

## **‘ZIVIL IST ALLEMAL SCHÄDLICH’? CLOTHING IN GERMAN-LANGUAGE CULTURE OF THE 1920S**

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### **Introduction**

‘Es war eine andere Welt. Wir waren gläubig und stolz und Untertane, die die Uniform anbeteten. Wir hielten etwas von Autorität’ (Tergit 1997, p. 37). These are the thoughts of a fictional Austrian in Berlin, looking back nostalgically from the late 1920s to the time before the First World War in Germany and Austria, as presented in Gabriele Tergit’s novel *Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm* (1931). A nation of uniform-worshipping subjects had been replaced, so the implication, by something new. Military uniform may no longer have been perceived as the epitome of German cultural identity by 1929, and the colourful, bizarre and experimental fashions visible in Berlin during the Weimar Republic were evidence enough of this, but the character’s assumption that he was living in ‘eine andere Welt’ is not necessarily accurate. The following questions suggest themselves. What were the prevailing attitudes to fashion and clothing in German-speaking Central Europe after the War? To what extent should these attitudes be related to rather than contrasted with those dominant until 1914? And how were these attitudes represented and reflected in contemporary culture? These questions provide a starting point for this essay, which will address them in the context of the complex identity and gender politics of the interwar period. A central focus will be the significance of clothing, and particularly of uniform, to contemporary constructions of gender in general, and of masculinity in particular.

Before turning to specific texts from the period in question, it is perhaps wise first to pause and think more generally about this interdisciplinary field, which may be approached from a number of directions. Clothing, quite clearly, can be a form of

communication, a means of informing about the wearer, and his or her attitudes or allegiances (see Barnard 1996). Artists tend to be acutely aware of this, and frequently make use of clothing as a sort of metonymic device: the depiction of an individual's outward appearance suggesting his or her character or the society in which he or she lives, or else, with deliberate irony, serving to *disguise* this character or provide a contrast with it. As an example of the former in German literature, one might cite Thomas Mann as a modern example: the symbolic leitmotifs of *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912), suggesting Aschenbach's vertiginous descent, frequently depend upon a relationship between outward appearance and inner disposition. Of the latter use of clothing, Gottfried Keller's novella *Kleider machen Leute* (1856) might serve as a prototypical example, the title suggesting what the story confirms: that one does not necessarily have to be a nobleman to be mistaken for one, for the differences between rich and poor are often only skin deep. The success as a social fable of Keller's novella, in which an 'armes Schneiderlein' who takes pride in his clothes ('der Märtyrer seines Mantels') is taken for a Polish duke by gullible townsfolk, depended upon readers' recognition of the comical reverence and servility which clothing, as a social marker, could command (Keller 1978, p. 277). Social attitudes to clothing in the period during and after the First World War may also be said to mirror some of the recent changes in the structure of society; this was after all a period in which, with the establishment of the first German and Austrian democracies, the clearly defined social hierarchy which informed Keller's works and was taken for granted throughout the nineteenth century was beginning to crumble. That said, deeply ingrained instincts and attitudes do not change overnight, and, as was the case in so many areas, clothing was to become a site of tension between modernising and reactionary forces during the 1920s. In particular, the aforementioned reverence for uniform – both in the

familiar military sense of the word, and more broadly in the sense of a prescribed physical norm in civilian life – was of continued significance for many people in the infant democracies in Germany and Austria. Ultimately, after 1933, this attitude, and the psychological disposition it reflected, were to be exploited, with notorious success, by the National Socialists.

### **Clothing vs. Fashion: Theoretical and Historical Context**

There is of course an important distinction between the simple notion of ‘clothing’, a physical descriptor, and the more complex, and more ambiguous notion of ‘fashion’, which implies conscious choice and may refer to almost all types of ornament and adornment. By the end of the nineteenth century, sociologists and cultural critics, aware that Western ‘civilization’ was increasingly driven by cultures of consumption, were beginning to analyse fashion in terms of its role in demarcating, creating or sustaining social relationships. The Zionist and conservative critic Max Nordau, for example, condemned what he viewed as the vanity of high fashion as a pernicious symptom of *fin de siècle* corruption (he makes much of the *French* origin of both the phrase and, he would have his readers believe, the attitude). For Nordau, even a hint of ostentatiousness and individuality – be it in a lady’s make-up or hat, or a gentleman’s haircut – was to be interpreted as such. Writing of bourgeois society gatherings in his unfortunately titled polemic *Entartung* (1892), he states: ‘Der gemeinsame Charakter aller dieser Menschen-Erscheinungen ist, daß sie nicht ihre wirkliche Eigenart geben, sondern etwas darstellen wollen, was sie nicht sind’ (Nordau 1892, I, p.16). Clearly, Nordau’s views are underpinned by an assumption of ‘authenticity’ or ‘naturalness’, closely linked to contemporary nationalistic discourse which defended German ‘purity’ against insidiously ‘foreign’ and ‘degenerate’

