

Turner's own voice) and then an account of the killings (which Tomlins takes to be Gray's voice). A break, then, between Turner's 'decision' and the actual killings, which involved not just Turner but a growing group of mostly enslaved blacks in the community who joined the rebellion. How does one lead to another? Turner might have been (in Tomlins' rendering) a Kierkegaardian 'lonely knight of faith', but how did he enter the secular world to mobilise others to join him? How did Turner cross, as it were, that break? Here, Tomlins confesses: we simply do not know. As Tomlins puts it: 'We cannot know the precise content of the politics [Turner] invented for that moment, but we do know that Turner's politics enabled their collective, violent defiance'. Here is a break in meaning caused by an absence of writing, one that brings us to the limits of our (and Tomlins') knowledge, the edge of our ability to produce meaning.

We confront the same limit to knowledge caused by a lack of writing when we talk about the actual killings. Tomlins rejects the historian Eugene Genovese's view that the Turner rebellion was 'mindless slaughter'. The killings make sense, Tomlins insists. But at the same time that Tomlins insists on the possibility of meaning, his own text reveals that that meaning dissolves into a series of unanswered (and unanswerable) questions. We might perhaps know what drove Turner, but we have ab-

solutely no way of knowing what drove the other rebels. As Tomlins puts it: 'The killings were not indiscriminate, but purposeful. They followed a logic. But what was their logic? Was it instrumental – revenge? Was killing incidental to some overriding purpose, such as flight or revolution? Or was it in itself a central and essential redemptive act?'

In Tomlins' book, then, we confront two different ways of responding to 'what was never written'. On the one hand, Nat Turner emerges as a model for the 'true historian' who reads 'what was never written' to blast open 'self-contained facticity'. Tomlins himself adopts this model when he forces disciplinary history to confront a Turner that it cannot contain. On the other hand, at various crucial points in Tomlins' account, in what is a very different model for a 'true historian', Tomlins also reads 'what was never written' – the nitty gritty of winning others over to join the rebellion, the hidden logics of the real work of killing – in terms of the limits of our abilities as historians, the realisation that we simply do not and cannot know. The former points to a surfeit of meaning, the latter to its breakdown. How do we decide? What is the relationship between the two? In Tomlins' reaching beyond and yet cleaving to his disciplinary training as a historian, the answers reside.

Kunal Parker

Moribund elegance

Philipp Ekardt, *Benjamin on Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 256pp., £74.59 hb., 978 1 35007 599 3

In Daniel Mourenza's *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Film* (2020), we learn that Walter Benjamin, in the summer of 1938, went to see a Katharine Hepburn film at the cinema – it might have been *Holiday*, it might have been *Bringing Up Baby*. In Philipp Ekardt's *Benjamin on Fashion* (also published last year) we learn of the 'hardly acknowledged if not entirely ignored fact that in his Parisian exile during the 1930s, Walter Benjamin must have visited fashion shows.' This is evidenced in a letter written in July 1935 to Gretel Karplus, wife of Adorno and one-time manager of a family leather business (something I also learnt from the Ekardt's book). 'If all goes well',

Benjamin writes, 'I will be able to treat myself again with one or two fashion shows.' This anecdote frames Ekardt's monograph on Benjamin's work on fashion – only the second on such a topic, since Ulrich Lehmann's *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (2000) – which functions not just to reconstruct Benjamin's esoteric and unsynthesised writings on fashion, but to do so through the textures, cuts and silhouettes of the time, as if to reassemble a 1935 runway show as the runway might have been viewed at that time. In this vast Warburgian panorama, history finds new patterns and transformations.

Benjamin on Fashion is divided into two parts. The

first half addresses fashion's temporality and historiography. Fashion is held as a 'measure of time' (*Zeitmass*), ruled not just by continuity but a continuity of discontinuity: a repetition or eternal return of the eversame, where the old appears in ultra-modern get up. Drawing on Georg Simmel's 1905 essay 'Philosophy of Fashion', Ekardt shows how fashion is forever becoming through its unbecoming: cancelling itself in its realisation, charting its rise and its demise simultaneously. To fulfil its own promise, fashion must continuously destroy itself, and fail to escape its own temporal logic. Ekardt provides two models: the revolutionary, which leaps tiger-like into the past, to arrest the present from the eternal churn of homogeneous empty time; and *apocatastasis* where the entire past is condensed into the present. The result is uncertain, hard to establish: a *mode* that abolishes time and ignites history, or one that breaks with the deathly charm of the commodity form, even one that abolishes the dull treadmill of fashion's seasonality.

