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Decoration and Decorum, Adolf Loos's Critique of Kitsch

by Miriam Gusevich*

Introduction

Adolf Loos is best known as the foe of ornament and the advocate of functionalism: this reputation rests mainly on the widespread dissemination of his notorious and paradoxical essay, "Ornament and Crime" (1912).¹ In this essay, as commonly understood, Loos advocated an uncompromising anti-ornament position on functional grounds. His radical assertions became an article of faith among the post-World War I European avant-garde, who accepted his claims uncritically and somewhat naively, and incorporated the essay into the canon of the Modern Movement. Through the agency of the avant-garde, Loos's alleged anti-ornament position has had a profound impact on the shape and character of the world's major metropolises in the post-World

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1. Adolf Loos's essays have been collected and published as *Sämtliche Schriften* (Vienna & Munich: Verlag Herold, 1967). They are divided into two major sections: "Ins Leere gesprochen," 1897-1900, (Spoken into the Void) and "Trotzdem," 1900-1930. "Trotzdem" includes two major essays: "Ornament and Crime" and "Architecture". I am using two different translations of "Ornament and Crime": (1) Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964, 1970) 19-24, and (2) Harold Meek's in Munz and Kunstler, *Adolf Loos* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966). I am using the translation of "Architecture" in Tim and Charlotte Benton and Dennis Sharp, *Form and Function*, (London: Grenada, The Open University, c. 1975) 41-45. All the other essays listed here are from the English translation of *Spoken into the Void*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981. Henceforth referred to as SITV).

War II era, as the most cursory look at our urban environment reveals. Loos's seminal influence is by now well established.

The current reexamination of the legacy of the Modern Movement has renewed attention on Adolf Loos's work both as an architect/builder and an essayist/critic,² and the portrait of the fanatical purist has been challenged to reveal a more complex personality. This essay offers a contribution to the examination of Loos's work by interpreting his condemnation of ornament as a critique of kitsch.

This essay will consist of three sections. The first — "Decoration and kitsch" — interprets the anti-ornament posture as a condemnation of kitsch by tracing a "discursive space" framed by three *masks*: work, sex and death. The second — "Function and Decorum" — examines Loos's Functionalism as an attempt to reduce this three dimensional discursive space to one dimension. The third — "Decoration and Decorum" — interprets Loos's condemnation of decoration as a critical gesture aimed at the recovery of a sense of decorum, thus upholding and — paradoxically — also transgressing the received boundaries of traditional aesthetic discourse.

From this perspective, Loos's critique of kitsch is neither simple rejection nor denial. It is a polemic based on a paradox, since his explicit claims of purity are made possible by a set of transgressive and iconoclastic strategies. This essay shows the complicity of purity and transgression by tracing the outlines of Loos's complex discursive space.³

I. Decoration and Kitsch

Adolf Loos's condemnation of ornament, banning it from ordinary utensils and implements of everyday life, is more than an idiosyncratic or perverse aesthetic preference; it is the focus of a broader cultural critique. The terms of this critique — ironical, perplexing, paradoxical — are significant; they point to a keen awareness of unprecedented problems

2. Noteworthy current reflections on Loos's work include: Kenneth Frampton, "Industrial Production and the Crisis of Culture 1851-1910" *Modern Architecture 1851-1919* (New York: Rizzoli 1983), 173-176. Benedetto Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1982). Aldo Rossi — Introduction to the English translation of *Spoken into the Void*. Damisch, Hubert, "L'autre 'Ich' ou le désir du vide: pour un tombeau d'Adolf Loos," *Critique* 339-340 (Aug-Sept. 1975)

3. Miriam Gusevich, "Purity and Transgression: Reflections on the Architectural Avant-garde's Rejection of Kitsch," *Working Papers*. Center for Twentieth Century Studies (Milwaukee: U. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1986).

transgressing the received boundaries of traditional aesthetic discourse and defying comprehension in traditional terms. These problems constitute a new phenomenon which is the core of his concern and the target of his criticism — kitsch.

Arguing that Loos's condemnation of ornament is motivated by a critique of kitsch is not as far-fetched as it might initially appear. Theodor Adorno, in a discussion of Loos and Functionalism, regarded Loos as "the sworn enemy of Viennese kitsch."⁴ This reading can be readily corroborated by innumerable examples from Loos's writings, where the most ludicrous objects are submitted to ridicule: "an ash-tray composed of the concave arms of the imperial house,"⁵ Gothic suitcases, Renaissance hatboxes, Greek cigarette cases,⁶ "Gothic candelabrum" and locomotive⁷ and other such items populate his text. He cleverly remarks: "We have gotten Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo blisters one after the other in the last two decades from the various ornamented handles of our vessels."⁸ His favorite object of scorn is the proverbial Munich beer hall style⁹ with its characteristic *Dekorationsdivan* — an ornamental divan in the Old German Style — and *Lusterweibchen* — a chandelier with a wooden female figure holding the candles framed by deer antlers.¹⁰

Nothing was exempt from his keen, perceptive eye and irreverent wit: ceramics, leather goods, men's and women's clothes, shoes, hats, underwear, furniture, building materials, plumbing.¹¹ Nothing was too small, insignificant or modest to escape his scrutiny and his ridicule. His concern with all kinds of everyday objects, from the most elegant to the most banal, underscores the comprehensiveness of his cultural critique. All these examples share certain traits. They are prototypical 19th-century inventions, accoutrements of modern life dressed in traditional forms and so, peculiarly anachronistic. Loos regarded this anachronistic quality as ludicrous and offensive. He intimated, through the

4. Theodor W. Adorno, "Functionalism Today" trans. by Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, *Oppositions* 17 (1979): 31-41. Originally a lecture given by T.W. Adorno at a meeting of the German Werkbund in Berlin on 23 October, 1965.

5. Loos, "Glass and Clay," SITV 37.

6. Loos, "The Leathergoods and Gold and Silversmith Trades" SITV 9.

7. "Furniture" SITV 78.

8. Loos, "The Bourgeois Household: The Lefler Room" SITV 92.

9. Loos, "English Schools in the Austrian Museum," SITV 107.

10. Loos, "English Schools," SITV 107. and "Interiors: A Prelude," SITV 20.

11. All the various essays on the occasion of the Vienna Jubilee Exhibition of 1898, in SITV.

choice of objects he ridiculed, that these objects are corrupted by the nexus of historically-derived forms and modern technology, the means of production and the way of life.