French influence, to which clothing should conform. To wear clothes in an attempt to impress, or in performance of a role (he compares social events to 'Maskenfeste') is to betray this authenticity. It is thus unsurprising that Nordau is scathing in his condemnation of the 'Ich-Sucht' of dandies and aesthetes, who, imitating Baudelaire, adopted eccentric or anachronistic clothing. He writes of Oscar Wilde's 'hysterische Gier, aufzufallen' (Nordau 1892, II, p. 120). For the conservative bourgeois, then, this type of individualistic fashion stood, in Maurizia Boscagli's words: 'in open opposition to the chivalric virtues of self-sacrifice, courtesy, service, responsibility, and work, which for the late-Victorian middle classes characterised an ideal masculine national type' (Boscagli 1996, p. 32). Moreover, a suggestion of individuality expressed through fashion was perceived as a threat to national esprit de corps and comradeship. We shall return to this, and its implications for the notion of the uniform, shortly.

Not all critics were as hostile to fashion as Nordau. Georg Simmel, with a rather more open mind, suggested that fashion, paradoxically, is a product of societies – and we might narrow this definition to include institutions and organizations within a complex society – in which there is a tendency both towards the security offered by uniformity ('[das] Bedürfnis nach sozialer Anlehnung'), and, simultaneously, towards individuation ('Tendenz auf Differenzierung, Abwechslung, Sich-abheben'; Simmel 1919, p. 27). One desires to be recognizable both as a part of a whole and as an individual person: 'So ist die Mode nichts anderes als eine besondere unter den vielen Lebensformen, durch die man die Tendenz nach sozialer Egalisierung mit der nach individueller Unterschiedenheit und Abwechslung in einem einheitlichen Tun zusammenführt' (Simmel 1919, p. 28). Remove one of these tendencies, and, if we accept Simmel's definition, there will be no 'fashion'. Where the impulse towards

individuality is non-existent or formally discouraged, as is the case in the military and in certain corporate organizations and businesses, this fact is most visibly expressed in clothing, and most specifically through the imposition of an obligatory uniform – whether this is khaki, *feldgrau*, or a suit and tie. It is on the representational function of such ‘uniforms’, rather than on, say, the individual, narcissistic self-presentation of the ‘dandy’ so hated by conservatives like Nordau, that is my concern here; that is to say, a type of clothing which is neither ‘fashion’, as understood by Simmel, nor the type of clothing most commonly associated with the ‘glamorous’ 1920s.

### **Constructions of Gender**

The 1920s in Germany and elsewhere in the Western world remain, in the popular imagination, the ‘Jazz age’, in which a liberated generation emerged, whose ‘modern’ ideas and youthful energy found expression above all in leisure activities and fashion – sport, pageboy haircuts, dance crazes like the Charleston, more informal clothes for men, and the invention of the ‘New Woman.’ Many contemporary German critics heralded the adoption by young women in Germany of the latest fashions, originating in the USA, as a symptom of healthy, sporty, asexual modernity and a welcome contrast to the kitsch and leaden eroticism of the traditional image of femininity in Germany. Writing in 1925, the cultural commentator Fritz Giese asserts the following of modern German women, whom he compares with American ‘Girls’:

Die Kleidung der Frau ist versportlicht und so maskuliniert. Die Frau im Beruf, auf der Wanderung verzichtet auf Gewandungen, die als typisch frauenhaft anzusprechen sind. Die Frisur brachte den Buben- und Pagenkopf auf, eine Tracht, über deren hygienischen Wert, praktischen Zweck und auch ästhetische Bedeutung in vielen Fällen kein Zweifel bestehen konnte. (Giese 1925, p. 120)

It is certainly true that new fashions and changing social attitudes did have a liberating effect for many middle-class women, whose mothers and grandmothers had

effectively been confined to the home and to housework, and whose movements had been restricted by corsets and heavy crinoline dresses.<sup>1</sup> But it would of course be a mistake to confuse the remarkable changes in women's fashions with deep, lasting changes in attitudes towards women in general. As far as Germany is concerned, this positive account of women's lives is applicable, if at all, only to the period of economic stability and industrial recovery between 1924 and 1929. Recent research has tended to emphasise the continued inequality and divisions between men and women in the chaotic and diverse society of the Weimar Republic (see for example Ankum, ed. 1997). It disputes, for example, the assumption that the enfranchisement and emancipation of women at the constitutional level, coupled with a relatively tolerant and liberal atmosphere in Berlin and others of the major cities, in any way amounted to general cultural or social emancipation for women. Social class, too, remained divisive. Whilst there was a clear restructuring of the jobs market for women, resulting in a greater visibility and freedom of movement, and a degree of economic independence for some young women, Germany remained a deeply hierarchical and patriarchal society, in which established gender stereotypes and prejudices remained rooted. An age-old marginalizing strategy, implicit in Giese's work, quoted from above, in which women are categorized either as safely 'virginal' or threateningly sexual (Madonnas or whores) was re-invented for a new decade, with athletic, asexual (or, in the eyes of some, 'masculine') flappers contrasted with 'vamps'. The stereotype is very clearly conceived in terms of the body and of clothing.

