

CLOTHES ARE SOUVENIRS

ORNAMENT AND OBSCOLESCENCE

In *Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence* (1932)¹ Bernard London proposed a strategy to adjust products in such a way that they become obsolete sooner, creating opportunity for new products to be introduced and stimulating their sales. This embedded obsolescence can be achieved by introducing functional elements with a limited lifespan, like non-replaceable batteries, or objects with singular functions that are inadaptable. It can, however, also be accomplished by changing the perception of the surface appearance of a commodity. This is commonly referred to as style obsolescence, linking directly to the fashion industry and the seasonal changes of looks: a new length, a new color, a new print etcetera.

With his observation that changes in ornamentation lead to a premature devaluation of the labor product² Adolf Loos illustrates that ornament can be understood as a tool of planned obsolescence. Ornamentation places the object in a certain style period and opens the possibility to create a new – and therefore desirable – version of a product by merely changing its appearance. This means that ornament plays a central role in a continuous cycle of production and consumption set in motion by industrialization, which gave rise to modernity, capitalism and the fashion industry as we know it today.

Ornament: the first thought that comes to mind is that it is a visible, material addition to the surface of an object. However, referring back to the 1920's and 30's, when Bernard London wrote *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*, the economic situation and developments in psychology of that time created the opportunity for another interesting form of ornamentation to emerge. In the book *The Waste Makers* (1960)³ Vance

¹ LONDON, BERNARD. (1932) *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*. [Online] Available from <http://www.2launch.nl/index.php/lifetime/planned-obsolescence>. [Accessed on 05/02/2014] / ² LOOS, ADOLF. (1908) *Ornament and Crime*. [Online] Available from http://www.2launch.nl/~art/Temporary_ST/177/pdfs/Loos.pdf. [Accessed on 10/10/2007] / ³ PACKARD, VANCE. (1960) *The Waste Makers*. United States: Vance Packard Inc. (first edition) LONDON, BERNARD. (1932) *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*. [Online] Available from <http://www.2launch.nl/index.php/lifetime/planned-obsolescence>. [Accessed on 05/02/2014] / ⁴ LONDON, BERNARD. (1932) *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*. [Online] Available from <http://www.2launch.nl/index.php/lifetime/planned-obsolescence>. [Accessed on 05/02/2014]



Packard divided planned obsolescence into two subcategories: one of desirability and one of function. For obsolescence of desirability he also used the term “psychological obsolescence” which referred to marketers’ attempts to “wear a product in the owners mind”.⁴ An example of this commercial strategy can be given by looking at Edward Bernays, the founder of PR and what we today consider branding. Bernays succeeded to make smoking a socially acceptable habit for women by arranging a public event where beautiful women would be seen smoking cigarettes alongside the powerful slogan “torches of freedom”.⁵ Using cultural symbols, conventions and understandings, Bernays created a symbolic value-ornament that changed people’s value-related perception. Just like the literal ornament, a value-ornament offers no functional improvements, imposes a certain aesthetic and gives the product a new ‘style’. In this case a desirable connotation of emancipation.

Today, (fashion) designers work both with literal ornaments, which are visible, material, and with symbolic value-ornaments, which often take on the form of ‘stories’. Both forms of ornament offer the possibility to change the surface appearance or style – the surface appearance as a tangible surface of an object and as an intangible layer of meaning – but the symbolic value-ornament is a specifically effective tool to create psychological obsolescence. Firstly because the value-ornament directly addresses the owner’s mind and secondly because it focuses on the intangible surface appearance and therefore exists independently from the practical materialistic character of the product. Because the value-ornament doesn’t require innovation of functions, materials or production processes it facilitates an ‘easy’ production of the ‘new’, and acts as an accelerant in the continued renewal and consumption of products. And although clearly related to fashion, this manner of changing style or surface appearance also occurs in numerous other sectors, like interior design, transport, food, technology, education, healthcare, etcetera.

ORNAMENT AS COMMODITY

At the 2013 CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund Awards, fashion designer Tom Ford told a crowd of young designers: “Remember that our customers do not need our clothes.”⁶ With this statement Ford, who is highly competent in fashion branding, points out

to his audience that the actual, material clothes do not really matter within fashion and consumer society. Customers do not need clothes but desire the accompanied symbolic value-ornaments.

