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6. Fashion Among Ruins: From Trümmerfrau to Modefrau—Fashion in Berlin 1945–46

Katrina Sark

This paper examines the resurrection of Berlin's fashion industry in the ruins of 1945. Fashion plays an increasingly important role in Berlin today, with the re-organization of Berlin's *Kunstgewerbemuseum* into a fashion museum in recent years, and various exhibitions on fashion taking place at several museums in Berlin simultaneously. Today there are more and more attempts by curators to tell the story of the Berlin fashion industry. This paper follows this tradition, examining the revival of the fashion industry and women's work within that industry, as well as the social conditions in which the industry sprang up after the allied liberation in 1945–46. The juxtaposition of fashion and ruins opens up social questions concerning production and manufacturing conditions, as well as concerning the role of women in the post-war "economy of pleasure."

Dieser Aufsatz beschäftigt sich mit dem Wiederaufbau der Berliner Modeindustrie 1945 in den Ruinen Berlins. Mode gewinnt im heutigen Berlin zunehmend an Bedeutung, was einerseits die sich in den vergangenen Jahren vollzogene Umgestaltung des Berliner Kunstgewerbemuseums hin zu einem Modemuseum und andererseits die Modeausstellungen, die in verschiedenen Museen Berlins parallel zu besichtigten sind, widerspiegeln. Heute versuchen mehr und mehr Kuratoren die Geschichte der Berliner Modeindustrie nachzuzeichnen. Der Aufsatz wird dieser Tradition folgen, indem er die Wiederbelebung der

Modeindustrie, die Arbeit der Frauen in dieser sowie die sozialen Bedingungen, aus der heraus sich die Modeindustrie nach der Befreiung Berlins durch die Alliierten 1945-46 entwickelte, untersucht. Die Gegenüberstellung von Mode und Ruinen wirft Fragen nach den Produktions- und Herstellungsbedingungen und nach der Rolle der Frauen innerhalb der "Vergnügungsindustrie" in der Nachkriegszeit auf.

In 1939, Walter Benjamin asks, "Die Mode ist die ewige Wiederkehr des Neuen. Gibt es trotzdem gerade in der Mode Motive der Rettung?" (qtd. in Lehmann 200). Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries progress and innovation were deemed as virtues of modernity, yet with the ruthless devastation and suffering brought about by World War II modernity has faced its dialectical antithesis. The mad search for the new and the modern briefly stalled at what came to be known as *Stunde Null* in Berlin in 1945. Benjamin saw fashion as the perpetual return of the new. But whether society is capable of regenerating itself and directing its progress away from destruction remains questionable. Today, Berlin is a fashion capital again. Its *Kunstgewerbemuseum*, which formally housed a collection of arts and crafts, as well as various furniture and design artefacts, has been recently turned into a fashion museum. An exhibition of life in the ruins of Berlin, including everyday clothing and accessories made out of dish towels and rags, can be seen at the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen*. Young Berlin designers present their work at the Berlin Fashion Week twice a year. Although both the former buildings of the *Damenoberbekleidungsverband* (DOB) on Kurfürstendamm and the *DDR-Modeinstitut* on Brunnenstraße are abandoned, Berlin is currently in the process of rejuvenating its fashion industry. More and more local designers open their boutiques in Prenzlauer Berg, while international brand names

have returned to Friedrichstraße. The presence of fashion in several of Berlin's major museums is perhaps an indication that not only is Berlin returning to its former status of the fashion capital of Germany, but also that there are people interested in examining the history of the Berlin fashion industry.

One typically thinks of high fashion as being a luxury, often associated with the lifestyle of the wealthy elite, quite the opposite of the experience of women in postwar Berlin. While more and more cultural historians in Germany turn to examine the conditions of life in the ruins in 1945, fashion is still a largely unexplored field in North America. My paper will examine this striking juxtaposition of fashion and ruins. By drawing on Benjamin's theory of history, I would like to emphasize the legitimacy of fashion as a document of its time on par with literature, film, and visual arts. Examining fashion in this particular context will allow me to demonstrate that we can find a very convincing example of the kind of salvation Benjamin contemplated.