Loos did not attempt to account for this modern state of affairs — the proliferation of the ludicrous and the banal — in a systematic fashion. Nor did he submit the term *kitsch* to a single, consistent definition. Rather, scattered throughout his writings, in his serious injunctions and his vitriolic and humorous invectives, he deployed a profusion of references, asides, and examples, offered with reckless good cheer. This irreducible multiplicity underscores the ubiquity of *kitsch* in modern life and presents a portrait of *kitsch* not as a single, unified animal, but as a monstrous Hydra, spurting heads at the slightest provocation.

The sources and manifestation of *kitsch* are variegated and multi-dimensional, and this multiplicity cannot be addressed through a univocal critique; instead it requires an equivalent multiplicity of strategies and targets. For this purpose, Loos speaks through a series of masks. These masks are vehicles for his irony and also function ironically: the foe of ornament and deception relies on rhetorical strategies of dissimulation and concealment. Loos's ironic use of the artifice of the mask suggests that he is not against artifice as such, but against a certain kind of artifice, *kitsch*. To understand Loos's critique of *kitsch* it is helpful to reexamine his famous critique of ornament, presented under the provocative title, "Ornament and Crime" (1898).

The essay starts out with an ironic, mock-serious parallel between the child and the savage:

The human embryo goes through all the phases of animal life while still inside the womb. When man is born, his instincts are those of a new-born dog. His childhood runs through all the changes corresponding to the history of mankind. At the age of two he looks like a Papuan, at four like one of an ancient Germanic tribe, at six like Socrates, at eight like Voltaire . . . The child is amoral. So is the Papuan, to us. The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. He is no criminal. But if a modern man kills someone and eats him, he is a criminal or a degenerate.¹²

The child and the savage, the individual life and the species,

12. Loos, "Ornament," trans. Meek, 226.

ontogenesis and phylogenesis: this system of parallels is a rhetorical figure of traditional provenance, extending as far back as Francis Bacon.¹³ In Loos's essay, this infancy of mankind is not celebrated as the age of the noble child-savage (Rousseau), nor is it castigated. Instead, it is marshalled to construct the rudiments of a *genealogy of decoration*. By positing the correspondence of the infancy of the individual and mankind in terms of the "Papuan" and "tribal German," Loos sets the stage for locating "decoration" within the primitive and infantile: Papuans tattoo themselves, ancient Germans painted themselves. Individual and social maturity is characterized, in part, by the progressive control and mastery over the urge to decorate the self and society. This rhetorical trope sets forth the historical dimension of Loos's critique and, by way of contrast, stresses the modern predicament: by clinging to decoration, modern man and society exhibit an obdurate infantilism, appropriate to the primitive, but problematic for the modern.

This genealogy is purposefully shocking; it reverses the traditional, art-historical regard for decoration. Especially in the historically hyperconscious 19th century, ornament was understood as a key index of the height of civilization. As Loos recognized,

... the age and origin of the objects could easily be determined from the ornamentation and this type of categorization was one of the best loved pastimes of this God-forsaken time.¹⁴

The association of decorative themes with the particular culture that created them is still commonly used by scholars to identify the provenance of various artifacts, to authenticate them and endow them with a pedigree. Reciprocally, these ornamental differences are used to establish different art historical periods. Loos's genealogy seeks to unsettle this established historicity, for in his schema, decoration is reduced to a vestige from more primitive, barbarous times. This reversal of traditional categories is a recurrent strategy developed and deployed throughout Loos's text using various masks. In the *discursive space* of the text, "Ornament and Crime" becomes the leitmotif loosely weaving together various masks representing the three most basic dimensions of human experience: work, sex and death.

13. Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977) 24-26.

14. Loos, "Architecture," 43.

Work:

The dominant theme or *mask* of the essay is the economic critique of ornamentation, which Loos addresses within the context of work. This mask has two faces: in one, decoration is presented as superfluous and wasteful luxury; in the other, it is presented as the exploitation of labor.

The essay reiterates the superfluity and wastefulness of ornament.

Ornament is wasted labor and hence wasted health. That is how it has always been. Today, however, it is also wasted material and both together add up to wasted capital.

It is a crime against the national economy that human labor, money and material should thereby be ruined.

Ornament is not only produced by criminals, it itself commits a crime by damaging men's health, the national economy and cultural development.¹⁵

Loos's economic critique of ornament is highly problematic. It implies a reduction of aesthetic considerations to ends and means, and reproduces the kind of instrumental rationality he elsewhere criticized in the philistine.¹⁶ Did Loos unwittingly share the values of the philistine he otherwise so vehemently criticized?

This suggestion is plausible when we recognize the other side of his appeal to the modern ethos of efficiency and productivity; these seemingly rational and neutral economic values are highly charged with the definite moral weight of the Protestant work ethic: austerity and thrift are cardinal virtues, extravagance and waste are sin, indeed "crime."

Yet Loos was more than a hard nosed businessman, concerned only with efficiency, productivity and the return on capital investment. He had a social conscience. He condemned the exploitation of the worker, the "criminally low prices" paid for the product of their labor:

Even greater is the damage ornament inflicts on the workers. As ornament is no longer a natural product of our civilization, it accordingly represents backwardness or degeneration, and the labor of the man who makes it is not adequately remunerated. Conditions in the woodcarving and turning trades, the criminally low prices

15. Loos, "Ornament," trans. Meek, 229.

16. See Loos's "The Leather Goods" SITV 6-10 and his satires on Austrian manufacturers and in "The Scala Theatre in Vienna," SITV 114-120. See also Loos, "Ornament."

paid to embroiderers and lacemakers, are well known. The producers of ornament must work twenty hours to earn the wages a modern worker gets in eight . . . The lack of ornament means shorter working hours and consequently higher wages. Chinese carvers work sixteen hours. American workers eight. If I pay as much for a smooth box as for a decorated one, the difference in labor time belongs to the worker. And if there were no ornament at all — a circumstance that will perhaps come true in a few millennia — a man would have to work only four hours instead of eight, for half the work done at present is still for ornamentation.¹⁷

Here Loos attacks the misuse and exploitation of labor in the modern production of ornament. He focuses on the two-fold alienation this production entails for the worker: economic alienation since the longer work hours required for ornamental production lower wages artificially; and psychological alienation in that no aesthetic pleasure, one of work's traditional compensations, is possible while creating such ludicrous objects.

This critique of alienated labor follows the tradition of Pugin, Ruskin, and William Morris. However, unlike them, Loos is not simply asking for a different kind of ornament (Gothic) that would be more acceptable politically, because it represents the correct sentiments. Loos's position is in a way more radical. He declares modern ornamentation criminal activity and calls for a complete ban of the practice. At first glance, the conclusion banning all ornament seems unwarranted from Loos's own assumptions. If ornamentation is objectionable, because labor conditions are objectionable, why not concentrate on changing labor conditions or labor-management relations? A change or a ban on ornament seem irrelevant to the issue of alienated labor. This was the conclusion of William Morris, who became a labor organizer and a political strategist once he realized that aesthetic efforts could not achieve his avowed objective of stopping the worker's alienation, but resulted simply in producing better and more elegant items for privileged consumption.¹⁸ Thus Morris's ultimate position, which suggests a political/economic solution to a problem seen rooted in political economy, appears finally more politically radical than Loos's continued "aesthetic" response.