Since the symbolic value-ornament, often constructed in stories, is what matters most to the consumer, it has now become the starting point in the design process. The technical, material production is outsourced to a ‘builder’ (a dressmaker or factory for example) who helps the designer build the material product that functions as a scaffolding for the value-ornaments. This outsourcing underlines the symbolic value ornament as the essence of design, exceeding utility value and stressing the role of today’s designer as ornamentor. Frame Magazine (2014) captures the redefined role of the designer and the ornament within the design process with the following headline on its cover: “Speak up, designers must be storytellers.”⁷

Craftsmanship and hands-on materialism currently enjoy increased popularity but even when they seem to stress the importance of the material object and in some cases contribute to the improvement of a product’s material quality, their commercial value is determined by a single symbolic value-ornament: authenticity. The focus on meaning over practical value not only turns the designer into an ornamentor, it also brings about a transformation of the role and character of the material product. Subordinate to the value-ornament, it now only functions as a carrier of meaning and as a result the actual material product becomes easily interchangeable with other products. This creates the possibility for a designer or a brand to not only create clothes, but also make-up, perfume, shoes, sunglasses, cars, furniture, etcetera without the necessity of any knowledge about the material and functional characteristics of the product. Again quoting Frame Magazine and its reflection on the number one furniture fair: “Anything goes, based on the story”.⁸ The role of the material product is now to make sure the intangible value-ornament can be carried around by the consumer, so that he or she can relate to it in daily life. Especially in clothing, the symbolic value is easily carried around and is worn close to the body. If ornament has become the main motivation in production and consumption, it is possible to conclude that ornament has not just become its essence, but that it has become the commodity itself. If so, does this mean that the actual material object has become what the ornament once was: an addition?

ORNAMENTING THE INNER SELF INSTEAD OF THE OUTER SELF

Ornament has made a transition from the tangible to the intangible, it has become the starting point in the design process and is the main motivation for the consumer to buy a particular product. In addition to this shift, the intrinsic character of ornament is also subject to change. Contemporary Western society is marked by an all-encompassing emphasis on developing our inner emotional selves. This shows in a growing business in ‘self-betterment’: personal coaches, self-help or self-improvement blogs, books and magazines that all address the psychological development of the individual faced with questions like: “Who am I?” “What is my talent?” “What is my passion?” and “What is my goal in life?” Likewise, in education and on the job market phrases like ‘passion’ and ‘personal qualities’ are presented as being the key to success. The move from fashion as a way to communicate a social identity to fashion as the expression of an individual identity is now followed by the next dimension, which is aimed at the design of the inner self instead of merely expressing it.

The general focus on emotion and the preoccupation with improvement of the inner self combine with consumerism and desire for the ‘new’ to reach new extremes in today’s experience economy. The experience economy demands that business should orchestrate memorable events through fantasies, feelings and fun, and that consumers will be charged for the value of transformation that the experience offers.⁹

For example, the Nike store in the Fashion Island lifestyle center in Newport Beach, California features an in-store workout studio for group or personal training sessions.¹⁰ Nike not only offers this in-store training as a means to sell a new shirt or pair of shoes or to engage consumers with a material product. The goal or the ‘product’ sold in these training sessions is interaction or, as B. Joseph Pine II & James H. Gilmore would say: the “transformation” as an ongoing activity. According to B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore the key elements

to these experiences are “fantasies, feelings and fun”. Within experience design, exactly these emotional elements are used as a constructed added value: a symbolic value-ornament. Bringing together emotion as a means and emotion as a goal illustrates that today, feelings are used to sell feelings.

Sometimes the emotion is clearly spelled out on the product to be sold, like Nivea Happy, and sometimes the emotion is sold almost without the existence of a relevant material product - Burberry Kiss for example: a collaboration of Burberry and Google that allows users to kiss their touch screens and send their lip prints to loved ones.¹¹

TODAY’S ORNAMENT, A FLEETING STATE OF MIND

Whereas the literal ornament dresses or ‘designs’ the human body, today’s ornament of emotions dresses the inner self. Today’s ornament, clearly grounded in the experience economy, could consequently be defined as a way to design or achieve a certain intrinsic modus, a ‘state of mind’ or ‘fashion’.

In White Walls, Designer Dresses, Mark Wigley, points out that Loos does not criticize ornament because it so easily succumbs to fashion. Rather, ornament is, by definition, fashion itself.¹² Approached from the realm of the literal ornament, as a so-called ‘superficial’ addition, this statement could be interpreted to mean that fashion is a surface layer, a ‘sauce’. However, considering the equation of ornament from the realm of today’s ornament leads to a completely different possible definition of fashion: if today’s ornament can be defined as a state of mind, and ornament is fashion, would it not be feasible to conclude that contemporary fashion is a state of mind?

Just like today’s ornament, fashion too could be defined as an intangible affair that only becomes obtainable, visible and useable through ‘expressions’ like shopping spaces, ‘dressing up’, writings, advertising, events, magazines, etcetera. More importantly, however: if fashion, like today’s ornament, is a state of mind, fleetingness is its most pronounced specification. This fleetingness has always been acknowledged as an

Remember that our customers do not need our clothes.