The continued polarisation of men and women according to stereotypical gender roles was not a phenomenon exclusive to the German-speaking countries, but it was certainly intensified by the experience of war, defeat, and political uncertainty.

These were traumas experienced, it is fair to say, in a *gendered* way, a fact which is related to the way in which national identity had tended to be defined. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the lost war and the collapse of empire resulted in a crisis of identity on a national scale. For over a century the citizens of Germany, and to an extent of Austria, had been actively encouraged to identify with, if not the state, then with a mythologised conception of the 'Nation' or 'Volk'. There are numerous examples of influential thinkers and writers who gave expression to these sentiments in their work: Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1807-08), for example, which are underpinned by the assumption of the German people's and the German language's unique 'purity'; or the founding father of the German gymnastics movement Friedrich Ludwig Jahn's *Deutsches Volkstum* (1810) which presents a programme for and a defence of a united German nation. Implicit in these works is that personal identity should not be distinguished or thought of separately from national identity. Moreover, Germany (or at least Prussia) had, at least from the start of the nineteenth century, tended to define itself, and the virtues of its citizens, in terms of military, 'wehrbar' virility and masculine 'discipline'. This had not always been the case, as many nationalistic writers from Jahn to Hitler have claimed, with spurious references to ancient Germanic warriors and the like. Jahn, for example, writes the following in support of the introduction of military service for men:

Erst wenn alle *wehrbare* Mannschaft durch Leibesübungen *waffenfähig* geworden, *streitbar* durch Waffenübungen, *schlagfertig* durch erneuerte Kriegsspiele und Immergerüstetsein, *kriegskühn* durch Vaterlandsliebe – kann ein solches Volk ein wehrhaftes heißen. 'Wehrlos, ehrlos!' So sagten unsere Ahnen und *den* Sinnspruch sollten wir in alle Landwehrsbanner setzen. (Jahn 1991, p. 217)

As Ute Frevert's research makes very clear, the soldierly qualities mentioned by Jahn here were by no means generally accepted as essential 'manly' virtues at the time of writing. It was only really with the introduction in Prussia of general conscription for

men, in 1813, that a double linkage begins to take place. Firstly, with army service a universal experience for men from all social levels and from which women were excluded, masculinity gradually came to be thought of in militaristic terms; in Frevert's words: 'Es spricht [...] vieles für die Annahme, daß der männliche Geschlechtscharakter im Laufe des 19. Jahrhunderts zunehmend soldatische Elemente inkorporierte' (Frevert 1996, p. 76). Secondly, and importantly, the experience of 'Wehrdienst' came to be linked with citizenship, the right to vote, and, implicitly, with nationality: 'Wehrdienst [sollte] die Nation im eigentlichen Sinn erst konstituieren, ständische und regionale Differenzen abschleifen und [einen] uniformen, geeinten "Körper" schaffen' (Frevert 1996, p. 80). By the early twentieth century, the construction of, on the one hand, German masculinity as a military masculinity, and, on the other, of German national identity as a military identity, and implicitly a masculine identity, was complete. It is therefore in this context that we must examine representations of military uniform; as suggested by the opening quotation from Tergit's novel, an everyday reverence for it, as the visual embodiment of both national and masculine pride, was taken for granted in imperial Germany and Austria, in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is necessary to bear this in mind if we are to understand the full extent of the trauma experienced by many young men after Germany's and Austria's defeat at the end of the First World War.

### **The Symbolism of Military Uniform**

The past and its emblems were perhaps most visible in, indeed could be said to be embodied by military uniforms and the associated regalia – hats, medals, flags, weaponry, even the characteristically German duelling scars of the officer. These ornaments, for many, represented a tangible link with history, with tradition, with



perceived stability. That they were associated with a regime and with a tradition which could be said to have failed did not matter, or else could be explained away with reference to myths of being ‘stabbed in the back’ – by shirkers, by Bolsheviks, by democrats, by Jews, by women. Thus we find, on the part of nationalists, howls of outrage in the turbulent months of the German ‘revolution’ in 1918 and 1919 not at the treatment of individual citizens but of certain key *symbols* – such as the uniform of the officer, or the flag of the *Reich*. Of particular symbolic resonance was the unwise and provocative decision by some soldiers’ and workers’ councils, founded in the hiatus between the Kaiser’s abdication and the declaration of the new Republic in Germany, to strip officers who opposed their demands of the outward signs of their rank – most visibly through the removal of epaulettes. More brutally, reactionary naval officers in Kiel who refused to replace the naval ensign with a red flag, were shot. In Austria, the bloodstained ceremonial uniform of a cavalry general in which Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914 was placed on public display (and remains so), reverentially, as the embodiment and most tangible symbol of an insulted and threatened nation.<sup>2</sup> The same exaggerated reverence for physical symbols was of course to become integral to National Socialist ritual, in which ‘national’ identity and masculine power could be represented in a few tattered rags, such as the bloodstained flag carried by the Nazis killed in the failed Munich Putsch of 1923, to which members of the SS swore allegiance.