17. Loos, "Ornament," trans. Meek, 228-229.

18. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955, New York: Pantheon, 1976).

However, closer examination of Loos's position shows that William Morris's conclusion could not have satisfied Loos's objectives. Loos's point was not simply to provide an economic or political critique of capitalism which could be addressed through a reform of labor relations. Loos sought to provide a broad-based cultural critique of the modern predicament as manifest in the production of kitsch. One element in this critique is the economic/political basis of modern production, which Loos advanced in terms of the labor theory of value, a weapon he borrowed from the classical economists Locke, Adam Smith and Ricardo.

The labor theory of value asserts the critical role of labor in determining the value of a commodity; according to this theory, the number of work hours is the critical determinant of the market price of an object.¹⁹ As Loos recognized, the logic of the labor theory of value would require that the ornamentation of an object, which requires more hours of work than a similar object without ornament, should increase the object's market price. Yet the system does not in fact work so rationally, as Loos observed:

Decoration adds to the price of an object as a rule, and yet it can happen that a decorated object, with the same outlay in materials and demonstrably three times as much work, is offered for sale at half the price of a plain object.²⁰

Ornament does not automatically enhance the market value of an artifact, as the labor theory of value would predict. Instead, ornament, by marking the object and making it conspicuously of a particular time and place, makes the object vulnerable to the vicissitudes of changes in fashion, and, through the cycles of fashion, the ornamental object is socially devalued: "Changes in decoration account for the quick devaluation of the product of labor."²¹

Spurious changes in fashion promoted by the demands of marketing undermine the "rational" market value of the object as determined by the labor theory of value. Even more serious, though, is the effect of the fashion/decoration industry on the inherent quality of the objects produced: inherent value is subverted. Objects are cheapened in two

19. See Karl Marx, "Capital," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972) 216-217.

20. Loos, "Ornament," trans. Meek, 229.

21. Loos, "Ornament," trans. Meek, 229.

senses. Literally, they are cheapened when they are sold for less than their production costs, thus lowering wages. Metaphorically, they are cheapened because they are of inferior quality and become kitsch. Furthermore, Loos recognized that the problem of kitsch went beyond mediocre materials or craftsmanship: “ornamental things first create a truly unaesthetic effect when they have been executed in the best materials and with the greatest care and have taken long hours of labor.”²² As Loos recognized, objects become kitsch when they are treated as *fetishes*:

As, however, the false prophets could only recognize a product by its ornamental nature, the ornament became a *fetish*, and they falsely attributed this changeling with the name of style.²³ (emphasis added)

Loos's use of the labor theory of value to criticize the double alienation of labor and to expose the relation between alienation and “commodity-fetishism” has an affinity with Karl Marx. In *Capital*, Marx introduces the critique of “commodity fetishism” as a new form of cult worship in which “the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life.”²⁴ The commodity becomes a social hieroglyphic disguising the relations and the process of production that make it possible. This critique of kitsch as fetishism is one of the unacknowledged dimensions of Loos's thought. Not that Loos was a Marxist; he did not share Marx's escatological vision, or the communist belief in the redeeming role of the working class. Nor is Loos's critique of commodity fetishism systematically developed. Yet, through his somewhat disjointed remarks we can discern a similar critique of the distortions in the process of production and consumption as leading to the cheapening of the intrinsic quality of the object and its transformation into a fetish. Loos's critique may not be as systematic or as powerful as Marx's, but it is also not as reductive since, unlike Marx, he recognized the role of “symbolic exchange” in consumption.²⁵ Loos understood that the distortions of the modern system of production and consumption leading to commodity fetishism were multiplied through

22. Loos, “Ornament,” trans. Meek, 229.

23. Loos, “Architecture,” 44.

24. See Marx, “Capital,” 216-217.

25. On the importance of “symbolic exchange” in the current critique of the reductivism of Marx, see Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975)

the alienated symbolic exchange of the system of fashion.

For Loos, the effect of the fashion system was pernicious. It was exemplified in kitsch, but extended beyond it to works of higher cultural aspiration, like the “applied art” of Otto Eckmann and Van de Velde, who sought to avoid kitsch by creating a tasteful modern system of ornament and only succeeded in promoting a new fashion, thus contributing to the ongoing process of commodity fetishism. Loos tried to sidestep fashion altogether, which is probably utopian. Nevertheless, his critique of kitsch and fetishism are still valid.

It is instructive to reexamine Loos’s preliminary remarks on the primitive using of this insight into the relation of kitsch and fetishism. For the primitive (the Papuan), objects are endowed with supernatural powers, are fetishized. From Loos’s perspective, fetishism is natural for primitive man: it is analogous to the relative helplessness of primitive men and women in the natural world and their need for the assistance of other-worldly powers. For modern man, however, this same primitive impulse to fetishize is regressive since it goes counter to the modern process of increasing mastery and rationalization, the “disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber).

As such, the commodity fetishism resulting from modern conditions of production and consumption is a distorted attitude to both natural and cultural artifacts; the effects of this perversity are pervasive in modern fetishized culture. Hence, for Loos the problem could not be solved by addressing a particular portion of social relations, i.e., the worker-employer relation as William Morris had suggested. Loos’s understanding of the problem called for a broader response addressing the general experience of modernity. Thus Loos carried forth his critique through the other two most general human experiences: sexuality and mortality.

Sex:

Sex is an explicit theme in Loos’s text:

. . . All art is erotic. The first ornament invented, the cross, was of erotic origin. The first work of art, the first artistic act, which the first artist scrawled on the wall to give his exuberance vent. A horizontal line: the woman. A vertical line: the man penetrating her. The man who created this felt the same creative urge as Beethoven, he was in the same state of exultation in which Beethoven created the Ninth.²⁶

26. Loos, “Ornament,” trans. Meek, 226.

This is a peculiar and provocative statement, meant to shock in the spirit of *épater le bourgeois*. What could be more iconoclastic than to identify the cross, the symbol of Christ's suffering, with the sexual act, to regard sexual intercourse as the source of the cross?

