

***Film and Fashion amidst the Ruins of Berlin: From Nazism to the Cold War*, by Mila Ganeva. Random House, 2018, 256 pp.**

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Over the past ten years, Mila Ganeva has written two books in the series *Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual* published by Camden House. Both studies map German visual culture in relation to female agency, starting with the Weimar years, 1918–1933, in the first book, and moving on to what the Germans call the “long decade”, stretching from 1939–1955, in the second. In the latter volume, Ganeva focuses on film and fashion from the perspective of German female consumers and spectators, and it is immediately obvious that her engagement with cinema is presented without any auxiliary theoretical discussion regarding the remit of either mass culture or visual studies. In particular, the study would have benefitted from a short introduction of the “rubble film” (films set in a city or landscape of ruins), preferably based on Robert Shandley’s study, which is also referenced in the book’s bibliography. I find it particularly odd that she does not link her own study more intimately with Hester Baer’s work on the topic in order to map out her subject matter for the reader, in the introductory chapter (*Dismantling*; “Film”).

In terms of content, *Film and Fashion Amidst the Ruins of Berlin: From Nazism to the Cold War* consists of five chapters, and two case studies which Ganeva calls “Vignettes”. Additionally, there are two appendices, one containing biographical notes on principal costume and fashion designers, the second a filmography. Given the dual focus points of the book’s primary materials, the film and fashion industries, Ganeva’s case studies revolve around the designer Charlotte Glückstein and the postwar mega film star Hildegard Knef. The chapters deal chronologically with the evolution of German visual culture during a very troubled and difficult time, beginning with a general presentation of fashion in film and print media between 1939–1944.

Having read the book, it is clear that the study’s *initial* premise to explore the “continuities, the commonality, and the interrelations across historical and ideological dividing lines, as well as the synergistic connections between the fashion and film industries” is not met in the conclusion (10). In view of the resulting study, this premise would however surely have been adjusted, had the text been subject to proper editing. As it stands now, it is my contention that Ganeva presents a more fitting premise for her study in Chapter 3, where she discusses female agency in relation to the effort by the film and fashion industries to visually shape the German “female spectators’ modes of self-perception” during the war effort, followed by the task to open up their minds to postwar consumer behaviour after the war (87). Urban societies were mainly populated by women during and after the war. Ganeva’s book, thus, maps out a seminal segment of German women’s history in modern times, especially in view of the work

she has already accomplished with the publication of the book on Weimar women and their application of fashion as a self-authoring practice.

The above embedded premise to visually shape the German “female spectators’ modes of self-perception” comes to the fore in the first chapter, which revolves around two binary topics: fashion as an instance of vicarious consumption, and its relation to the German female consumer. Ganeva writes interestingly on Nazi Germany’s objective to conjure “imaginary consumption” among its female citizens through a persistent remediation of fashion in both printed media and entertainment films. This approach was designed to curb the distress caused by the extensive clothes and food rationing which had been put in place in 1939. However, despite all the detailed information on the production situation for the fashion and film industry in Germany at the time, this chapter does not present a serious problematisation and discussion of its main topic which is how this vicarious consumption translated into a daily dress practice in relation to the female consumer. What is more, Ganeva uses Thorstein Veblen’s term “vicarious consumption” without any firm declaration of how she understands it and intends to apply it to her first materials (film and fashion), in the book. In her discussion of Nazi Germany’s 1939 call for a “fashion of the future emerging from Berlin,” she points to the concept’s “imaginary quality, its virtual existence on the pages of magazines only, and its inaccessibility to the city’s actual consumers” (29). This statement is, of course, an embedded definition of her reading of vicarious consumption in relation to fashion in Chapter 1, but she does not let the notion evolve along with the chronological exposé of her materials in the following chapters, despite the fact that this particular reading of the notion clearly applies to the topics under discussion in several of them. The lack of clarity regarding the study’s application of Veblen’s concept and how it interacts with Ganeva’s primary materials thus adds to the confusion regarding how film and fashion helped shape the German female spectators’ modes of self-perception during “the long decade”. In order to obtain a more forthcoming implementation of Veblen’s notion during (almost) the same period in Germany, I therefore recommend Irene Guenther’s excellent essay on the fashioning of Berlin between 1945–1952. Guenther’s pointed reading of vicarious consumption as distraction, wilful amnesia or simple *Wünschträume* (wish dreams) alone goes a long way when it comes to honing the reader’s awareness of the German women’s situation (407).

Ganeva’s book is the result of several years of archival studies pertaining to costume and fashion history in film. All primary materials are painstakingly referenced, and translations of all citations dutifully listed in the notes, but still, important themes in the fashion press, mentioned in Chapter 2, are left without further comment. Due to a lack of necessary contextualisation, Ganeva’s own archival findings are also somehow left hanging in the air, suggesting that this book would have benefitted from a closer discursive interaction with other publications on this particular historical period, such as Guenther’s. Such a dialogue would surely have provided the reader with a better understanding of, for instance, “the transition years” 1945–1949, explaining why and how so many of the personalities making up Ganeva’s account either resurfaced after the war and resumed their film or fashion practice without any further questions asked, or kept on working during the entire long decade, as if the consequences of the Nazi regime never happened. From a similar point of view, the book’s main topic, the fashion and film cultures between 1939 and 1955, needs to be framed within a larger perspective in order for the readers to follow Ganeva’s explication of their evolvment. In my opinion, the fashion perspective of Ganeva’s study, for instance, does away with the “Aryanisation” of the fabric and dress industry far too casually, given the reader’s possible lack of knowledge regarding the specifics of this criminal action by the Nazi regime. Her exposé of the fashion and textile scene would also have gained considerably from a contextualising

discussion about the geographic re/location of the “Konfektion” district after the war, and the effects of it on Germany’s postwar fashion industry. In my view, a short introduction of the production historical background is missing here, along with a more compassionate and circumscribing account of the social conditions and hardships evinced by ordinary German women at the time.