This project started with a photograph from the exhibition catalogue of the *Berliner Chic* exhibition, which portrays a young woman modeling a white evening gown in front of the ruins of what appears to be the *Friedrich-Wilhelms-Gedächtniskirche* on Breitscheidplatz in Berlin. The photograph was entitled "Abendkleid vor Ruinen,"¹ the design was by H.W. Claussen from 1946, and the photographer is unknown. One cannot help but wonder why this photograph was taken? In what condition was the fashion industry in 1946? For whom was this photograph taken and who could afford to buy such a dress? In 1945, two-thirds of the decimated population of Berlin were women. Survival in the ruins of Berlin was a harsh reality: the largely female

population of survivors endured malnutrition while working, sometimes involuntarily, on rubble-clearing sites. Many women suffered abuse and sexual assaults from Soviet soldiers.² Clothing was being produced from materials smuggled and scavenged, and could only be purchased at exorbitant prices on the black market. Thus, the fact that high fashion was being produced at all is striking.

At the time when mass investigations and trials³ were taking place in Nuremberg, as the Allies were negotiating the future of German cities, prisoners of war were returning to their wives and mothers, and the black market was one of the few functioning economic structures in place. Berlin's infamous "rubble women" were cleaning up the rubble created by Hitler's war. The first illustrated magazines and newspapers celebrated the engineer who restored the energy supply, and the mechanic who returned the streetcars onto their tracks, but not the mother of three children who managed to exchange her last carpet for a bag of potatoes.⁴ Gradually, the workers of the *Berliner Konfektionsindustrie*⁵ returned to their old factories, and searched through the basements to retrieve stored and left-over fabrics. Former employees brought out their surviving sewing machines, and former designers, such as Heinz Oestergaard, Walter Schulz, and Hans W. Claussen, who had returned from the war eventually reopened their fashion houses on and near Kurfürstendamm.⁶ At first American cigarettes and coffee served as currency. Under Soviet command all available and imported fabrics were to be used for making dresses that were shipped to the Soviet Union as soon as the last stitch was secured. This created a fabric shortage and left the local population with the little it had. Old rags were collected all

over the city, torn and processed into new fabrics and used for making new clothes, the *Lumpenkleider* 'rag dresses.'

In the summer of 1945, Walter Friedrich Schulz organized the first post-war *Modette* 'fashion tea' on Kurfürstendamm, showing his new collection of *Flickenkleider* 'dresses quilted out of various pieces of colorful fabrics.'⁷ The first fashion magazines, *Berlins Modeblatt* and *Chic*, were made available with the authorization of the Western Allied Powers. Fashion in 1945, perhaps even more than at any other time, reflected the daily reality of the people, while the high fashion that was portrayed in the post-war magazines simultaneously allowed a glimpse of a future beyond that reality. In the first issue of *Berlins Modeblatt* from October 1945 (only five months after the German capitulation) the editorial section announced that the magazine does not attempt to be a *Luxuszeitschrift*, but rather a practical and entertaining fashion magazine "*für Sie*" (October 1945) addressing Berlin's women directly. The magazine assisted in re-vamping yesterday's wardrobe, suggesting resourceful creations for the day. Articles such as, "Die Kunst aus Wenigem viel zu machen" (the art of making a lot out of a little) provided encouragement in daily life by offering drawings and practical tips for re-using old clothes, such as making one new dress out of two old ones. Advertisements announced the reopening of sewing salons that offered re-modeling of garments and creations made from "mitgebrachten Stoffen" 'salvaged material' (October 1945). Hat makers advertised in English, Russian and French, catering to the Allied troops, hairdressers offered their services, and bars and clubs reopened.