The second part turns to Benjamin's relation to fashion's textured history, and Ekardt evokes a chorus of designers, cutters, photographers, journalists, spectators and socialites. The most central figure is Helen Grund, who most likely would have accompanied Benjamin to the 1935 show. Interestingly, Grund only gets a footnote in Lehmann's *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*, but with her married name. 'Frau Hessel' was married, we are told, to Benjamin's co-translator of Proust, Franz Hessel. In 1935, Grund (her maiden name that she always used for writing) published *The Essence of Fashion* in a limited run of 1,000 copies by the German College of Fashion in Munich, which is extensively quoted in the *Arcades Project*. Ekardt shows how Benjamin's writing is indebted to Grund's work, and how to exclude this would replicate the detachment of his 'genius mind' from the work of those around him. Ekardt not only seeks to acknowledge Grund's work in all its expertise and elegance, but to expand on it, to fill in the gaps that Benjamin also left vacant or unacknowledged (helped along the way by fashion scholars such as Caroline Evans and Judith Clark).

This work of reconstruction has already begun, but largely in German. In 2014, Mila Ganeva edited *Ich schreibe aus Paris: Über die Mode, das Leben und die Liebe* [*I write from Paris: on fashion, life and love*], which collects Grund's writings together in a glossy single volume for

the first time, including articles on sports apparel, organ-die and hairdressing. In 2018, the magazine-periodical *Mode and Mode*, edited by Laura Gardner, devoted eighty pages to a couple of translations of these *feuilleton* articles, an interview with Ganeva, alongside facsimiles of Grund's correspondence with Henri-Pierre Roché (the writer of *Jules et Jim*, a novel that depicts his polyamorous entanglement with Grund, the basis for François Truffaut's 1962 film of the same name).



Helen Hessel photographed in Paris, c.1929 (Nimbus Books /Manfred Flügge)

A theory of elegance is a significant product of Ekardt's engagement with Grund's work, refracted back through Benjamin. This, the second part of the book, is based on a previously unpublished eight-page fragment held in the Benjamin Archive in Berlin, thought to be the transcript of a lecture delivered to Grund's fashion students in Munich, which somehow fell into Benjamin's hands. For Grund, elegance is the production of something beyond mere dress. It refers to materials but is 'a surplus in relation to the mere textile and its materiality'. It relates to how the body animates matter, beyond a concept of beauty. It is a form of confidence, fused into

grace through gesture and movement, enabled by clothes that would otherwise appear dead or inert.

From here, Ekardt explicates a theory of the model (alongside the mannequin), on the runway or in the studio, who embodies elegance through the animation of material, rather than the mere presentation of dead, inert matter. This is what Benjamin extracts most from Grund's work: the development of what Ekardt names as 'obdurate fashion', an interest in the morbid, the hard-edged, the inorganic. To animate matter is to vivify the deadly, to shock, subvert and ironise. Here we find the book's first reversal of reification, in which the garment and (by implication) the subject becomes 'thing' in order to become 'subject' again. Elegance teases death. Ekardt mobilises the example of the designer Elsa Schiaparelli, whose models walked as drawers and cabinets, with door handles for nipples. The same can be seen also with Schiaparelli's other famous construction: the shoe that becomes a hat. One can add another example. In 1968 the designer and union activist Elizabeth Hawes designed a jumper that might most demonstrate obduracy. In the knit was included what looks like a US phone number: 382-5968. Dial it up. The threads of the knit speak back: FUC-KOFF. Ekhardt argues that 'stuff' doesn't move; in this case, 'stuff' obdurately speaks back.



Elizabeth Hawes, Sweater, 1968 (Collection: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

For Ekardt, elegance is tied up with the rejection of the androgynous looks of the 1920s, in favour of gender-dimorphous silhouettes of the 1930s. At this point, historiography becomes important. The classicism of the 1930s look – lower hems, higher waists and more typically gendered silhouettes – points to a counter-revolutionary turn in which the imperialist or neo-classicist tendencies of the 1930s were dressed in the garb of the imperialist past. Ekhardt shows us stark silhouettes of models, shot by the likes of Horst, George Hoyningen-Huene or Cecil Beaton, who appear as if petrified in Munich's Glyptothek, as if to prefigure Leni Riefenstahl's opening of *Olympia* (1938). Here the famous trope of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852) remains true in its reversal: counter-revolutions as much as revolutions find their expression in the garments of the past.