This shock is lessened today, since our threshold of sexual shame is virtually nonexistent compared to that of the highly repressed puritanical bourgeoisie of *fin de siècle* Vienna which Loos addressed. We also fail to be shocked because we are accustomed to the Freudian source for Loos's assertion. As early as 1905 Freud placed the genesis of art and the sense of beauty in Eros.²⁷

According to Freud, art and ornament, like all other features of civilization, result from the sublimation of instinct:

Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development: it is what makes it possible for higher psychological activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life.²⁸

For Freud, this sublimation of instinct was highly equivocal. It is the source of cultural value and also the source of cultural frustration; it is a repression, a renunciation of libidinal satisfaction. Loos's position in contrast seems highly unequivocal: the demands of civilization are paramount, and in our times they call for the condemnation of ornament as the perverse and criminal exhibition of this erotic drive:

But the man of our own times who covers the walls with erotic images from an inner compulsion is a criminal or a degenerate. Of course, this urge affects people with such symptoms of degeneracy most strongly in the lavatory. It is possible to estimate a country's culture by the amount of scrawling on lavatory walls. In children this is a natural phenomenon: their first artistic expression is scribbling erotic symbols on walls. But what is natural for a Papuan and a child, is degenerate for modern man.²⁹

If Loos's association of ornament and Eros has ceased to be shocking,

27. Loos and Freud were contemporaries and must have known of each other's work. Freud implicitly refers to Loos's argument of "The Plumber" in *Civilization and its Discontents*. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961) 40.

28. Freud, 44.

29. Loos, "Ornament," trans. Meek, 226.

his condemnation of the nexus of art and eros as criminal remains puzzling and needs further reflection. Is he serious? Is he in jest? Is he both?

In orthodox Freudian terms, Loos's association of ornament, eros and crime is not only highly idiosyncratic, it can be seen as outright repressive. Such was Adorno's judgment. He criticized Loos's "unique strain of puritanism, which nears obsession" and added:

Loos traces ornament back to erotic symbols. In turn, his rigid rejection of ornamentation is coupled with his disgust with erotic symbolism. He finds uncurbed nature both regressive and embarrassing. The tone of his condemnations of ornament echoes an often openly expressed rage against moral delinquency.³⁰

To salvage Loos's position, or at least make sense of it, Adorno presented a psychological argument:

His hatred of ornament can best be understood by examining a psychological argument. He seems to see in ornament the mimetic impulse, which runs contrary to rational objectification; he sees in it an expression which, even in sadness and lament, is related to the pleasure principle. Arguing from this principle, one must accept that there is a factor of expression in every object. By means of the *mimetic impulse*, the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings. This occurs long before artists initiate conscious imitation. What begins as symbol becomes ornament, and finally appears superfluous; it had its origins, nevertheless, in natural shapes, to which men adapted themselves through their artifacts."³¹

Adorno criticized Loos for his puritanical repression of the pleasure principle on behalf of bourgeois rationality. This critique is wholly warranted: Loos's condemnation of ornament as an erotic perversion, a crime, opens him to charges of hysterical, puritanical repression. Nevertheless, perhaps there is an alternative, more generous interpretation of Loos's position which is made possible by recognizing the role of the feminine in erotic transaction. This feminist reading is capable of unraveling a few of the puzzles in Loos's equation of ornament with crime.

In an earlier article, "Ladies' Fashion" (1898), Loos brought together

30. Adorno, 34.

31. Adorno, 34.

sex, crime and fashion. In his critique of late 19th-century women's styles he says:

Certain aberrations usually accumulate in one period, only then to make way for others. The sentences meted out according to paragraphs 125 through 133 of our Penal Act are the most reliable fashion journal. I will not go very far back. At the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties, the literature of a certain tendency, seeking to achieve its effect by means of its realism and directness, superabounded with descriptions of the Sacher-Masoch, Catulle Mendes, Armand Silvestre. Soon thereafter, clothing sharply emphasized rounded voluptuousness and ripe femininity. Whoever did not already possess these had to counterfeited them: *le cul de Paris*. Then the reaction set in. The cry for youthfulness rang out. The child-woman came into fashion. People languished after immaturity. The psyche of the little girl was investigated and praised. Peter Altenberg. The Barrisons danced on the stage and into men's hearts. Whatever was womanly disappeared from women's clothing. Woman disguised away her hips; stout forms, earlier a source of pride to her, were now embarrassing. Her head took on a childlike look because of her hairstyle and her big sleeves. But these times too are over.³²

In this highly ironic quote, Loos was criticizing 19th century women's fashions as a sadomasochistic torture chamber inflicting violence on women: he condemns this association of eroticism and violence as a sexual perversion. By analogy, we can infer that if ornament, like women's fashion, has an erotic origin, then the degeneration of ornament into kitsch is sadistic, inflicting violence on the integrity of the object. Kitsch is the transformation of the object into a sexual fetish; the love of kitsch is a form of sexual perversion.

This critique of kitsch as a sexual fetish is both a critique of the object and of the rituals it engenders. As a fetish, the kitsch object is a simulacra of sensuality, an *ersatz* replacement of longing and desire. Incapable of fulfilling its promises, of giving satisfaction, the fetish creates an insatiable restlessness.

Implicitly, this critique of kitsch as sexual fetish also zeroes in on a particular set of social practices centered on the consumption and display of ornamental bibelots, on "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen).³³

32. Loos, "Ladies' Fashion," SITV 100.

33. Unlike Veblen, who regarded "conspicuous consumption" as typical of what

In the nineteenth century, bibelots became part of a complex social code signifying sexual status, sexual availability and especially sexual difference; this is crucial. While men participated in the ritual mainly as spectators, purveyors and providers, it was women who were (and still are) the committed consumers of kitsch. Consumption became the object of bourgeois women's lives, their mission. When men collected, they bought serious works of art; when women collected, they bought knick-knacks, household ornaments, luxuries, collectibles, the kind of objects most likely to degenerate into kitsch. In the 19th century, two institutions were established to feed, exploit and promote women's voracious appetites for kitsch objects: the department store, (e.g., Bon-Marché) and the advertising industry.³⁴ The biggest consumer of them all, the queen of the bibelots who set the standards for consumption, was found in the figure of the *demi-monde* courtesan, such as Margaritte Gautier in Dumas's *La Dame aux Camélias*.³⁵ The courtesan, the coquette, the object of honest women's scorn and envy, became the fashion setter, as Loos sharply pointed out. The crucial role of the coquette as consumer of bibelots in this ritual of vicarious acquisition underscores the transformation of women into the central most expensive bibelot, the pride ornament of the house. Woman became objectified as an ornament, and like the ornaments surrounding her, she too was threatened with becoming a fetish. This phenomenon is widely illustrated in the late 19th-century novel: Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Paul Bourget's *Un Homme d'Affaires*. Contemporaneous with these transformations is the development of the dichotomy home and work, interior and office.³⁶ The interior, the special domain where woman reigned supreme, became the privileged setting for the display of bibelots oozing both sensuality and sentimentality.