In key fictional texts from the Weimar period the depiction of military uniform reflects its unique symbolic function, not just for nationalists but in society in general. In the numerous war novels and diaries published during the 1920s, inevitably, we can find numerous examples. Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929) was of course *the* best-seller of the period, and attracted a great deal of

contempt from nationalists, who attempted to ‘expose’ him as a Jew, as a Communist or as a liar, and his book as a deliberate attempt to insult the memory of the German war dead. By depicting his protagonists as, first and foremost, individuals with personal feelings, desires, and fears, Remarque, necessarily, questions the established myth of the ‘uniform’ and ‘uniformed’ man, for whom serving one’s country with unquestioning servility was a central pillar of his sense of identity. This attitude, evident in many episodes in the novel, frequently finds expression through clothing and uniform – the central symbol in the myth of heroic male nationalism. Remarque displays a clear understanding of the performative, empowering qualities of the uniform. Speaking of the effect of the uniform upon ordinary men with ordinary jobs, a character states: ‘So wie sie Tressen oder einen Säbel haben, werden sie andere Menschen, als ob sie Beton gefressen hätten’ (Remarque 1998, p. 38). Thus when the novel’s central character Paul Bäumer *refuses* to wear his uniform when on leave it is a deliberately provocative act, a refusal to yield to the pressure to conform and an assertion of his desire to retain his individuality. Equally suggestive is the episode in which the men must swim across a river for a forbidden rendezvous with some French girls, necessitating the complete removal of the uniform – they swim across naked except for their boots, which they hold above the water. As convincingly argued by Klaus Theweleit, for the indoctrinated soldier the tightly buttoned, enclosing ‘armour’ or ‘shell’ of the uniform – though sometimes an object of fetishized fascination – was commonly understood as a counterbalance and check to the dissimilating, ‘corrupting’ power of heterosexual desire. Referring to the numerous nationalistic ‘Freikorpsromane’ of the Weimar Republic, Theweleit notes that for their protagonists, ‘Liebe zu Frauen und Liebe zum Vaterland sind Gegensätze’ (Theweleit 1977, I, p. 48). The casual manner in which Remarque’s characters abandon their

uniform, with Theweleit's point in mind, is illuminating, for they choose women over the 'fatherland'. Equally remarkable is the narrator's own awareness of the resultant shift in identity, ironically, given the danger they are accustomed to at the front, experienced as an unsettling loss of security:

Mir wird schwindelig, es ist nichts hier, woran man sich noch halten könnte. Unsere Stiefel haben wir vor der Tür gelassen, man hat uns Pantoffeln dafür gegeben, und nun ist nichts mehr da, was mir die Sicherheit und Frechheit des Soldaten zurückruft: kein Gewehr, kein Koppel, kein Waffenrock, keine Mütze. (Remarque 1998, p. 106)

This contrast, between desire and duty, is echoed in a number of the Austrian-born novelist and journalist Joseph Roth's texts from the period, which frequently delineate their military protagonists' psychological traits with reference to the uniform and the body (compare Hughes 2000). In his most famous novel, *Radetzky* (1932), the protagonist Carl Joseph Trotta's weakness and lack of discipline, as well as his humanity, are established in a memorable seduction scene, in which the young cadet's uniform is removed by an older, married woman:

Auf einmal lagen ihre beiden schimmernden Ärmel an seinem Hals, und ihr Gesicht lastete auf seinen Haaren. Er rührte sich nicht. Aber sein Herz klopfte laut, ein großer Sturm brach in ihm aus, krampfhaft zurückgehalten vom erstarrten Körper und den festen Knöpfen seiner Uniform. [...] Wie ein ohnmächtig Gefesselter sah er zwischen halb geschlossenen Lidern, daß sie ihn entkleidete, langsam, gründlich und mütterlich. Mit einigem Entsetzen bemerkte er, wie Stück um Stück seiner Paradekleidung schlaff auf die Erde sank, er hörte den dumpfen Fall seiner Schuhe und fühlte sofort an seinem Fuß die Hand der Frau Slama. (Roth 1989-91, V, pp. 166-7)

The contrast between the 'erstarrt' body, enclosed by 'feste Knöpfe', and the 'schlaff' condition of the uniform when removed is deliberate, and a reflection of the psychological impact of the removal not merely of clothing, but of the external markers of an individual's status as an obedient subject of the state. The act of removing, being stripped of, or losing one's uniform is one of immense symbolic resonance, and is a recurrent motif in narratives of this period. In a later novel by

Roth, *Das falsche Gewicht* (1937), the potentially disorientating effects of demobilisation, of losing the psychological crutch of the uniform is described thus:

