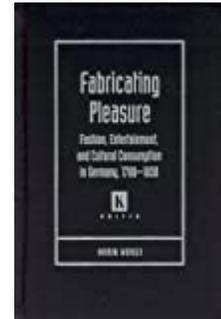




Karin Wurst. *Fabricating Pleasure: Fashion, Entertainment, and Cultural Consumption in Germany, 1780-1830.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. xxvi + 485 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3131-6.



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Serious Entertainment in Late-Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth-Century Germany

Until fairly recently, German-speaking lands played only a bit part in scholarly discussions of eighteenth-century European consumer culture. The situation changed in 1998, with the publication of Daniel Purdy's *The Tyranny of Elegance*. Purdy's analysis made it clear that Germany, despite its relative economic underdevelopment, was nonetheless the site of "a vibrant and complex consumer culture," one that "from its earliest stages exhibited many of the features we associate with mass consumer culture."^[1]

Karin Wurst's fascinating new study offers the most comprehensive treatment to date of the many facets of that consumer culture, which comprised everything from fashions and fashion journals, to leisure travel, landscape gardening and the viewing of large-scale public dioramas. Wurst's approach to these topics incorporates the insights of the most recent scholarship in the field, and not only from German Studies. Indeed, one of the many strengths of this volume is its engagement with recent work done on consumption by those working on British culture. The basic theoretical framework that informs the study, however, comes neither from Germany nor Britain

but from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Wurst presents a multi-faceted analysis, but it seems safe to say that her primary interest is in the identity formation of the German middle class. She uses Bourdieu's conceptual framework in order to demonstrate how various cultural practices in the period serve both to articulate and legitimate social differences among members of that class. Complicating one of the commonplaces of scholarship on eighteenth-century Germany, her analysis identifies a late-eighteenth-century shift in the self-understanding of the middle class, as a notion of identity conceived in opposition to the nobility was replaced by an emphasis on intra-class differentiation. The fact that this shift seems so self-evident in retrospect only illustrates the persuasiveness of Wurst's argument and makes one wonder why it has been neglected for so long. The author herself provides an answer. Only by expanding the scope of analysis beyond the traditional focus on elite culture can one grasp how cultural consumers combined a wide variety of practices in order to demonstrate both their individuality and their allegiance to specific

subgroups.

Wurst could have made her case even more compelling (and it certainly would have been in the spirit of Bourdieu), had she included a more detailed typology of these subgroups. Nonetheless, her basic insight is invaluable and opens up an important new perspective middle-class identity formation in the period. This new perspective helps counterbalance the rather less inclusive approaches of a number of social and cultural historians, including Jürgen Habermas, another one of Wurst's main interlocutors. As Wurst reminds us, Habermas's theory of the public sphere, as crucial as it is to any analysis of eighteenth-century culture, nonetheless relies too heavily on a monolithic conception of high culture and critical discourse as a source for middle-class values. One unfortunate consequence of this narrow focus is a neglect of the central role played by women in helping to create the everyday culture from which the middle class derived its self-understanding. As Wurst explains, while the patriarchal system forced women to restrict their activities to the domestic sphere, these activities nonetheless provided many with a means of creative self-expression, and also, in some cases, the ability to exercise a great deal of influence over public tastes.

Wurst's study is composed of an introduction and nine very readable and information-rich chapters. There is a great deal of productive overlap among them, but, generally speaking, the analysis proceeds from theory to practice. The first five chapters tend to emphasize methodological and theoretical issues, whereas the remaining four focus on specific cultural forms or activities. Following the introduction, which takes issue with the lack of a serious critical engagement with the concept of pleasure, Wurst turns in chapter 1 to the inadequacies of the binary model of "high" and "trivial" culture that has informed criticism and scholarship ever since the opposition emerged in the eighteenth century. Chapter 2 elucidates the "two waves" of middle-class identity construction mentioned previously, while chapter 3 explores how the discourse of sensibility—with its emphasis on the family and the love-marriage—helped to enable the new consumer culture that appeared around the same time. Chapter 4 offers an in-depth treatment of the concepts of pleasure and entertainment, addressing their relation to traditional aesthetic theory and their relevance for understanding specific practices of cultural consumption in the period. The fifth chapter functions as something of a transition piece, explaining the special significance of the increasingly diversified print culture within the larger complex of "cultural consumerism" that constitutes the

focus of the study. One of the most compelling sections of the chapter analyzes the gendered terminology used to differentiate "serious" from "trivial" literature, thereby showing that the idea of a "feminized" mass culture can be traced back at least to the eighteenth century.

Chapters 6 through 9 focus on fashion journals (especially Bertuch's *Journal des Luxus und der Moden*); on emerging forms of sociability and domestic entertainment; on nature as a source of pleasure in the new cultures of travel, spa visits and landscape gardening; and, finally, on the wide range of leisure-time activities, from *Deklamatorien* to *tableau vivants*, that can be seen as part of a burgeoning public interest in theatricality and performance. The appeal of these chapters has as much to do with the wealth of primary material Wurst introduces as well as with her fine-grained analyses of these materials. Nonetheless, she frequently comes back to the broader theoretical concerns of the study—not simply the topic of middle-class identity formation, but also the way in which entertainment culture helps to compensate for an increasingly disciplined and functionally differentiated modern society. There are times when Wurst's arguments in this regard sound similar to claims about the compensatory role of culture made by Herbert Marcuse and others, despite the fact that she distances herself from this approach in the introduction. The key difference is that Wurst is not interested in the allegedly negative political consequences of such compensation. She focuses instead on the legitimate role of entertainment and pleasure as a means for what Foucault has described as "the care of the self."

My brief overview of the chapters gives a sense of the impressive scope of Wurst's analysis. While there are times when the precise relation among the pieces of the puzzle is not completely clear, the reader is more than compensated for this minor shortcoming by the quality of the individual analyses and the basic conceptual framework that informs them. Moreover, for scholars working on topics related to consumer culture, *Fabricating Pleasure* also raises a series of questions that point to key areas for additional inquiry. Most fundamentally: what is the precise status of literature, and of print culture more generally, in the consumer culture of the period? Whereas Daniel Purdy presented reading the fashion journal as a kind of anticipatory, "virtual" consumption that preceded the more developed consumer culture of the nineteenth century, Wurst tends to view reading as one form of consumption among many, simultaneous with and inextricable from the purchase of actual goods and services in the period. Related to this question is that

of Germany's uniqueness vis-à-vis more commercially advanced countries such as England (or France). Finally, the study raises the question of just how materialist material culture studies is or should be. Taking her cue, it would seem, from Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1983), Wurst emphasizes the change in mentalities that enabled the rise of cultural consumerism in the period. But this change in mentalities could itself be linked to changes in technology, as some media theorists would argue, or to the consequences of social phenomena such as the spread of the market.

In sum, Wurst's analysis deepens our understand-

ing of consumer culture in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Germany; it sheds new light on the role of entertainment and pleasure in the construction of class and gender identities; and it generates reflection on a host of topics that have great relevance for future research. It is a book that makes an important contribution to the field and will prove valuable to wide range of scholars from a variety of disciplines.

Note

[1]. Daniel Purdy, *The Tyranny of Elegance: Consumer Cosmopolitanism in the Era of Goethe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. ix.

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