From this alternative perspective, Loos's critique of ornament is not simply puritanical repression: it is a critique of the devaluation of sensuality into a perverted sadomasochism leading to the reduction of human-made objects and human beings themselves, into fetishes deprived

he called "barbarian" culture, culture since the beginning of history, Loos recognized that the phenomenon he was criticizing was distinctly modern, that it reached its apogee in the second half of the 19th century.

34. Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

35. Remy G. Saisselin, *The Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (New Jersey: Rutgers U., 1984) Chapter 4.

36. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" *Reflections* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 154.

of any intrinsic worth. Kitsch is an effect of this devaluation of sensuality into perverse alienated sexual fetishes; in this light, ornament stopped being an innocent play of exuberant sensuality and became an instrument of oppression. To end this oppression, to liberate human beings from the hold of sexual fetishes on their energy and imagination, Loos demanded and foretold the imminent death of ornament. Once this crucial aspect of Loos's condemnation of ornament is recognized, it becomes clear that his attack on ornament as sexual fetish and his objection to reducing the interior to the display of kitsch is more than a puritan's reaction to sensuality. His aesthetic critique is inextricably bound to a cultural and social critique, which may be characterized as "protofeminist" despite his individual proclivities.³⁷ He made this clear at the conclusion of "Ladies' Fashion":

We are approaching a new and greater time. No longer by an appeal to sensuality, but rather by economic independence earned through work will the woman bring about her equal status with the man. The woman's value or lack of value will no longer fall or rise according to the fluctuation of sensuality. Then velvet and silk, flowers and ribbons, feathers and paints will fail to have their effect. They will disappear.³⁸

With these words, he anticipated and welcomed the death of ornament.

Death

The theme of death is the most subtle mask in Loos's text. It is paradoxical; introduced first as a mourning for the threatened loss of sense and meaning, it is then celebrated as opening new possibilities for emancipation. Death makes its presence felt through a Nietzschean "mask," akin to the prophet Zarathustra.³⁹

The mourning for ornament echoes Zarathustra's lament; Loos was bringing untimely news:

37. Late in life, Loos was accused of pedophilia and fled to Paris to avoid criminal prosecution. This sojourn in Paris, we note in passing, led to his commissions to design houses for both Tristan Tzara and Josephine Baker.

38. "Ladies Fashion," SITV 103.

39. In the introduction to *Trotzdem*, 1900-1930, Loos explicitly acknowledges Nietzsche by quoting an epigram and naming the collection of essays after Nietzsche's last word, *Trotzdem*.

I have discovered the following truth and present it to the world: cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use. I thought I was giving the world a new source of pleasure with this: it did not thank me for it. People were sad and despondent. What oppressed them was the realization that no new ornament could be created. . . People walked sadly around the showcases, ashamed of their own impotence. Shall every age have a style of its own and our age alone be denied one? By style they meant decoration.⁴⁰

This mourning for the loss of ornament is countered by a Nietzschean affirmation, which sees the death of ornament as a “*promesse de bonheur*.”

But I said: Don’t weep! Don’t you see that the greatness of our age lies in its inability to produce a new form of decoration? We have conquered ornament, we have achieved a lack of ornamentation. Look, the time is nigh, fulfillment awaits us. Soon the streets of the town will glisten like white walls. Like Zion, the holy city, the metropolis of heaven. Then we shall have fulfillment.⁴¹

Like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, Loos was bringing the anti-Gospel. He was announcing not the birth, but the death of ornament, and he wanted the terrible news to be countenanced with affirmation in light of the complete nihilism, complete negation that it brings. Hence the reign of the aristocrat:

I am preaching to the aristocrats; I mean, to the people in the forefront of humanity who still fully appreciate the needs and strivings of those beneath them. They understand the native weaving ornaments into textiles to a certain rhythm, which can be seen only when torn apart, the Persian knotting his carpet, the Slovak peasant woman embroidering her lace, the old lady crocheting wonderful objects in beads and silk. The aristocrat lets them be, for he knows they work in moments of revelation. The revolutionary would go there and say ‘this is all nonsense.’ Just as he would pull the old woman away from the roadside shrine with the words: ‘There is no God.’ But among the aristocrats the atheist raises his hat on passing a church.⁴²

40. Loos, “Ornament,” 226-227.

41. Loos, “Ornament,” 227.

42. Loos, “Ornament,” 230.

The aristocrat is the Superman (*Übermensch*) who is able to affirm the new times under the new dispensation of the Death of God and through his superiority, to respect the stragglers still believing the old faith. The Superman is the anti-Messiah who paradoxically will fulfill the Messianic task of bringing Zion, the holy city, to earth.

This conscious Nietzschean impersonation, almost a parody, duplicates two distinct features: the death of God and the problem of the aristocrat, the Superman.

The death of God and the death of ornament are presented as conditions of modernity, but the parallel between them is not explored further. Is the death of ornament, as manifested in kitsch, a prefiguration of the death of God? Or is the death of God the harbinger of the death of ornament? This uncanny parallel acquires significance when we confront the debasement of religious art and architecture since the Enlightenment, its awkwardness and lack of conviction. The ubiquity of kitsch in 19th- and 20th-century churches, in religious art, and in the paraphernalia of religious observance contrasts starkly with the inspiring beauty of traditional religious art. However suggestive the parallel between the death of God and the death of ornament is, it is fraught with contradictions. How can God die? Either He has never been, an atheist's conviction, or He is still alive, a believer's faith. What does it mean for God to have been and be no more? Furthermore, after announcing the death of God, how could Loos say in his later essay, "Architecture," (1910) that:

Whoever realizes that the purpose of art is to guide man ever onwards and upwards, making him ever more God-like, senses that the fusion of art with functional ends is a profanation of the highest degree.⁴³

If God is dead, what is the basis for Loos's moral posture, how could he talk about art making men more "God-like," or condemn kitsch as a "sacrilege," a "profanation"? These theological preoccupations did not trouble Loos, he had other concerns. For the purposes of his cultural critique, the death of God — death of ornament parallel is a highly effective polemical tool; it is arresting, provocative and puzzling, and the story has a definite moral: if ornament is dead, then the whole spectacle of 19th-century historical revivals is a ghoulish consumption

43. Loos, "Architecture," 45.

of the dead. The love of ornament represented by 19th-century kitsch becomes necrophilia, once again reiterating his contention that modern ornament is crime.