Sex, sexuality and subversion also come to play a significant part in the text. Ekhardt reads Grund's work through an essay by George H. Darwin (Charles Darwin's son), 'Development in Dress' (1872), which argues that fashion permits 'the ability to recompose one's appearance (i.e., the difference and variation in comparison to a panorama of earlier looks) which sparks sexual attraction'. What can be understood as a 'heterosexual naturalism', whereby fashion's display functions to signal or encourage procreation, also leads to a surrealistic morphology where augmentation, modification and elaboration transform the body, through the dissolution between the boundaries of the organic and inorganic. The bride who closes the fashion show, now appears wedded, not to a groom, but to a deadened and transformed nature. Fashion here entices sexuality to recognise its relation to the inorganic world: to sequins, shells and whale bone. Such obscure references in Benjamin's work, particularly in convolute B of the *Arcades Project* find their historical underpinning in Ekhardt's work.

Ekhardt takes the argument further, to the point where fashion does not *reflect* sexuality but *substitutes* it. The claim is that fashion exists because there isn't enough sex, whether out of the necessity of repression or, perhaps, as Brecht has it elsewhere, because 'the bourgeoisie has contrived to ruin even sexuality' to the point where it will die out. Ekhardt finds this explicitly in the history of contemporaneous fashion, through Schiaparelli's 'genital millinery', which Benjamin refers to in the *Arcades*, a reference that would otherwise be

lost on the reader, as it was on me. A history can be told of hats that, at some point, were phallic and hats that, at other points, were yonic. This, for Ekhardt, represents a shift from the androgyny of the 1920s to a biorphication of the body in the 1930s: rendered classically, with exaggerated sexualities. The connection to a fascist aesthetic could be elaborated further here, as it is in Irene Guenther's *Nazi Chic: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (2004) and Eugenia Paulicelli's *Fashion Under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt* (2004).

For Benjamin, as for Ekardt (bar a brief discussion of textile manufacture), production remains a neglected part of the analysis, which does not mean that they think it unimportant, even foundational. Marx began the first volume of *Capital* in a similar place, with the commodity and its transfigurations, but he fell back quickly to a discussion of linen and its quantities and the conditions of its making. Étienne Balibar has claimed that one should start by reading the final chapter of *Capital*, so that the first element of capital's accumulation – i.e. primitive accumulation – is at the start when (spoiler alert) it isn't. But if capital is a whirling circuit of im-

minent disaster and exploitation, it does seem strange to ignore the sweatshops, the monopsonies, the mythical factory ships that combine production with circulation, the industrial disputes and disasters, the wage relation, the environmental extractions and disasters, the way in which racism and gendered violence structure all moments of the circuit. After all, if elegance is teased by death, isn't this because, as commodities, the elegant things of fashion contain the dead labour of their production, and, as such, like all other commodities, they drip with the tragedy of their production?

Fashion is a corpse. Benjamin knew that, but fashion too animates the body in new ways, against (or through) the objectification of subjects in capital. But it does so insufficiently and incompletely. Of Benjamin's famous image, in which the hems of the dresses expand with the territorial expansion of French Empire, one wonders what could happen to our dresses, our hems, our touch, our relation to materials after empire's total abolition. Only at this point, the tiger jumps backwards, into another world. Ekardt, through Grund and Benjamin, points the way.

Sam Dolbear

The doctor's knife

Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020). 145pp., £11.55 hb., 978 1 62963 706 8

Silvia Federici is one of contemporary feminism's celebrity thinkers, and with good reason. Her work since the 1970s on capitalism and gender has been of fundamental importance in developing theories of social reproduction. She is known as both a scholar and an activist, as a founding member of the Wages for Housework campaign. Her writings have reached a new audience in recent years through a series of essay collections published by PM Press, helping to galvanise a popular revival of Marxist feminism that offers a valuable counterpoint to the shallow neoliberal individualism that has underlain much of feminism's mainstream resurgence. Federici remains distinctive in Anglophone feminism for her attention to environmental issues and to feminist justice on a global scale; her concern with elder care and ageing

is similarly unusual and praiseworthy. Her work on social reproduction has taken on a renewed urgency in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of homeschooling and increased demands for unpaid care.

Federici's latest book consists of ten short chapters on familiar themes. These include the historical context for the disciplining of the body under capitalism (the subject of her earlier work *Caliban and the Witch* (2004)); the body in second wave feminist thought and activism; theories of gender performativity, with which Federici takes issue; and the feminist politics of surrogacy and of sex work. The book collects a number of essays mostly published in the last ten years, along with new material developed from lectures delivered in 2015.