In the first months after the war some 86,000 women in

Berlin worked as *Trümmerfrauen* 'rubble women,' clearing the streets, cleaning out basements and collapsed buildings, and piling bricks to make them usable for reconstruction. Those who refused to work in the rubble received no food ration cards. The average work day was 9 hours with a 20- to 30-minute lunch break. The wage of the *Trümmerfrauen* was 72 *Pfennige* an hour plus a food card (*Trümmerfrauen*). This card was enough to feed one person, but not enough to feed children or other dependants. A loaf of bread cost 80 Marks, a pound of butter 600 Marks on the black market. One cigarette equalled 10 Marks; while a dress cost between 10,000 and 20,000 Marks (Hartung 49). Most women and their families survived by gathering fire wood, planting vegetables, and trading remaining household items for food. Many who had nothing to trade, were left destitute or whose homes had been bombed, prostituted themselves to survive (*Woman in Berlin*). This *Überlebensökonomie* 'economy of survival' began with the arrival of the Soviet troops and lasted until the currency reform, when wages improved and stores could offer a variety of goods again.

Most history books talk of "*Plünderungen*" (looting) and "*Ausschreitungen*" (acts of lawlessness) by the Soviet soldiers who had conquered Berlin during the dying days of the war. Recently numerous studies and witness accounts of the mass rapes and violence against women which occurred during the first weeks of Russian occupation have been published. One of the best known of these accounts, *A Woman in Berlin*, is a diary of an anonymous woman who records her experiences from April to June 1945. The diary recounts the rape and mistreatment of German women, particularly *Trümmerfrauen*, providing a moving record of their daily struggles. For instance, an entry dated May 26, 1945 reads:

Tomorrow is Sunday, but not for me. The Viennese gave a little speech today, the gist of which was that if we didn't show up for work tomorrow, they would come to our apartments and take us to the factory by force. (*Woman in Berlin* 258)

A few days later she wrote:

On my way to Steglitz I passed long chains of women, all dressed in blue and grey, stretched out across the mountains of rubble. Buckets were going from hand to hand. A regression to the time of the pyramids, except we're hauling material away instead of constructing something. (273)

With the arrival of the Western Allied Powers in June 1945, the situation changed, primarily in the Western zones. An entry from June 2, 1945 reads:

An order came—I have no idea from where—to hang out the flags of the four victorious powers. And lo and behold, your average German housewife manages to conjure flags out of next to nothing. If I were one of the victors looking for a souvenir to take home, I'd go round after all the celebrations were over and pick up some of these amazing rags—all so different in color, fabric and form. (277)

To Allied troops arriving in Berlin, the term *Fräulein* came to symbolize German women fraternizing with soldiers. At first, fraternization was forbidden by the Allied military command and took place secretly. Eventually, however, venues such as cabarets offered a legitimate location for the

"economy of pleasure;" here Allied soldiers exchanged meal tickets, coffee, cigarettes, or silk stockings for the one thing many German women had left to give, themselves. But a cultural transformation was also taking place: women eager to be attractive to the men in uniform began to pay attention to their appearance. This sparked a new demand for hairdressers, seamstresses, and fashion designers. This transformation is summed up well in Hela Strehl-Firle's poem "Das Fräulein":

Die Amerikaner kommen!

Pieksaubere Uniformen, Bügelfalten, weisser Ledergürtel,
weisse Ledergamaschen, untadeliger Haarschnitt, traumschlank.
Auch ältere Offiziere kalorientrainiert, nach Dienstvorschrift.
Ein neues Vocabulaire: Ice-cream, Coffee, Nylons. Cigarettes! Lucky strike!!

Noch ist Fraternization verboten.

Doch da kommt das "Fräulein" auf. Schlagfertig.

Das Fräulein ist die rasanteste Metamorphose, die es unter Weiblichkeit je gab.

Seidiggepflegtes Haar, über Nacht.

Soeben unter dem "Ziegenbart," einem Kopftuch, noch schaurig verdauerwellt
Mona Lisas sanftflächender Mund.

Kann ein Mann so schnell Frieden tanken, soeben noch bombenangstverzerzt?

