

An excerpt from *Fashioning Value – Undressing Ornament* (2015, Onomatopée). Edited versions published in KABK magazine (2015), Posture magazine, issue 2 (2016) and Matto magazine, issue three (2019). By Femke de Vries

Ornament and Obsolescence

I open a fashion magazine on a random page and read “Make it New”¹, a few pages later I read “What to buy now” followed by pages with headers, captions and quotes talking about the *new season*, the *new look*, *summer’s new directive*, *this summer* and *headlining now*². The idea of the *new*, the *now* and *contemporary* is ingrained in fashion’s vocabulary and, needless to say, the fashion system at large. And, in fashion it is common knowledge that to make something new, you need to make something else ‘old’. In 1932 Bernard London, a real estate broker and later writer, wrote *Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence*³. In this text he proposed a strategy to adjust products in such a way that they become obsolete sooner, enhancing the production and sales of new products. This embedded obsolescence as proposed by London, can be achieved by introducing functional elements in products 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. Constantly aiming to ‘make things new’.

With his observation; that changes in ornamentation lead to a premature devaluation of the labor product,⁴ Adolf Loos, architect and writer of *Ornament and Crime* (1908), illustrates that ornament can be understood as a tool of this kind of planned obsolescence. Ornamentation, like a print on a T-shirt, places the object in a certain style period and opens the possibility to continuously create a new – and therefore desirable – version of a product by merely changing its appearance. This means that ornament plays a central role in an ongoing 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. To explain this, I would like to refer to Vance Packard, who wrote *The Waste Makers* (1960)⁵. In this book he divided planned obsolescence into two subcategories: one of desirability and one of function (think of the non-replaceable batteries). For obsolescence of desirability he also used the term “psychological obsolescence” which referred to marketers’ attempts to “*wear a product in the owners’ mind*”.⁶ An example of this commercial strategy can be given by looking at Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud and founder of PR and what we today consider branding. In the 1930’s Bernays used new insights from psychology to successfully make smoking a socially acceptable habit for women. He arranged a public event, reported on by the press, where beautiful women would be seen smoking cigarettes alongside the powerful slogan “torches of freedom”.⁷ Using cultural symbols, conventions and understandings, Bernays created a symbolic value-ornament that changed people’s “value-related perception” towards this well-known product. Just like the critiques about the literal ornament, a value-ornament like this, offers no functional improvements, imposes a certain ‘aesthetic’ and gives the product a new ‘style’. In this case a desirable connotation of emancipation.

Today, designers work both with literal ornaments (which are visible and material), and with symbolic value-ornaments, which often take on the form of ‘stories’, brand values and identities. Both forms of ornament offer the possibility to change the ‘surface appearance’ or style of an object– the surface appearance as a tangible surface of an object and as an intangible layer of meaning. Both ornaments are effective in creating obsolescence, however, it is the symbolic value-ornament that is a specifically effective tool to create psychological obsolescence. Firstly, because this 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.

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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.”⁸

With this statement Ford, who is highly competent in fashion branding, could be saying that we have enough clothes and don't need any new ones, but I believe he also points out to his audience that the actual, material clothes do not really matter within fashion and consumer society. Consumers do not need clothes; we desire the accompanied symbolic value-ornaments; we want the “love”, “playfulness”, “fearlessness”, “nostalgia”, we want to be that “wanderer”, that “carefree spirit”.⁹

Since the symbolic value-ornament is what matters most to the consumer, it has now become the starting point in the design process. In the fashion industry the technical, material production is outsourced to a ‘builder’ (a dressmaker or factory for example) who helps the designer ‘build’ the material product. 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, as storyteller. The focus on meaning over practical value of a garment not only turns the designer into an ornamentor, it also brings about a transformation of the role and character of the material product, the garment. Subordinate to the value-ornament, it now only functions as a carrier of meaning; 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. 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 these products.

So, if ornament has become the main motivation in production and consumption, it is possible to conclude that ornament has not just become the 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, an ornament?