The critique of kitsch as necrophilia becomes even more *a propos* in social terms as a critique of the aristocratic pretensions of the bourgeoisie. For Loos, the aristocracy as the dominant economic and political class was dead. This death announcement was somewhat veiled, since he was writing in Hapsburg, Vienna, and asserting the demise of the aristocracy could be construed as an act of sedition. For Loos, the death of the aristocracy was a historical *fait accompli*; it was integrally related to the death of ornament, since the aristocracy was the decorative class *par excellence*. The aristocracy was literally and metaphorically the decorative class. Literally, the aristocracy used decoration as a badge to differentiate itself from its social inferiors and reserved decoration as a class privilege. Metaphorically, the aristocracy had become decorative in the distinctive, modern bourgeois sense of superfluous, non-essential. It had no effective role to play in the modern world and was merely a relic of the absolutist past which the bourgeoisie was liquidating. The bourgeoisie had become the dominant class in the modern world. To Loos, it seemed ridiculous that the bourgeoisie, which had the energy, power and confidence to conquer and transform the world, did not have the confidence to assert its own sensibility and way of life, and instead felt compelled to mimic an obsolete, aristocratic lifestyle. Unlike the social snob who objects to *nouveau riche* pretensions because he wants to keep the bourgeoisie in its place, Loos objected to it as a modern democrat. He regarded the bourgeoisie as representing the tradition of the Enlightenment, and saw their aristocratic pretensions as a betrayal of their own progressive principles.⁴⁴

There is a tension between Loos's anti-aristocratic sentiments and his previous appeal to the aristocrat, the superior man. Aristocrat as deployed in his text refers neither to an inherited aristocracy of class and privilege, nor to an aristocracy of power and plunder; rather it refers to an aristocracy of culture and sensibility, a meritocracy perhaps, or an avant-garde at the forefront of humanity. This appeal to the aristocrat is also a Nietzschean rhetorical flourish, part of the "death mask" with elitist implications Loos did not feel compelled to accept; instead he deployed the Nietzschean connection selectively, for specific

44. On the bourgeois, see his essays in SITV, "The Bourgeois Household: The Lefler Room," 91-92, and "Furniture," 77.

polemical effects.

Loos's argument about the death of ornament targeted typical kitsch and its mindless exploitation of historical motifs, and also artists like Olbrich, Van de Velde and Otto Eckmann, who sought to invent a new form of decoration. For Loos, the death of ornament was final, since the conditions that made decoration possible — such as traditional craft production and the existence of a decorative class — had been destroyed by modernization. The inexorable development of modern civilization, a *fait accompli*, precluded the revival of decoration. Since ornament had no integral connection to modern life, it was dead, and it could not develop. For this reason, ornament could neither be resuscitated, nor invented:

Modern ornament has no parents and no progeny, no past and no future. It is greeted joyfully by uncultivated people, to whom the grandeur of our age is a book with seven seals, and shortly afterwards repudiated.⁴⁵

Loos's appropriation of a Nietzschean death mask serves to establish a series of thematic parallels between the death of God and the death of ornament, between the "genealogy of morals" and the "genealogy of decoration." These parallels are deployed as part of his transgressive strategies, which promote the complete reversal of traditional categories, "a transvaluation of values" (Nietzsche). The introduction to his collected essays, "Trotzdem," starts with an epigram from Nietzsche, and concludes with Loos proudly and earnestly boasting of his transgression:

I have emerged victorious from the thirty year struggle: I have set humanity free from superfluous ornamentalism. Ornament was once the epithet of 'beautiful.' Today thanks to me, it is the epithet of mediocre.⁴⁶

Unlike Nietzsche, Loos neither reveled in ironic play nor pursued transgressions for their own sake. His sense of paradox was marshalled for a very serious cultural critique. He was both ironic and earnest, just as he undertook discursive acts of transgression and reversal while

45. Loos, "Ornament," in Conrads, 22.

46. Introduction to "Trotzdem," see footnote 1. Translated in Burckhardt, *The Werkbund- History and Ideology 1907-1933*, Lucius, ed. (New York: Barron's, 1980) 104.

upholding claims of purity. To understand this complicity of purity and transgression, it is worthwhile to reexamine the problematic status of “function” within the space of Loos’s discourse.

II. Function and Decorum

Loos’s polymorphous critique, his playful use of masks and voices, captures the multiple facets of the problem of kitsch through the heterogeneity of strategies he deploys. Yet ironically, his overt intention is to master this heterogeneity, to reduce it to a staid univocal interpretation by asserting the priority of function, of use:

The beauty of an object only exists in relation to its purpose . . . the highest degree of functionality in harmony with all other parts is what we call pure beauty.⁴⁷

While Loos’s functionalism is a helpful tool in criticizing the fetishization of ornament, once it is privileged as the key element in his critique it distorts his argument, turning it into a dogma. This single-minded functionalism does violence to the complexities and subtleties of his argument.

Use plays two roles in Loos’s critique; it articulates the distinction between use and exchange values, and it serves to differentiate between use object and art object. Loos insisted on the priority of use values over the marketplace imperatives. Use has priority because its existence is temporally prior to the need for exchange, and therefore is seen as more important, more essential. He criticized assigning priority to exchange values — to the joint demands of industrial production and marketing — as leading to the fetishization of the object. As we saw earlier in the discussion on work, Loos ascribed this transformation of the object into a fetish to the manipulation of fashion by industry; he criticized the pursuit of stylistic obsolescence as a way to generate business, and condemned the business strategy of transforming common artifacts into art objects as a way of making the object more fetching (that is, fetching more money). His complaint was the blurring of the distinction between art and artifact.

Loos wanted to assert a radical division between art and artifacts. For Loos, the value of art was ineffable. It transcends any considerations of economic gain, status, or ideology. Artifacts, in contrast, are useful

47. Loos, “Furniture for Sitting,” SITV 29.

objects, part of life and therefore, can be judged and justified “rationally” in the instrumental terms “means” and “ends.”

A house should appeal to everybody, as distinct from works of art which do not have to appeal to anyone. The work of art is the artist's private affair. A house is not. The work of art is put into the world without there being a function for it. A house supplies a need. The work of art is answerable to no one. The work of art aims at shattering man's comfortable complacency. A house must serve one's comfort. The work of art is revolutionary, the house conservative. The work of art points man in the direction of new paths and thinks to the future. The house thinks of the present. Man loves everything that serves his comfort. He hates everything that wants to tear him away from his secure and safe position, and is burdensome. And so he loves the house and hates art. Does the house therefore have nothing to do with art, and should architecture not be classified under the arts? This is so.⁴⁸

Loos was concerned with safeguarding a space where artistic judgment could have free play unencumbered by practical considerations. In contrast to the freedom of the artist, the architect was stoically to accept his/her social responsibility and operate rationally and pragmatically.