Die Hungerfigur wirkt, mit ein wenig Tand aufgeputzt, filmgerecht,
Glanz à la Hollywood. /Fingernägel superlang, supergepflegt, superrot, superchic.

In zarten Riemenschuhen tumt man über Schutt und Asche.

Man tanzt in zarter Hingebung. /Und isst Doughnuts. In der Snackbar.

Am Kurfürstendamm hält ein Auto.

Regisseurblick hat unter den Passanten einen Zeittyp entdeckt.

Eine Weltkarriere ist im Beginnen. /Es ist, es wird die Knef. (Strehl-Firle 6)

In this post-war economy German women metamorphosed from *Trümmerfrauen* to fashionable Fräulein practically over night. Hollywood glamour set the standards for fashion and style, the first post-war German film star, Hildegard Knef, emerged from the rubble landscape.

To understand the rapid return of the fashion industry to Berlin, it is important to recognize the hardships the women of Berlin endured in the months of early occupation and their great longing for a return to normal life. In this world of pain, bitterness and ruin, fashion played a dual role. On the one hand, fashion symbolized the return of everyday life among the rubble with its emerging need for attractive clothes and perhaps even signified the hope for future normalcy. On the other hand, fashion represented a commoditization industry in which clothes were acquired by women looking for a foreign provider, blurring the line between survival and prostitution. This double-sidedness leaves fashion as an ambiguous, unexplained, unexamined record of history. It is precisely in fashion that social history and gender politics come together to shed light on the social and cultural life in Berlin in 1945. It may be that an elegant evening gown was the last thing needed by a woman who worked 12-hour days, was undernourished and often mistreated, and lived in a half-ruined or pillaged apartment. Yet perhaps just knowing that such a garment was available again provided the one essential survival tool that no amount of ration cards could buy: hope.

This is where Benjamin's use of commodity offers some insight. In a male, modern, violent world human beings are often torn between their reliance on material commodities and their need for the escapism they provide. In the ruins of Berlin, the *Vergnügungsindustrie* 'pleasure industry' was

institutionalized with the encouragement of the Allied command. Cabarets and bars appeared on every corner. This pleasure industry provided young women with an opportunity to earn a living at a time when no industry other than the construction and rubble-clearing sites was yet in place (Gronefeld 31). The fashion industry played a role in that economy, providing women with outfits that were not only necessary to survive the hard winters and long working hours on construction and rubble-clearing sites, but costumes and evening dresses needed to entertain or catch the attention of Allied officers. The famous fashion designer, Gerd Hartung, recalls in an interview with the Berlin designer, Heinz Oestergaard, that in those days, his first female customers with money or tradable goods were often women who made their living as "Damen des leichten Gewerbes" 'women of the night,' whose profession was then considered an "ehrenwerter Beruf" 'respectable occupation' (49).

Some women resumed their work in the fashion industry as seamstresses and designers, of course for a lower wage than those working in other professions. A catalogue on the exhibition of women in the Charlottenburg fashion industry after 1945 records an interview with a certain Frau Günter, who worked as a designer in one of the smaller salons on Kurfürstendamm. Her descriptions of the working conditions reveal the reality behind the newly flourishing post-war fashion industry:

Ich hab einmal gearbeitet einen ganzen Tag und eine Nacht durch bis am nächsten Tag um halb Zwölf, weil die Kollektion stehen musste, nur mit Kaffee, Zigaretten und n'Joghurt schnell nebenbei. Das war nichts

Seltenes. Ich bin kaum eine Woche unter 60, 65 Stunden nach Hause gegangen. Bezahlt wurde fast nie. (Goos and Heyde 5)

Trümmerfrauen achieved an almost mythical status in post-war Germany: their accomplishments performing the kind of hard labour traditionally reserved for men have been praised and celebrated to this day, especially in Berlin.⁸ However, not many historians recognize the achievements of other re-emerging industries in post-war Berlin, particularly those where women, reassumed their jobs—often working in their homes—as seamstresses and designers, producing clothing for a population devastated by the war.