To her credit, Ganeva’s chapter on the effect of Christian Dior’s introduction of the New Look (1947) on postwar German consumer culture and mass media is more readable. Beginning with a comparative study of two films, the chapter moves on to a discussion of German costume designers’ take on the New Look and ends with the real “New Look Girls”. Here Ganeva almost makes the common quest for an elegant apparel in postwar Germany perceptible. Irene Guenther again fruitfully broadens this discussion by remarking that most ordinary German women actually were quite critical of Dior’s (re)introduction of long skirts and slim waists, in view of the country’s persistent material shortages and lack of private spending money—the so-called *Krieg der Röcke* (war against skirts) (411). Ganeva’s discussion of the two films embracing Dior’s New Look, the DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) production *Street Acquaintances* (*Straßenbekanntschaft*, Peter Pewas, 1948), and *Martina* (Arthur Maria Rabenalt, 1948), made in West Germany, however points to interesting similarities between them regarding media stardom, vicarious consumer culture, and the image of the self-assertive modern woman. Both film industries actually embraced the New Look, although the ideological divisions between their production concepts were evident.

The result of the emerging ideological divide between the two systems is put to the fore in the last chapter, entitled “Consuming Fashion on the Screens of the Early 1950s: *Modell Bianka* (1951), *Frauenschicksale* (1952), and *Ingrid: Die Geschichte eiens Fotomodells* (1955)”. This chapter offers a very interesting discussion on the premises for fashion consumption among German women by revisiting these films from the early 1950s; two DEFA productions and one made in West Germany. Was it symptomatic of the time that any film dealing with female consumption of fashion in the West was only considered as trivial, and therefore played out as a comedy, whereas a similar narrative outline resulted in a drama and ideological propaganda in East Germany? Although all three films revolve around how German women should ideally negotiate the commodity world as average consumers, it is a fact that only West Germany went ahead to become economically prosperous and enjoyed an overall consumption boom. The East German regime centralised and rationed all consumption, making it extremely difficult for any consumer to obtain proper clothing, not to mention shoes (Ganeva 146–47). According to Ganeva, the effects of these differences in real life economic politics are obscured in the films, mainly in terms of their narrative, but also cinematically by incorporating documentary footage of a propagandistic nature in DEFA’s *Modell Bianka* (Richard Groschopp, 1951).

In terms of fashion display, the most remarkable item in all films discussed by Ganeva must have been the *Verwandlungskleid* “Bianka” in *Modell Bianka*, which could be converted from “a travel suit into a sporty dress, then into an elegant afternoon dress, and finally into a fancy ball gown” (156). According to Ganeva’s sources, the transformation dress was the ultimate fashion item in East Germany in the early 1950s, although this archival find does not prompt her to discuss it in any form of discursive terms that would actually show it for what it was: a propagandistic stunt to make the female consumer accept the consistent shortage of material to make different types of clothes. Ganeva thus avoids all critical analysis, although she does note the film’s carefully constructed ideological rhetoric in terms of what it leaves out

of the picture. Consequently, there is no mentioning of ration cards in the film, nor is the word “fashion” ever spoken, but replaced by the word “confection” (158–59).

Informative as it is, I subsequently find Ganeva’s exposition of the female consumption in relation to film and fashion in Germany during the long decade too hermetic because of its over-reliance on archival findings without further contextualisation. The overbearing exposition of Ganeva’s archival work in relation to the book’s overall subject matter sometimes causes confusion, for example, when she lists a number of articles focusing on the actress Hildegard Knef, instead of clearly mentioning the ones she quotes (210). Her book would also have gained from discursive interaction with other works dealing with the “long decade” despite the fact that they do not pay any immediate attention to German visual culture and female consumption of the period. Given the overwhelming Jewish input on the German clothing and film industry before the war, Ganeva’s treatment of the subsequent Aryanisation of these industries and the postwar “transition” period would have greatly benefitted from such a clarification. These historically decisive circumstances are not excluded in her account, which means that, as the book stands, the social, economic and ideological effects of these criminal actions are never explicitly addressed.

As a media scholar, it is also my contention that the author’s lack of general knowledge about film history and visual culture reduces the impact of her discussion on the overall presentation of women in German cinema during the “long decade”. The German film industry did not work in a vacuum, but took impressions from the visual culture in other countries, especially France and the United States. The decision to thoroughly ignore the effect of the commonalities between German cinema and that being produced in the surrounding world generates a certain exasperation in the reader when central details are presented as unique when they are not. From a general point of view, the production mode of the German film industry during the studied period bears a close ideological proximity to that which occurred in Japan. Ganeva does mention Dudley Andrew’s chapter “Film and History”, but I suggest that John W. Dower’s *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II* would have made a better companion when it comes to a discursive contextualisation of the effects of the war on both countries’ cultural values and visual culture. Among several similar experiences, it is worth mentioning that the Japanese film industry also produced “rubble films”, witnessed the effects of rationed goods and the black market and, in effect, introduced the same female stereotypes; the heroic “rubble women” and the *Fräulein* who went out with US soldiers, and so on.

Given the ambitious list of publications in Camden House’s series on German film and visual culture, which obviously has a non-German-speaking readership in mind, it is important to maintain an explicatory and inclusive discourse. Unfortunately, in this case, the lack of proofreading and uncalled for repetition of facts further spoils the reading of *Film and Fashion amidst the Ruins of Berlin: From Nazism to the Cold War*, as does Ganeva’s persistent use of derelict terms like “the Third Reich”, and “silver screen”. In short, better editing wanted.

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