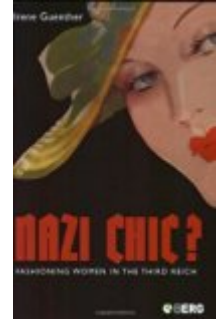


Irene Guenther. *Nazi Chic?: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich.* Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004. 320 S. \$31.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-85973-717-0.



Reviewed by Yvonne Houy

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Irene Guenther's book on fashion during National Socialism is a treasure trove for those interested in women and aesthetic politics from the Weimar Republic through National Socialism. Her remarkably broad book on fashion during National Socialism places an underappreciated topic in the public eye by arguing persuasively about the political and economical importance of modern fashion in Nazi Germany. The breadth and depth of her writing on fashion in Germany from the First to the Second World War has no rival in materials published in either German or English, and the author has unearthed some remarkable, difficult to access primary source materials for some of her chapters. If there is anything to criticize about this well-written, well-received work, it is that her researched materials are more interesting than her stated conclusions. In her explanation of the phenomena she describes--the existence of modern fashion during National Socialism--Guenther chose not to forge new ground, nor engage with some key research about modern-looking women, but returned to the safety of reaffirming a twenty-year-old theory.

Guenther reiterates Hans Dieter Schaefer's influential thesis that National Socialism was characterized by a Janus-faced "split consciousness" (*gespaltenes Bewusstsein*), in which modern consumer goods like Coca-Cola and Volkswagen survived and even thrived because of what Schaefer called a "tolerance" toward an "unpolitical sphere" (*Duldung einer politikfreien Sphäre*).[1] Guenther argues that fashions considered modern by the international Western community survived and thrived during National Socialism because of the Nazi regime's Janus-face, which allowed the existence of modern fashions next to the female ideal she and many other (but not all) researchers see as the "most promoted" (p. 11) National Socialist female ideal: the dirndl-clad, make-up free, hair-in-bun Germanic woman. According to Guenther, attempts to refashion women into any kind of unique "German" type failed, partly because no single definition of "German fashion" emerged. The cause for the impasse lies for Guenther in the following: institutional infighting within the poly-cratic party and Hitler's refusal to take an official stand on how the German female ideal should look (although it was well known that he pre-

ferred women in modern dress and make-up). Interestingly, what Guenther cites and describes shows that modern fashions were more than merely "tolerated" in an "unpolitical sphere"--indeed, she argues convincingly that fashion was highly politicized and shows how contemporary fashion was heavily promoted by some prominent National Socialists--pointing to a turn that could be an interesting twist on Schaefer's important insights, but which Guenther's book does not ultimately take.

While many of Guenther's readers might still have that old stereotype of the *dirndl* and "Gretchenzopf" National Socialist female ideal, a number of notable researchers interested in women during National Socialism--including Ute Frevert, Leila Rupp, Sabine Hake and Thomas Elsaesser[2]--have written about the importance of modern-looking women for National Socialism for three decades, arguing that images of modern-looking women were politically important--perhaps more than the *dirndl*-clad stereotype. In her approachable writing, Guenther unfortunately does not engage with those arguments.

Guenther does engage with a broad palette of other relevant research, however: in her book she covers more ground than any other researcher on this topic. She treats fashion debates from World War I to National Socialism (particularly the love-hate relationship of the German fashion observers with the dominant Parisian fashion industry), the well-known controversies over the Weimar "New Woman," the antisemitic slant of National Socialist debates over clothing and the Aryanization of the German clothing industry during the Third Reich. She writes at length about "fashioning women in the Third Reich." On this topic, she argues that the political importance of German-designed modern fashions was to promote the illusion of continuity after the National Socialist takeover in 1933. However, this illusion of continued consumerism became impossible for the average German woman after the war broke

out. Fashion was economically important as well, because German-made popular fashion was seen to help in the autarky drive of the 1930s by displacing the popularity of Parisian fashions; indeed, in the war years it was seen as a useful export article in the effort to obtain scarce hard currencies. Guenther includes a separate chapter on fashion during World War II, contrasting the horrifying conditions of the concentration camps and the hardships of the war-ravaged German population with haute couture shows put on by the Nazi elite. Her case study of the German National Fashion Institute breaks new ground, adding many important details to previous publications on this Nazi-sponsored haute couture design studio and its ambitious plans to take the world by storm (echoing Hitler's plans for world domination) with its innovative materials, and German made (but secretly still Paris-inspired) fashions.

Given the extraordinarily broad background on fashion in Germany in this book, it would have been interesting to read Guenther's reaction to recent research in women's appearance that escaped her attention. Fashion was as central to female stardom in National Socialist film as in Hollywood film, and thought-provoking essays by Hake and Elsaesser use this topic, among others, to ask new questions and advance new theories about the role of modern aesthetics in National Socialism. For example, if Guenther had engaged with Elsaesser's insight that the frequent appearance of modern women in film during National Socialism acted as "lifestyle propaganda"--propaganda that showed that National Socialism was continuing to provide Germany with the most modern consumer goods--her arguments would have been richer. I would have been particularly interested to read her reaction to my dissertation about debates on modern-looking women, including their fashion and cosmetics, during National Socialism. On the basis of much of the same background research, but with a different emphasis on primary sources than that of Guenther's work, I argued that for political and economic reasons

two feminine ideals coexisted side by side during National Socialism--a traditional Germanic female ideal, represented in various traditional *Trachten* (including the dirndl) and a modern-looking German woman who would be considered fashionable in Western cosmopolitan centers. I agreed with Frevert that advocating only an anachronistic traditional female ideal like the *völkisch*-supported woman wearing a *Tracht* would have been politically disastrous for the Nazi Party, and argued that in the highly polarized Germany of the 1930s, modern-looking women would have been lifestyle propaganda for those in German society still excited by modernity and its cultural and consumerist promise. I found much evidence that Goebbels and Ley and their respective institutions were among those in the polycratic Nazi party who openly advocated a modern-looking German woman as a National Socialist female ideal.[3]

Engagement with such recent insights on the debates about and images of modern-looking women during National Socialism would have made this readable book even more valuable for readers interested in visual culture and women during National Socialism.

Notes

[1]. Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das Gespaltene Bewußtsein: Über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit 1933-1945* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1984), p. 174.

[2]. Ute Frevert, *FrauenGeschichte: Zwischen Bürgerlicher Verbesserung und Neuer Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 251; Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Sabine Hake, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

[3]. Yvonne Houy, "'Of course the German Woman should be modern': The Modernization of

Women's Appearance during National Socialism" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2002).

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