5 CURTIS, ADAM. (2002) The Century of The Self. Happiness Machines. [Online video]. Available from <http://sophistryandillusion.com/videos/Adam-Curtis/The+Century+of+the+Self+-+pt.+1+-+%28Happiness+Machines%29.flv.php>. [Accessed on 19/11/2013] / 6 FRANK, JULIA. (2013) Tom Ford’s 14 Tips on Building a Fashion Brand. [online] 14th November 2013. Available from: <http://www.vogue.com.au/fashion/news/tom+ford+14+tips+on+building+a+fashion+brand>. [Accessed in May 2014] / 7 FRAME. (2014) Product and Form. Frame 99. (Jul/Aug 2014), p. cover. / 8 FRAME. (2014) Frame Product and Form Survey. Frame 99. (Jul/Aug 2014), p. 147. An answer from Mario Minale, from design studio Minale-Maceda, on the most prominent forms of 2014.

9 PINE II, JOSEPH B. & GILMORE, JAMES H. (2011) The Experience Economy. Updated Edition. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press. / 10 NIKE (2014) Nike women’s-only store with fitness studio opens in Newport Beach [Online] 20/11/2014. Available from <http://news.nike.com/news/new-nike-experience-store-in-newport-beach-california-combines-best-of-women-s-products-with-fitness-studio>. [Accessed on 07/05/2015] / 11 DAVIS, SCOTT. (2014) Burberry’s Blurred Lines: The Integrated Customer Experience. [Online] 27th March 2014. Available from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottdavis/2014/03/27/burberrys-blurred-lines-the-integrated-customer-experience/> [Accessed in January 2015] / 12 WIGLEY, MARK. (2001) White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture. Cambridge / London: MIT Press. p. 174.

important characteristic of fashion but it becomes even more pervasive within the realm of today’s ornament. With respect to today’s ornament, which is mainly built of intangible experiences and feelings, we have to consider that any emotion or state of mind itself is a fleeting experience, clearly related to psychological obsolescence. In addition, there is a strong possibility that buying into an emotion or experience that is artificially staged by a ‘designer’ who imposes his or her taste or aesthetic, increases this fleetingness and subsequently stimulates a craving for a new feeling, a new state of mind.

CLOTHES
AS
SOUVENIRS

Even though it appears to be the most fixed element in contemporary design and fashion – where the emphasis lies on intangible values – the physical product now seems to function as a prop. Just as symbolic ornaments have become commodities, physical products have become objects with no actual function except as a carrier of meaning.

While the general decline of the material and functional character of design products is a reality, an opposing trend in contemporary design that focuses on craftsmanship and authenticity has actually put various products of improved material quality on the market. But in the context of today’s ornament, it is highly relevant to ask if the purchase of a better-made product really prevents consumers from discarding it sooner than necessary or if they still replace it because the feeling that it represents has become obsolete? If the latter is the case, we must question the potential of an investment in material and functional quality to add significantly to the lifespan of a product.

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Today, feelings are used to sell feelings.

With the consumer longing to develop their inner self and the designer offering stories and identities constructed from ‘feelings, fantasies and fun’, the object of clothing is now mainly purchased to grasp the experience and carry it around in the expectation of the wearer to transform by reviving memories each time they dress. On this notion of the object as souvenir Pine and Gilmore state: “Selling memorabilia associated with an experience provides one approach to extending an experience (...)”¹³ With this understanding, can the palpable props of fashion, like clothing, be defined as souvenirs? Souvenirs that do what fashion is all about: capturing a fleeting intangible experience, a state of mind, ‘wearing’ a different feeling with each change of clothes? Has the fashion object reached its perfect form as a souvenir?

13 PINE IL, JOSEPH B. & GILMORE, JAMES H. (2011) The Experience Economy. Updated Edition. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

INSPIRATIONAL 1

ROBERTO PIQUERAS, fashion designer.



» Current obsession? • The book Moral Mazes by Robert Jackall » Is fashion superficial? • 100% » What is your favorite piece from any of your work, and why? • My favourite piece is the Queen of England t-shirt I designed for AW 2012, it was the first collection I launched in London and brings me lots of great memories » Who has been the greatest influence on your work? • When I was studying in 2002 it was Galliano, Gaultier and Margiela but when I started with my own brand in 2007 it was Cassette Playa, KTZ and Jeremy Scott » What is the most important element in your work? • The full digital print but from the new collection AW 2015 the most important will be the message in every piece » What’s your philosophy? • Don’t give up and work hard » Have you shaped fashion or does fashion shape you? • I shaped fashion

..... » Is there a future? • Always. Meanwhile new generations are coming » What’s your movement? • I don’t think I belong to any movement at the moment » What do you think of art education nowadays? • I think an art school is a business but not a factory of new artists, you have to learn the technicalities to create your object but the idea and the creativity is something that you have to learn and live outside of school » Are you religious? • No » Countryside or city? • I love both » Alone or together? • Alone » Wine or water? • Water » Order or chaos? • Order » Night or day? • Day » Black or white? • White » Uppers or downers? • Uppers » Tradition or innovation? • Innovation » Analog or digital? • Digital » Talk or listen? • Listen.