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Book Review

***Ornament und Mode bei Kafka, Broch und Musil. Literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf das Fin de Siècle in Wien***

by **Miriam Annabelle Wray**, transcript Verlag, 2019. 194 pp. 74.99€.

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*Ornament und Mode bei Kafka, Broch und Musil. Literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf das Fin de Siècle in Wien*

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The ornament played a key role in the intellectual discourses in the German-speaking world of the early twentieth century. Adolf Loos' famous evisceration of ornamentation as an anachronistic remnant of a bygone era is perhaps the central text in this context, and Siegfried Kracauer's elucidations of the mass ornament and the capitalist economy were similarly influential. Wray invokes both thinkers in the introduction to her work, but whereas scholars have generally considered such theories of the ornament in the context of architecture, Wray determines to show that the interconnection of fashion and ornamentation is of similar importance. Fashion, she makes clear, is to be defined broadly in this context, referring not only to clothing and sartorial accessories but also to the stylization and transformation of the human body more generally. Wray establishes that the advent of industrialization and mass production constituted a crucial moment for fashion and ornamentation: The ornament, previously viewed as an articulation of human creativity, became the superficial product of mechanized industry. Wray seeks to show that the consequent reassessment of the ornament, inexorably bound up with reflections on modern socioeconomic transformations, left an indelible mark on literature at the turn of the century.

Wray's literary analyses convincingly demonstrate the interconnection of societal change and fashion in the works she considers. This is exemplified by her initial reflections on the writings of Grete Meisel-Hess. She establishes that the question of fashion and ornamentation is bound up with questions of women's liberation for Meisel-Hess. The

fashion of the time was, Meisel-Hess detailed in her essays, determined by repressive sexual morality under the conditions of modern capitalism, which results in the woman's economic dependency on her husband. Meisel-Hess consequently brings together political emancipation with the transformation of fashion, likening the fight for suffrage to the concomitant dress reform movements that sought a move away from the restrictive corset. Wray shows that this understanding of fashion illuminates Meisel-Hess's literary works, and she charts the way in which the emancipation from restrictive bourgeois norms of the protagonists of *Fanny Roth* and *Die Intellektuellen* takes place through a negotiation of different forms of attire and ornament.

It is Taylorized modern industry that Wray sees embodied in the ornaments of Franz Kafka's work. Her focus in this case lies primarily on the relevance of Kracauer's mass ornament for *Der Verschollene*, and she convincingly argues that Kafka anticipates Kracauer's essay and its analysis of the Tiller Girls, who form an ornament that, abstract and disconnected from organic forms, reproduces the structure of commodity capitalism. Wray contends that Kafka develops his own cinematographic perspective on this basis, perceiving in the superficiality of modern life insights into the underlying socioeconomic developments. Fashion and ornamentation accordingly play an important role for such a perspective, and Wray explores the role Kafka attributes to professional attire in determining individual identity and integrating the human into the Taylorized workforce and the modern economy. Clothing thus functions not as a means of self-expression but rather acquires an autonomy and, reflecting the disciplining of the human body under prevailing economic relations, dictates the identity of its wearer.

There can be no doubt that the strength of Wray's monograph lies in her ability to lucidly uncover the importance of the ornament to the works she considers, and this ability finds its most convincing articulation in her analysis of Hermann Broch's *Die Schlafwandler*.

Wray offers a cohesive reading of the novel trilogy that she presents as a critique of a society no longer able to produce ornamentation. Broch differentiates between the ornamental and the decorative. While the former expresses underlying meaning or artistic creativity, the latter is entirely superficial. Such superficial decoration, Wray argues compellingly, has become the norm in the modern society depicted by Broch in his trilogy. Whereas sacral and professional attire had, according to Broch, previously been underpinned by a universal Judeo-Christian worldview, a totality that imbued all its elements with meaning, such a system has disappeared in a modern era characterized by fragmentation and the erosion of values. Wray outlines how attire consequently becomes an empty shell, a relic of a bygone era disconnected from any greater meaning, and individuals submit themselves to destructively anachronistic forms of identity entrenched in professional and military uniforms.

Wray concludes her literary analyses with a consideration of Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, opening a new perspective on a text that, for all its canonicity, has rarely been considered in this thematic context. Fashion and ornamentation embody in this case various intellectual and cultural discourses that coexist in the depicted society. The tension between personal identity and communal identity communicated through clothing, well-established in the preceding analyses, appears here again, and clothing once more attains a degree of autonomy, compelling individuals to conform to social discourses and thereby dictating the wearer's personal identity. Wray introduces Ernst Mach's theory of the unsavable self to argue that the depiction of fashion corresponds to a form of individuality that, tied to discourses and their sartorial representation, is inessential and shifting. The murderer Moosbrugger provides, in Wray's view, an illustratively extreme case of the dangers of the subject's disintegration. The disharmony of an identity imposed from without and the individual's own experiences, which constitutes the fundamental condition of the depicted society, is shown to lead to murderous violence.

Throughout her work, Wray details the historical interconnection of the textile trade and the act of writing. Thus, in the second chapter, she outlines the history of that trade and its impact on the German-speaking world. She goes on to explicate historical connections between the textile trade and Jewish culture, etymological connections between text and textile, and biographical connections to the textile industry of the authors she considers. In her textual analyses too, she emphasizes how texts supplement ornamentation or how, in Musil's case, the novel's structure itself resembles a discursive tapestry. Such elucidations undoubtedly make a compelling case for the interrelation of text and textile in the early twentieth century. At times, however, the monograph struggles to hold together the countless strands of inquiry it thus lays out, and the chapters occasionally appear unfocused. Nevertheless, in spite of this inability to answer all the questions it raises, Wray's work provides an illuminating and original testament to the importance of its subject matter and paves the way for further examinations of the role of fashion and the ornament both in fin-de-siècle Vienna and beyond.