Er hatte Zivilkleider nicht gern, es war ihm zumute wie etwa einer Schnecke, die man zwingt, ihr Haus zu verlassen, das sie aus ihrem eigenen Speichel, also aus ihrem Fleisch und Blut, ein viertel Schnecken-Leben lang gebaut hat. Aber anderen Kameraden ging es beinahe ebenso. Die meisten hatten Frauen: aus Irrtum, aus Einsamkeit, aus Liebe: Was weiß man! Alle gehorchten den Frauen: aus Furcht und aus Ritterlichkeit und aus Gewohnheit und aus Angst vor der Einsamkeit: Was weiß man! (Roth 1989-91, VI, p. 130)

There can be few clearer expressions of the symbiosis experienced by many men for whom the army and its uniform had become integral, constitutive parts of their sense of 'self'.

In Kurt Tucholsky's satirical article 'Schädlichkeit des Zivils', published alongside John Heartfield's mocking illustrations in his anthology *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* (1929), we find the suggestion that a retired general not only feels inadequate in civilian dress ('Die Autorität war dahin') but that, somewhat paradoxically, he is attracted only by women in uniform – chamber maids or nurses 'ganz in aseptisches Weiß gehüllt' (Tucholsky 1996, p. 16). The vicious anti-militarism of Tucholsky's writing is clear, but his insight into military psychology is nevertheless remarkable. It is confirmed by Theweleit's examination of the peculiar eroticisation, in nationalist and militaristic writing, of 'untouchable', virginal women, and of nurses in particular, who cease to be attractive when they are out of uniform and, in theory, 'available' (Theweleit 1977, I, pp. 161-76). As Tucholsky notes ironically: 'Was in Tracht ist, muß in Tracht geliebt werden. Zivil ist allemal schädlich' (Tucholsky 1998, p. 16).

Paradoxical, masochistic psychology also lies at the heart of Kafka's famous short story, *In der Strafkolonie* (1919). Kafka was, as has been amply demonstrated, particularly in the work of Mark Anderson, fascinated by and knowledgeable about

fashion and clothing, and his fiction is laced with intriguing references to and descriptions of clothing (Anderson 1992). *In der Strafkolonie* is a famously rich tale which functions on many levels, but it can at one be read as an analysis of the obsession with power, discipline and organisation inherent in military regimes, and also of the peculiar sadomasochism of the career soldier. The story's nameless, voyeuristic 'traveller', dressed in civilian clothing, receives an elaborate demonstration of an arcane torture and execution device from a an officer dressed in full military regalia, despite the oppressive heat:

'Diese Uniformen sind doch für die Tropen zu schwer', sagte der Reisende, statt sich, wie der Offizier erwartet hatte, nach dem Apparat zu erkunden. 'Gewiß', sagte der Offizier [...], 'aber sie bedeuten die Heimat; wir wollen nicht die Heimat verlieren.' (Kafka 1978, pp. 98-9)

There are of course echoes of the symbolic impracticality of certain Jewish customs in this statement, but it also suggests the elision of national identity and clothing typical of a militaristic regime, of which the officer in the story is a last representative. At the story's conclusion he offers himself as a test subject for his machine, in which he has invested all his faith in the power of a regime clearly in decline, and he must remove his uniform. This act is carefully described, reflecting the significance of a moment of ritual self-emasculatation:

Trotz der offenbaren Eile, mit der er den Uniformrock auszog und sich dann vollständig entkleidete, behandelte er doch jedes Kleidungsstück sehr sorgfältig, über die Silberschnüre an seinem Waffenrock strich er sogar eigens mit den Fingern hin und schüttelte eine Troddel zurecht. (Kafka 1978, p. 121)

### **Disillusionment and Loss: Uniforms after the War**

In the aftermath of the First World War, throughout the Western world, the arts became politicised, but we also find, in the 1920s, the development of a distinctive literature of disillusionment, of a so-called 'lost generation' scarred by the experience

of war and its turbulent aftermath (compare Midgley 2000, pp. 189-225). In Germany, such texts frequently dwell on the sense of profound insecurity experienced by survivors of the war, who seem unable to find a meaningful role in the new, post-imperial democracy. Notable examples include Roth's *Die Rebellion* (1924), *Die Flucht ohne Ende* (1927) and *Rechts und Links* (1929), Erich Kästner's *Fabian: die Geschichte eines Moralisten* (1932), and Remarque's *Der Weg zurück* (1931). There is, however, perhaps no more eloquent fictional representation of the difficulties experienced by a generation which had grown up under the old regime in adapting to the new Republic than that provided by the film *Der letzte Mann*, which was directed by F. W. Murnau in 1924 from a screenplay by Carl Mayer. The film is perhaps best known for its formal experimentation with mobile camerawork and lighting, and the almost complete absence of intertitles, but in this context I wish to remark upon the film's employment of the uniform as a central motif. When the central character, a hotel porter, is demoted from his job he finds himself unable to admit this fact to his wife and neighbours. His loss of status is symbolized above all by the loss of the uniform he had been required to wear. In a memorable sequence, immaculately played by Emil Jannings, he sneaks back into the hotel by night and steals the uniform, so that he can wear it at his niece's wedding. Murnau photographs the sequence carefully, illuminating the desired jacket almost like a sacred relic, and juxtaposing it with Jannings's desperate, yearning face. It should be remembered that this is not military uniform, with all that connoted for men; instead, the film provides an illustration of the complex relationship between masculine pride and the outward symbols of institutional power, in this case an upmarket hotel's livery. The discrepancy between the expensive hotel's callous treatment of the old porter and his continued desire for and love of its uniform is of course a central irony, somewhat