Loos intended to preserve an unbridgeable gap between art and artifact, the purpose-free and purposeful. He was critical of the artists of the Vienna Secession, who sought to bridge this gap and obliterate the distinction of utensil and an art object. This desire to protect the autonomous status of art strongly allied him to Karl Kraus:

Adolf Loos and I — he literally and I grammatically — have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with elbow room. The others, those who fail to make this distinction, are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.⁴⁹

Loos's insistence on the separation of art and life is profoundly ahistorical. It does not recognize that the autonomy of art as an institution

48. Loos, “Architecture,” 45.

49. Quoted in Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) 89.

is an historical construct, that it is the particular mode in which art and life are mediated in modern bourgeois society. He failed to recognize that art and life must in some way be socially mediated. Perhaps this is an unfair and anachronistic criticism, since in his time Loos could not have understood the historicity of the “institution of art,” a perspective which we now have thanks to Peter Bürger’s insights on the role of the avant-garde.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Loos’s distinction is still problematic, because it depends on function.

To understand the difficulty of the concept of function, it is worth examining the relative modernity of this demarcation between art and artifact, and aesthetic and non-aesthetic valuations. This distinction was not established and institutionalized until the late 18th century, with the inception of “aesthetics” as a particular discourse reaching its paradigmatic formulation in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Kant posited that the human faculty of judgment performed the task of aesthetic valuation. In Kant’s system the distinctive feature of aesthetic judgment is its disinterest in the affairs of the world. Loos’s distinction between art and artifact is based on the Kantian criterion of disinterested perception as opposed to interested, practically motivated action. Function is an inadequate concept to render this distinction between disinterest and interest, art and artifact. Besides, by stressing function Loos must paradoxically exclude architecture from any aesthetic judgment, since architecture is by necessity a practical endeavor, compromised from its inception by practical interests and considerations. This conclusion is untenable and lead him to contradict himself, since for Loos architecture could not be reduced to utilitarian, practical considerations:

50. Loos’s desire to maintain inviolate the boundaries of art and life, makes Loos pre-avant-garde or “Modernist” in Peter Bürger’s sense. According to Bürger, Modernism are those artistic movements — such as the Vienna Secession — which sought new aesthetic forms and pursued art as an autonomous institution separate from daily life: these are the advocates of “art for art’s sake.” The “avant-garde” also pursued a break with tradition, but their goals run counter to the aestheticism of Modernism; they sought to reestablish a new relation of art and life by challenging the status of art as an autonomous institution. They wanted to rescue art from the transcendental role which both protected it from the onslaught of daily life and guaranteed its irrelevancy in the modern world; for this purpose the avant-garde transgressed the boundaries of art and life. Loos’s position as a modernist implicitly asserts “art for art’s sake,” thus betraying his affinity with his nemesis, the artists of the Vienna Secession and Jugendstil. Loos condemned the Secession’s romantic belief in “life for art’s sake,” as well as the philistines’ desire for an “art for life’s sake.” Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota, 1984).

Architecture arouses feelings in people. The task of the architect is, therefore, to define what the feelings should be. The room must look comfortable, the house cozy. The court-house must make a threatening impression on the furtive criminal. The bank building must say, 'Here your money is securely safeguarded by honest people . . .' The architect can only achieve this if he makes use of the same type of buildings, which have always produced these feelings in people, in the past. The Chinese colour of mourning is white, while for us it is black.

It would therefore be an impossible task for our architects to arouse a joyous mood by the use of black paint. If we find a mound in the forest, six foot long and three foot wide, formed into a pyramid shape by a shovel, we become serious and something within us says: 'Someone lies buried here'. This is architecture.⁵¹

This account of architecture yields a broader, more generous and more nuanced understanding of aesthetic judgment which cannot be encompassed within his own functionalist argument. As Adorno recognized in Loos, "the question of functionalism does not coincide with the question of practical function."⁵²

This broader definition of 'functionality' implicit in Loos's work, this functionality beyond practical function, may be better characterized by a very old fashioned notion: *decorum*. Decorum addresses issues of suitability, appropriateness, *bienseance*; it is concerned with a whole way of life, including deportment and conduct. Decorum addresses the appropriate modes of intercourse of human beings with the world, with each other, with the objects they create. It is socialized judgment. It presupposes human inter-subjectivity and interaction as the condition for proper judgment in human affairs, and assumes mutual awareness, respect, even fear of being embarrassed and ashamed. The compulsion to follow decorum arises from human interdependence. Decorum implies a complex structure or "figuration" among human beings, objects and occasions; it is not deterministic.⁵³ These relations are neither necessary nor unavoidable; rather, they are conventional, and their imperative rests on human judgment and mediation.⁵⁴ Functionalism,

51. Loos, "Architecture,"

52. Adorno, 32.

53. For the use of "figuration" see Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners* vol. 1 of *The Civilizing Process*, trans. E. C. Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

54. Loos's concern with decorum in this broader sense is evident in his writings covering an array of subjects from shoes to interiors, as we have seen, as well as in his

in contrast, objectifies and reifies these relations, by assuming a deterministic relationship between the form, the *appearance* of the object and its function, or *essence*, presuming that this relation of *form* and *function* is invariant and necessary.

Loos's functionalism may be seen as a self-misunderstanding, since his concern was not with function as such, but with a whole way of life, *Lebensformen* (Wittgenstein). This self-misunderstanding recalls the similar self-misunderstandings of Freud and Marx, who aspired to "scientific" accounts of human behavior and were convinced of the ultimate truth and validity of their own accounts.

In adopting a functional account to buttress the argument against ornament, against kitsch, Loos was also following a broader pattern in enlightened opinion regarding mores and manners. As Norbert Elias has shown in his brilliant book, the *History of Manners*, from the Renaissance to the 19th-century the injunctions dictating manners changed from commands to persuasion through rational grounds. Earlier the reasons for these injunctions were quite overt: to service and not offend the patron or his lady, as well as the desire to be acceptable to polite society. These injunctions based on politeness and fear of shame were reinterpreted and rationalized in the 19th century as impersonal and universally valid criteria such as function or hygiene.⁵⁵ Loos unwittingly reproduced this shift of opinion on mores and failed to acknowledge the historicity of his own critique.

There are good reasons why Loos preferred to use function over decorum. The term decorum has an aristocratic source, like courtesy which comes from the court. Decorum referred to the rules and rituals of the aristocratic court: it implied a hierarchical society, which Loos rejected as anachronistic and counter to the enlightened democratic ethos of the modern world. Loos was concerned with a suitable way of life for the modern bourgeois and democratic society; he condemned kitsch for its courtly pretensions. While decorum seems more suited to a critique of kitsch than function since it incorporates a broader sense of a way of life, the aristocratic associations of decorum make it highly suspect.