The Garment as Prop

Functioning as a carrier of meaning, or value, the object does not even have to function properly; it only has to look good or convincing as part of the staged experience as B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore would call it. In their book the Experience Economy they explain how we've arrived in a new economy in which experiences are more important than products. They consequently argue that goods can be considered as props for the directing of experiences set within a theatre.¹⁰ The experience economy makes today's ornament, such as brand values, visible and obtainable through shopping spaces, advertisements, celebrities, shows, videos, personnel, and through the products themselves. In fashion, a diverse range of media such as advertisements, blogs, magazines, celebrities, shopping spaces, perfume, fashion shows and accessories have been used to present symbolic value for many decades. But today even the clothes themselves can be added to this range of media, because they have lost their function as the starting point in the design process to the stories and values they now serve to illustrate. The garment in a way, has become part of the décor itself. Just as (symbolic) ornaments have become commodities, garments have become props, especially in the experience economy.

Props are objects that have no actual function beyond being used to dress up a theatre stage, movie set or photograph. So, to what extent has the character and quality of clothing adapted to its new place in the design process and its definition as a prop?

To a large extent, fashion today takes place online. This is a two-dimensional context, mainly focusing on still images rather than on moving images, and aimed at viewing a piece of clothing, not wearing it. Consequently, the object seems to completely lose its relationship to a three-dimensional, moving body and with that, it loses its functional, material character. It is disconnected from its original realm of use. This has led some designers to start designing for the online realm and its flat, square images in mind, as discussed in the conversation *For Fashion's Sake*.¹¹ Essentially, these designers consider the way a piece of clothing will look best on the internet as the most important attribute and ignoring the aspect of practical use on a moving body. Of course, the same can be said of traditional magazines and fashion photography – and this underlines an approach to fashion that has little connection to clothing as objects of use and can therefore function as an abstract affair. It clearly illustrates the difference between fashion and clothing.

The decline of the material quality of products that is interlinked with mass produced confection, has now also entered the luxury industry and can be easily and directly related to the idea of commodities as props. In *How Luxury Lost its Lustre*¹² (2007) Dana Thomas writes about a strong concentration on elements that can be defined as part of today's ornament in the fashion world: shopping palaces, star celebrities, actresses, stylists, perfumes, bags and interior design. She demonstrates how this specific focus forced luxury brands to cut costs using cheaper materials, which is clearly affecting the material quality of the product.

For example, she compares a pair of Prada trousers bought in 2002, to a Prada cocktail dress from 1992. *I put them on, and the gentle passing of my foot ripped the hem out. I put my hand in the pocket, and it tore away from its seam. (...) I hadn't had those pants on ten minutes and they were literally falling apart at the seams. I mentioned this to a former Prada design assistant. "It's the thread," he told me. "It's cheaper and breaks easily." When I told him about my gorgeous dress from 1992 that was solid as a Rolls, he nodded. "That was then," he said with a sigh.*

Ornamenting the Inner Self instead of the Outer Self

Ornament has made a transition from a tangible to an intangible form, it has become the starting point in the design process and is the main motivation for the consumer to buy a particular product. It has affected the role of the material product and of the designer. 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 successful business around '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', 'inner urgency' and 'personal qualities' are presented as being the key to success. The shift 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 combines with consumerism and desire for the 'new' to reach new extremes in today's experience economy (in overlap with its successor, the transformation 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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* shower gel, and sometimes the emotion is sold almost without the existence of a relevant material product.

Today's Ornament, a Fleeting State of Mind

Whereas the literal ornament dresses or 'designs' the garment or 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 fashion magazines we can find direct references to *moods* and *emotions*.

*"Summer's New Mood"*¹⁵

"Now, designers from Isabel Marant to Chloé are harnessing the EMOTIVE power of pink to infuse their SS19 collections with a

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*spirited and sanguine mood. Romanian beauty Alexandra Micu shows us how to follow suit with strong shapes that will add a CONFIDENT elegance to your summer wardrobe.*¹⁶

In *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, Mark Wigley, points out that Adolf Loos does not criticize ornament because it so easily succumbs to fashion. Rather, ornament is, by definition, fashion itself.¹⁷ 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? Reaching far beyond the material confines of a garment.

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 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.

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While the new role of the garment as a prop has led to a general decline of the material and functional character of design products, 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 if an investment in material and functional quality really adds to the lifespan of a product.

With the consumer longing to develop their inner selves 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 (...)"¹⁸ 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?

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