diluted by the film's absurd happy ending (the English title's 'last laugh') in which the porter receives an unlikely windfall and himself becomes a wealthy customer in the hotel. Nevertheless, Murnau's and Mayer's interest in the empowering qualities of a uniform – *any* uniform - and of the implied power of certain clothes to ensure acceptance within hierarchical capitalist society, is strikingly clear. The sad thing is that the porter's livery does not denote power but a menial role, and in this sense its function is quite different to the captain's uniform which enables a working class man to taste, temporarily, genuine power in Carl Zuckmayer's satirical play *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (1929). What the two texts share, however, is the acute consciousness that wearing a uniform, legitimately or not, makes a difference both in terms of personal confidence and, objectively, in the manner in which one is treated by others. Superficial though it is, it means the difference between rejection and acceptance.

### **Civilian Uniform**

Of course, there is more than one type of uniform, and in the industrialised, democratic Weimar Republic, military-style uniform gradually lost ground to civilian dress as a signal of social conformity and status. The notion of there being a 'civilian' uniform equivalent to that of the military was not of course unique to this period. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the civilian, bourgeois 'Beamte', in his black suit, top hat, and starched collar, had become an instantly recognizable type, as memorably evoked in texts such as Kafka's *Der Process* or Hermann Ungar's *Die Verstümmelten*. In Sabina Brändli's view, this uniform was almost as suggestive a certain type of industrious, disciplined masculinity as was military uniform:

Der aus der zweiten Haut gebildete, geschlechtsneutrale universelle Zylinder-Körper rädelt sich diszipliniert in die Arbeitswelt ein. Wie die militärische Uniform reduziert

auch die zivile den Träger auf seine Funktion innerhalb einer Männerwelt. Persönlichkeit würde das reibungslose Funktionieren gefährden. (Brändli 1996, p. 114)

The exclusively bourgeois, male business world of pre-War Europe was not, however, to last. In response to fundamental changes in the management of industry and business, largely inspired by developments in science and technology, and the innovative theory and practice of Americans such as the industrialist Henry Ford, or the early management ‘guru’ Frederick Taylor, the traditional structure of the jobs market in Germany had changed dramatically by the final years of the Weimar Republic. Particularly noticeable was the erosion of the old division between the proletariat with manual or menial (blue-collar) jobs and the middle classes in white-collar professions. The metaphorical use of ‘white collar’ and ‘blue collar’, of course, signals the symbolic importance of clothing in the context of class difference. A new generation of white collar employees emerged during the 1920s – office and shopworkers – whose family background was frequently working class, and which, significantly, included many hundreds of thousands of women, for whom work in the ‘public’ space of the department store or the office represented a liberation of sorts from the domestic service which many had previously been obliged to accept. In his study of these new ‘Angestellten’, written in 1929 and the product of weeks of research in offices and shops in Berlin, Siegfried Kracauer observes that the tendency towards *standardization* in the business sphere has obvious consequences for the individual employee, whose individuality, like that of the trained soldier, is to be effaced by the artificial ‘community’ of a company, whose only motive, in most cases, is profit. He notes that although many companies have introduced psychological, or even graphological testing in order to find the most suitable staff, in practice it is often physical appearance which determines an individual’s



employability, and not only for positions involving direct contact with the public: 'Ein Beamter eines Berliner Arbeitsamtes erklärte mir, daß Leute mit körperlichen Fehlern, Hinkende etwa oder gar schon Linksschreiber, als erwerbsbeschränkt aufzufassen und besonders schwer unterzubringen seien' (Kracauer 1971, p. 23). When employers themselves are asked what they require of an employee, they speak vaguely of 'ein freundliches Gesicht.' But Kracauer adds:

Um die Freundlichkeit des Mannes zu steigern, fordert das Arbeitsamt übrigens, daß er sich mit rasierten Wangen und in seinem besten Anzug bewerbe. Auch der Betriebsratvorsitzende eines Großbetriebs empfiehlt den Angestellten, bei Chefbesuchen im Kriegsschmuck ihrer Feiertagskleider aufzutreten. (Kracauer 1971, p. 24)

