of clothing, a combination of textiles and seams — but it is also an expression of individual taste and social status, an interface between the body and its environment, a site for production and consumption. It is an image, a representation, in photographs, drawings, on the silver screen, and described in literature, but it is also a living practice, both spectacular and routine, cyclical and novel, allying itself now with a cosmopolitan spirit, now with nationalist traditions. Women’s fashion encompasses an array of heterogeneous everyday practices that inspire, shape, and clarify the emergence of modern agents. In this book I use the analysis of selected representations and discussions of fashion in the pages of the popular press, in literary texts, and in films as a starting point from which to map out a cultural history of Weimar modernity centered around women as fashion journalists, professional models, and avid but critical consumers of fashionable images in the mass media. At the same time I consider unfairly neglected subgenres within Weimar journalism, literature, and film — the fashion column (*Mode-Notizen*, *Modeplauderei*), popular novels set in the *Konfektion* milieu, and the fashion farce (*Konfektionskomödie*) — and reevaluate their relatively marginal status vis-à-vis now canonical works of Weimar modernism.

Among the diverse existing approaches to the study of Weimar modernism, three theoretical studies have offered constant productive dialogue during my effort to define Weimar fashion and fashion practices as central to women’s experience of modernity. The first was a direct result of the



realization that for too long modernism was associated exclusively with the products of high art and that its study has been kept strictly separate from any interest in popular art or low and mass culture. In his groundbreaking *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986), Andreas Huyssen points out the historical reasons for excluding the products of commercial mass culture (popular literature, film, illustrated magazines) from the study of canonical modernism: in essence they were seen as inferior, feminine, and threatening. He argues that if we continue to maintain the strict boundary between high art and mass culture, our understanding of modernity and modernism becomes increasingly sterile and incapable of grasping fully the cultural phenomena of our contemporary surroundings.<sup>11</sup> My study of the rise of popular Weimar fashions and fashion practices and their impact on the aesthetics of literary and filmic representation contributes to a new theoretical paradigm, exploring Weimar modernity in the mixed and often contradictory multiplicity of its origins, meanings, and influences rooted in both the vernacular and the avant-garde.

Another approach that has informed my work was first formulated by Patrice Petro in her pioneering monograph on women and melodramatic representation in Weimar Germany, *Joyless Streets* (1989).<sup>12</sup> Both in her reconstruction of historic debates about mass culture and modernism and in her close readings of Weimar cinema, the illustrated press, and photo-journalism, Petro consistently draws attention to questions of intertextuality. For example, she always explores the media institutions in Weimar and their various cultural productions (films, texts, images) with an eye to the multiple relationships among them. While her analysis of intertextual connections is geared primarily toward understanding the representations of gender and spectatorship in mass culture, I shift the focus toward a broader cultural-historical reconstruction of women's position as agents of Weimar modernity. Thus my analysis of a heterogeneous body of primary materials — literary texts, journalistic accounts, and films — traces the emerging figure of the fashion practitioner who is not only being observed but is an insightful observer and commentator herself, who is not only a media representation but an influential producer of opinions and shaper of experience as well.

And finally, I have benefited from Janet Ward's more recent *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (2001), which more comprehensively than any other study examines literal and conceptual expressions of *surface* — architecture, advertising, film, and fashion — in Weimar modernity and reassesses them according to their own merits. Ward points out that the Germany of the 1920s offers “a stunning moment of modernity when surface values first ascended to become determinants of taste, activity, and occupation” and that a reengagement with those modern elements would help us understand how they still