Frau Günter also described the creative process behind forging new collections, stating,

Wenn wir Stoffe einkauften, blieb die Chefin immer dabei, einfach weil sie meine Höhenflüge kaufmännisch bremste.... Dann habe ich mich hingesetzt und anhand der Stoffe meine Entwürfe gemacht. Anregungen erhielt ich von Modeheften, die Modelle aus Paris und Italien brachten, mit erstklassigen Fotos, auf denen man auch die Nähte erkennen konnte. Das sieht natürlich alles unglaublich schick aus. Und nun setzen sie das mal um auf eine Frau, die Grösse 46 hat! Das war aus meiner Sicht die grösste Kunst, das so umzusetzen, dass man eine Kollektion hatte, die schick war, der Moderichtung entsprach und tragbar war. (Goss and Heyde 5)

By 1946 the fashion industry had moved from self-made *Lumpenkleider* to small mass-production industry. Culturally

and socially it meant that more women were now employed as seamstresses and that there were more articles of clothing available for sale, which eventually eliminated the black market economy. Overall it signified returning stability, if not yet prosperity. By July 1946, more than forty small fashion businesses opened around Kurfürstendamm, where, after the destruction of the Hausvogteiplatzviertel (where the pre-1933 fashion industry was located), the new fashion center was developing (Kubitz 15). Yet this new beginning was abruptly stopped by the Berlin Blockade in 1948, when the Soviets cut off all supply routes to Berlin, except by air. In most industries, production was either stopped or was reduced to a minimum for more than a year. After the Blockade and with the promise of new capital from the Marshall Plan, Berlin's Senate decided to invest in the fashion industry to create jobs for the 60,000 trained professionals and to boost an industry that was based on consumption and thus guaranteed a profitable return. Most workers received 80 Pfennige an hour, some women home-workers were paid a lower wage per item sewn (for the sewing of a jacket in 1949 a home worker received 1.80 DM). In 1949 Berlin's DOB-Verband (*Damenoberbekleidung*) 'Berlin Fashion Institute' was established across from the ruins of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche, bringing together the fashion houses of Heinz Oestergaard, H.W. Claussen, Uli Richter, and many other established couturiers, and managing all of West-Berlin's fashion production and distribution until German reunification in 1990. Despite initial post-war difficulties, the Blockade, and restrictions imposed by the military command, Berlin by the 1950s became a fashion capital again, even though its production quotes never exceeded those of pre-1933. Berlin designers displayed their

collections at fashion shows in Stockholm, London, and New York, attracting many foreign and local buyers, and turning Kurfürstendamm into an extension of Oxford Street and Fifth Avenue.⁹ In August 1961, the Berlin Wall caused irreparable damage to the fashion industry of Berlin, forcing the closure of many companies and compelling the fashion industry to relocate to Düsseldorf, in West Germany. The walled city was no longer a profitable location that attracted many people. As with other Berlin industries and enterprises, the fashion industry slowly fell into a state of slumber and decay. In the 1960s and 70s, Berlin lost its status as the fashion capital of Germany and, despite surviving through the difficult transitions and adjustments, many of the post-war designers closed their fashion houses by 1970 (Mohr and Panck 20).

Driving through the ruins of Berlin in 1946, Carl Zuckmayer wrote,

Die Fahrt durch die Ruinen...als sei man im Hades gewesen, in den man nicht zurückblicken darf. Daher kommt wohl auch jenes unerklärliche Vergessen, das mich heute immer wieder bei vielen Menschen in Deutschland überrascht. Als hätten sie in dieser Notzeit gar nicht wirklich gelebt, als wären sie wie Schlafwandler durch diese jammervollen Jahre gegangen. (Qtd in Holmsten 220)

This notion of sleep-walking through Hades and the notion of general forgetting echoes Benjamin's theory in his *Passagen-Werk*, which states that fashion(s) can serve as medication against collective forgetting. This medication could be tasted at the various exhibitions commemorating the

history of the Berlin fashion industry and the life in the ruins. Not only is fashion an expression of the social unconscious, as Benjamin claimed, it serves to remind us of our own history by always being contemporary to each past (qtd. in Lehmann 271). Precisely this way of looking at history through fashion was demonstrated at the *Berliner Chic* exhibition that was on display in Berlin from November 2001 until January 2004, and it is this type of history that has been preserved by the women of Berlin who have preserved, collected, told and displayed their past through articles of clothing.