The psychological consequences of the process of supposed 'rationalisation' are therefore physically visible in office workers – the ubiquitous 'white collar' and tie for men, accompanied by a suit and polished shoes. Indeed, the detachable white collar itself can be considered a product of the same process of streamlining and rationalisation – a nineteenth century American innovation, designed to save labour in the preparation of a shirt for work. In Germany male office workers continued to wear starched collars even after soft ones had become the norm elsewhere. Many contemporary commentators, like Fritz Giese or the many admirers of Henry Ford, viewed this process uncritically, and approved of the 'Verschwinden des Individuellen im Betriebszusammenhang' (Giese 1925, p. 83). For women employees there was, admittedly, more flexibility, which has been interpreted as a hangover from 'nineteenth-century expectations that women would perform a more decorative role and indulge in more personal display than men' (Barnard 1996, p. 62). However, there was little of the jazz 'glamour' for which the period is remembered, but relatively plain and simple outfits intended to convey the seriousness of a company. The imposition of this civilian 'uniform' was sometimes understood as an honour, and

above all as a sign of 'improved' status, superior to that of the manual worker whose pay was not much worse, and whose rights were far better defended by the strongly supported and well-organised workers' unions. The impulse behind the prescription of a uniform is frequently not liberating but controlling and, potentially, dictatorial, in that it encourages an almost corporeal identification with an institution or company. Kracauer remarks, noting that many employees have taken to using beauty salons and playing sport not out of vanity but with their jobs in mind: 'Mode und Wirtschaft arbeiten sich in die Hand' (Kracauer 1971, p. 25) This echoes Giese's rather less critical acknowledgement of the power of 'Körperkultur' to influence one's employment or financial prospects: 'Körperkultur und Dollar sind korreliert' (Giese 1925, p. 104)

There are a number of memorable literary representations of the lives of white-collar workers, in which these issues, and the centrality of clothing to them, is clear. Indeed, the numbers of employees prompted the establishment of what was essentially a new genre, or sub-genre, in popular fiction – the 'Angestelltenroman'. Perhaps the most remarkable literary representation of an employee in this period is to be found in Hans Fallada's novel *Kleiner Mann – was nun?* (1932), which tells the story of the struggle of a young couple to make ends meet at the peak of the great depression. For much of the narrative the protagonist Pinneberg is employed as a salesman in the men's clothing section of a Berlin department store. The introduction of American-style sales quotas and the obligation to make a sale at all costs make his life a misery, and Fallada makes much of the ironic discrepancy between the servile hypocrisy expected of the salesmen who are forced to sell overpriced fashion items, such as tuxedos, dinner jackets, Ulsters and trenchcoats, and the reality of their own circumstances. The department almost becomes a microcosm of capitalist society,

with clothes functioning as *the* commodity per se – a necessary and practical item which has become a tool of exploitation, not only of the salesmen forced to meet targets but of the gullible customers ignorant of quality and interested in fashion only as a status symbol. This is in keeping with contemporary left-wing social theory, which tended to interpret fashion as, ultimately, superfluous and unnecessary. In Germany of this period, luxurious fashion items were socially permissible only insofar as they demarcated social or class difference, which was assumed by influential sociologists such as Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen to be the ultimate ‘purpose’ of fashion – what the American Veblen refers to, in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) as ‘conspicuous consumption’, or ‘waste’, denoting an excess of money and leisure (Veblen 1994, esp. chaps 3-4). Veblen, adopting a Darwinian model, casts the ruling classes as parasites, and analyses their consumption of fashion, and the enforcement of arbitrary norms in physical appearance, as a means of exploitation of the working classes. There is little sense that fashion can also function as form of rebellion; from dandies to punks, there is no doubt about the significance of conscious deviation from these prescribed norms.

In Fallada’s novel, the most accomplished salesman is Heilbutt, whose charms and ‘elegant’ dress are constantly emphasised, but whose obsession and only hobby is – one notes the deliberate irony – the promotion of *Freikörperkultur*, the German nudist movement. Naturism has a long tradition in Germany, and enjoyed a particular period of growth during the Weimar period. Ideologically, the movement’s emphasis upon freedom, health, and the bond between the ‘natural’ human body and the landscape, was not so far away from the vague ‘mysticism’ of the more militaristic *Wandervögel* and the scouting movements, which enjoyed simultaneous popularity. Indeed, Fallada’s portrayal of Heilbutt’s fanaticism and slightly intimidating

leadership role within a self-styled 'Bewegung' makes clear that, in a sense, he merely exchanges one form of uniform for another when he removes his workwear for a FKK meeting. Pinneberg's reluctance to join may thus be understood as consistent with his suspicion of the 'collective' whatever the context. Pinneberg, however, consistently fails to distinguish between the superficial 'respect' one is accorded in urban society if one seems to fit into a clearly defined social and economic role, as signalled most clearly by one's clothes, and a genuine tolerance or understanding of somebody as an individual. Thus just as the donning of a borrowed police uniform by the unemployed cobbler and former convict Vogt in *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* garners him extraordinary privileges and the respect which people's prejudices would otherwise prevent him from earning, so bourgeois society in capitalist Weimar Germany was unlikely to accept anyone who failed to meet the norms of physical appearance, regardless of their background or status.