To further complicate the semantic relationship between decorum and function in Loos's discourse, it is important to examine the relation

famous lectures on "how-to-live," frequented by Viennese luminaries like Karl Kraus and Wittgenstein, and out of town visitors like Kafka.

55. Cf. Elias, *History of Manners*.

of *Kultur* and *Civilization* in German speaking countries.⁵⁶ Among 18th-century bourgeois intellectuals, *Civilization* became associated with the French absolutist court and the aristocracy; it was seen as materialistic and mechanistic, obsessed with manners, protocol and etiquette. To French *Civilization*, they countered German *Kultur*, as higher, purer, concerned with Idea, Spirit (*Geist*), and the disinterested appreciation of “art.” *Kultur* is a German Romantic construct; in opposition to the court, where questions of taste were paramount, the German bourgeois intellectual regarded all questions of taste as frivolous. Divorced from the prosaic everyday, the bourgeois intellectual became unable to articulate an alternative to the court’s life style, which continued to retain all prestige.⁵⁷

By referring to function rather than decorum, Loos implicitly asserted a modern bourgeois rather than an aristocratic definition of culture, while simultaneously asserting the values of material civilization and technological progress over the idealistic ethos of German *Kultur*. This mobilization of function and its associated semantic constellation — bourgeois, civilization, science, empiricism — endows Loos’s essays with a specific polemical force, especially in a German speaking intellectual milieu. At the same time, this polemical force makes him vulnerable to misinterpretation, since his real concern went beyond function to address the problem of decorum as the intersection of culture, manners and civilization.

Loos’s position is complex. He was highly critical of the German pretention to an inward *Kultur* with barbarian manners and lifestyle, thus echoing Nietzsche. He extolled *Civilization*, yet for Loos civilization was not French but Anglo-Saxon, not aristocratic but *haute-bourgeois*, namely the British gentry. For Loos, the English were the paragon of good taste, as characterized by discretion and simplicity and made evident by the lack of ornament in clothes and the preference for well-tailored, well-crafted items. The lack of ornament he called for was, to his mind, a *fait-accompl*i in the Anglo-Saxon world. For Loos, aristocratic French *Civilization* — decorative, religious, aristocratic — had been superceded by bourgeois English *Civilization* — mechanistic, scientific, democratic. This change from French to British, from aristocratic to

55. Cf. Elias, *History of Manners*.

56. Elias, Chapter 1.

57. Nietzsche provides a mordant critique of this claim of superiority of German *Kultur* throughout his writings.

gentry, corresponds to the semantic change from *decorum* or *bienseance*, to *function* in Loos's discourse.⁵⁸

This discursive use of function is a risky strategy: to challenge the aristocratic pretensions of the bourgeoisie as manifested in kitsch by confronting them with their own values, Loos faced a conundrum. If he asserted the value of *decorum* as understood by his contemporaries, he would be signaling a wish to return to the anachronistic values of the *ancien regime*, whose vestiges remained ensconced in the Hapsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire. This would therefore mean participating in the nostalgia he so vigorously condemned as necrophilia in kitsch. On the other hand, if he asserted the value of *function* — as he did — he would be signaling his loyalty to the progressive legacy of the bourgeois Enlightenment, yet, ironically, reiterating the arguments of the philistine he criticized.

The effect of his choice is not only contradictory, but reductive. By privileging the work-mask over its counterparts, the sex-mask and the death-mask, he reduced the play of his discursive space to one dimension, production, and threatened the symbolic dimension emphasized by the other two. As a result, his own critique of kitsch as commodity fetishism, disclosed through the work-mask, is displaced and reduced to a recapitulation of the Puritan Ethic, and his insights on the crucial role of symbolic exchange in consumption are undermined.

Reading Loos's critique of kitsch in terms of its claims of purity is suffocating: the critique of fetishism is reduced to functionalism, the critique of sexual perversion is repressive and his critique of necrophilia is meaningless. To counter this suffocating effect, it is important to emphasize the tension between purity and transgression within his discourse. To pursue these reflections, one of his crucial — and productive — transgressions must be reexamined: the "transvaluation of values" with regards to ornament, effected through the disjunction of *decoration* and *decorum*.

III. *Decoration and Decorum*

Decoration is an attribute of objects. Decorum is an attribute of subjects and of subjects' intercourse with objects in the world. Though different, as semantic cognates they share a common root, *decor*, which

58. "Men's Fashions," 12, "Furniture for Sitting," 33, "The Luxury Vehicle," 39, "School of Fine Arts," 88, "English Schools in the Austrian Museum," 107, all in SITV. For a discussion of Loos's anglophilia see Gravagnuolo and Rossi.

reveals the traces of a traditional reciprocity of beauty and the befitting, of the seen and the seemingly. In light of this assumed reciprocity we may understand some of the paradoxes of Loos's critique of kitsch.

Loos condemned the modern use of ornament as kitsch, and kitsch itself as a crime, as violence to the object, transforming it into a fetish reeking of sadomasochistic perversions and necrophilia. These crimes are decried as a violation of civilized norms, of decorum. Thus for the sake of *decorum*, Loos called for the banning of *decoration*. His accusation leads to a radical disjunction of decoration and decorum, and this disjunction is a radical "transvaluation of values," a divorce of the traditional correspondence of decoration and decorum. Yet this violation of traditional assumptions, this transgression, is justified on the conservative grounds of protecting the proper, the seemingly, the decorous against a previous transgression, the transgression leading to the proliferation of kitsch.

For Loos, kitsch was a monster begotten through a crime of violence, a transgression against decorum. Against the transgression leading to the fetishism of kitsch, he sought to defend the "pure" object, and wanted to exorcise its contaminants. Yet, this claim of purity entailed a different act of transgression. Unwittingly, Loos reversed the traditional association of decoration and the decorous. Loos was a reluctant revolutionary: revolutionary because he cut the Gordian knot of eclectic decoration in one stroke, eliminating decoration as an issue and thus transforming both architectural discourse and subsequent practice; reluctant because this transformation was achieved for the sake of traditional values of propriety and continuity.

Adolf Loos's critique of kitsch offers a crucial and profound cultural critique by addressing the basic human condition: work, sex and death. Through this critique, he characterized *kitsch* as the perversion of modern ornament into a commodity fetish, an object of sexual perversion and necrophilia. To counter kitsch, he offered a simple solution: ban all ornament. Yet this solution has had paradoxical effects: it liberated architects from the obsession to create a modern ornament to represent modern life, but also transformed ornament from a fetish into a taboo.