Endnotes

1. Berliner Stadtmuseum Mode-Abteilung.
2. See *A Woman in Berlin—Diary 20 April 1945 to 22 June 1945*. Anonymous. Transl. by Philip Boehm. London: Viarago Press, 2005.
3. The Nürnberg Trials and the ambitious de-Nazification process took place across the country shortly after the Allies arrived in the spring of 1945.
4. *Berlins Modeblatt* (Berlin: Herausgeber Chery Karl Gessinger, Oktober 1945).
5. Berlin's fashion manufacturing industry was among the most successful in Europe throughout the 19th century and prior to the Nazi take-over in 1933. Its success was primarily based on the *Zwischenmeister*-system, in which the designer/manufacturer supplied the *Zwischenmeister* (middle-man) with orders and fabrics, while the middle-man was responsible for managing the cutting and finishing procedures, and hiring the seamstresses and home workers who were paid per item sewn. This system was particularly efficient as no large factories were needed, since most of the work was performed by home-working seamstresses; the industry could flourish by adjusting to new economic conditions. With the Nazi take-over the industry was almost completely eliminated or aryanized, forcing the majority of (the many Jewish) designers and manufacturers to emigrate.

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6. *Berlins Modeblatt* (Berlin: Herausgeber Chery Karl Gessinger, Oktober 1945).
7. Gretel Wagner, "Die Mode in Berlin" in *Berlin en Vogue: Berliner Mode in der Photographie*. Ed. By. Katja Aschke, F.C. Grundlach, Uli Richter. (Berlin: Wasmuth Ernst Verlag, 1993), 130.
8. There have been many exhibitions in Berlin in recent decades commemorating *Trümmerfrauen*. Currently there are at least two displays, one at the Museum of European Cultures, the other at Berlin *Unterwelten* bunker tour. There are also two monuments erected to the *Trümmerfrauen*, one in the west part of Berlin, one in the east, in front of the Rotes Rathaus.
9. Two examples are: Society of Berlin Fashion Houses Fashion Show at the Dorchester Hotel, London, March 28, 1957. Berlin Day Fashion Show and Luncheon, Friday, May 21, 1965, at Noon, Plaza Hotel, New York City.

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7. Die "Grenze" als literarische Kategorie" oder Bilder einer geteilten Stadt in der deutschen Literatur nach dem Mauerbau

Carsten Gansel

In view of the presentation of Berlin as a setting this article deals with culture related considerations which place Berlin in the context of city developments like the emerging "Berlin-novels." This will be accomplished by examining the significance of the concept of spatiality in fictional texts and its discussion within narrational models. Uwe Johnson's essay "Berlin City Railway (obsolete)" will be re-discussed in the second part of the article. It will also be shown why the author argued that when it comes to the literary presentation of the 'locality Berlin' one cannot avoid considering its particularities because "the border among both systems, according to which one can live in the world today" runs through Berlin. It will be demonstrated to what extent the border between Berlin's districts falls into the state of a "literary category." In the third part of the contribution, exemplary selected aspects of the Berlin-presentation from GDR authors after the construction of the wall from August 1961 will be examined. In doing so, specific characteristics of the action and "symbol system" literature should also be recorded.

Ausgehend von der Bedeutung der Raumdarstellung in fiktionalen Texten und seiner Diskussion im Rahmen narratologischer Modelle wird in Hinblick auf die Inszenierung von Berlin als Schauplatz von kulturwissenschaftlich motivierten Überlegungen ausgegangen, die Berlin in den