At the conclusion to *Kleiner Mann – was nun?* we find Pinneberg unemployed, having failed to meet his sales quotas, and desperate for money. Despite having few prospects he has doggedly maintained his attachment to the outward symbols of his notionally middle-class status, epitomised, of course, by the detachable white shirt collar. He stops before an expensive clothes shop, and regarding himself in a mirror, decides to remove his collar, as symbolic and meaningful a gesture for the 'little' employee as the removal of military regalia was for the officer in Kafka's story:

Pinneberg bleibt vor einem Modewarengeschäft stehen, da ist ein schöner großer Spiegel, Pinneberg sieht sich in ganzer Figur, nein, gut sieht er nicht mehr aus. Die hellgrauen Hosen haben viele schwärzliche Stellen von dem Dachteeren, der Mantel ist so abgeschabt und verschossen in der Farbe, die Schuhe sind voller Riester -, eigentlich hat Puttbreese recht, ein Kragen dazu ist Quatsch. Er ist ein heruntergekommener Arbeitsloser, jeder sieht ihm das auf zwanzig Schritte an. Pinneberg greift nach seinem Hals und macht den Kragen ab, er steckt ihn mit dem

Schlips in die Manteltasche. Viel anders sieht er nun auch nicht aus, es ist nicht mehr viel zu verderben an ihm [...]. (Fallada 2000, p. 402)

It nevertheless comes as something of a shock to Pinneberg that he is, almost immediately, singled out for abusive treatment from a policeman, prompting the bitter admission to himself that: 'Armut ist nicht nur Elend, Armut ist auch strafwürdig. Armut ist Makel, Armut heißt Verdacht' (Fallada 2000, p. 412).

## Conclusion

Most of my examples have suggested the potentially negative, oppressive qualities of clothing. I shall conclude with a reference to an example of its potentially empowering, or self-affirming qualities. Irmgard Keun's novel *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932) is loosely modelled on Anita Loos's famous 'flapper' novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and is equally amusing, but it is underpinned more strongly with a social conscience (see Ankum 1997). Unlike Loos's heroine, Doris, the eponymous girl, begins life as an office worker, a barely competent typist of the type dismissively referred to in contemporary parlance as a 'Tippse'. She loses the job and moves to Berlin, naively hoping to 'make her fortune', preferably through finding a rich lover. Fashion, inevitably, is a central motif, and Doris's obsession with her appearance reflects her mediated view of the world – mediated in the sense that the way she judges herself and others is in terms dictated by advertising, popular cinema, trashy novels, and illustrated magazines. In this respect the novel is depressing, in that it illustrates convincingly the effective commodification of women and their perception of themselves. Yet her attachment to one fashion accessory in particular, a fur stole which she steals from a theatre cloak room, may be considered an ambiguous but ultimately positive reflection of her desire for individuality, to be distinguished

from the mass of people whose uniformity and lack of ambition is reflected in their physical appearance. There can be few novels of any period in which the sensual qualities of expensive clothing are better expressed, and few in which the transformative qualities of accessories such as the stole are more clearly represented: 'Ich – mein Feh – der ist bei mir – meine Haut zieht sich zusammen vor Wollen, daß mich in dem Feh einer schön finde' (Keun 2000, p. 81). Note how, here as elsewhere, the first person pronoun does not seem complete to her without a reference to her fur. She invests her identity as a woman in the fur, just as clearly as does the porter in *Der letzte Mann* his own identity in his uniform; this fact explains her apparently irrational fear of losing it. For her it is more than a status symbol, a symbol of the conspicuous waste analysed by Veblen, as it is a stolen object, part of a costume acquired by illegitimate means. It is not therefore to be equated with an imposed uniform, but it forms part of a disguise she is quite conscious of, a front through which she hopes, but ultimately fails, to establish herself as a 'Glanz' or star.

The examples considered here represent only a small snapshot of the ways in which German-speaking artists of the early interwar period examined a society in which, for all its diversity, national, corporate, social and gender identities were inscribed within dress codes, and in so doing engaged critically with prevalent attitudes. To change one's clothing – to remove a uniform, or a white collar, or a fur stole – is to indicate a shift in one's identity, to step into or out of a prescribed social, economic or political role. This was certainly not a phenomenon peculiar to the German-speaking countries, but it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that the National Socialists' rapid ascent to and cementing of their power in the 1930s was aided by Hitler's ability to manipulate these codes, and to establish certain types of dress as 'German' and others as 'alien'. The conditions required for this were not

created overnight. As I have argued here they had a long tradition, and, moreover, manifested themselves in various ways throughout the years of the Weimar Republic.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Sabina Brändli (1996, p. 106) refers to the ‘demonstrativer Müßiggang’ of women in the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> The uniform remains on display today in Vienna’s Heeresgeschichtliches Museum.