

ORNAMENTATION: FORM AND FUNCTION

Desma 10 Midterm Assignment

Fall 2007

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Ornament is usually regarded as an addition that accentuates a subject. However, ornamentation goes beyond surface representation and aesthetics; its most important role is serving as a symbol to be deciphered. Adolf Loos's *Ornament and Crime* is undeniably one of the most influential and controversial works regarding ornamentation in design and its impact on the Modernist movement. In his essay, he radically argues against the wasted effort in adding ornamentation, especially during the height of Art Nouveau in 1900. This way of thinking initially emerged during the Industrial Revolution with the transition from manual artisan production to mass industrial production. This led to a separation of design and machine that did not exist with artisan production. With the two concepts separate, disagreement eventually arose about the necessity of ornamentation. In *Industrial Design*, John Heskett explores this topic and its influence on the transition from handcrafts to mass production, man to machine, and object to designer. He neither agrees nor opposes Loos, but instead proposes that given various objects, such as a locomotive or bicycle, function may take precedence over design whereas with a streamlined car, design was necessary to promote an increase in sales and recognition. The idea of ornamentation as crime is put at odds with "form follows function"¹ as we assign meaning and signification to ornaments through semiotics.

Industrialization changed the expression of ornament and decoration; it was not a sign of "quality and exclusivity" anymore and instead was "widely accessible at modest costs"². Heskett approaches ornamentation chronologically, starting with the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century. The Industrial Revolution is a marked point in the creation of Loo's *Ornament and Crime* because it was the event that began the transition from manual craftsmanship to mass machine production. This shift would detach man and design, allowing a

¹ Louis Sullivan

² John Heskett, *Industrial Design*. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980), 19

distinct separation from the point of manufacture to the point of design. The Industrial Revolution led a big jump in production and many took advantage of it, including Josiah Wedgwood and Matthew Boulton. Heskett provides a thorough analysis of their diverging opinions concerning ornamentation. Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) is most known for industrializing the manufacture of pottery with part of his success accredited to his use of ornamental design. Matthew Bolton (1726-1809) was also a manufacturer at the time. While Boulton believed in decorative products for a fashionable market of rapid changes in taste, which Loos would inarguable disagree with, Wedgwood believed otherwise. Wedgwood set a more “clear division [between] ‘useful’ and ‘ornamental’ wares”³. He believed that “form had to be reconciled with requirement of utility and durability”⁴. This gap in opinions among the pioneering industrialists would be amplified as industrialization became more advanced, furthering separating an object’s design or form from its intended function.

The idea of form and function is directly correlated with ornamentation as a crime. Loo’s argument is that if form followed function was true then any extraneous décor would be unnecessary. Although it was Louis Sullivan that initially coined the term, it was Frank Lloyd Wright who restated that “form and function are one”. That phrase, however, implies that “as long as the functional requirements are satisfied form will follow and seem pleasing”⁵. Provided two fervidly extremes of form following function or not at all, Heskett rested on several examples in which the situation of the specific object dictates whether or not function will be dominant and essentially commanding form. Introduced in the late 19th century, the bicycle (See Figure 1.1, John Kemp Starley’s Rover ‘safety’ bicycle) was a much simpler machine than that

³ John Heskett, *Industrial Design*. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980), 15

⁴ John Heskett, *Industrial Design*. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980), 19

⁵ Victor Papanek, *What is Design? A Definition of the Function Complex*. (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2000), 6

of a locomotive or airplane. Its form easily followed its function that it left hardly any room for irrelevant beautification. “Its proportion, with a large wheel in front and small trailing wheel, were dictated by the pedal drive being directly connected to the front hub; the large front wheel was necessary to convert the thrust on the pedals into a speed adequate to enable the cyclist to maintain balance”⁶. This is one of examples Heskett uses to illustrate the causality of form and function and the few options of ornamentation when function wholly dictates form. The design of the bicycle served a single purpose and that was as a means of transportation.

However, Heskett also introduces the reverse, when form does not necessarily follow function and there is room for design over utility. When the American industry began to mimic Britain’s large-scale mass production, it was forced to set their own standards and respective trends. American products were practical, but less ornamental than European ones—this is the birth of industrial ornament. This eventually led to streamlining, which symbolized American design in the 1930s. There were two basic principles: Avoid gliding form and a smooth, continuous surface. This streamline design pattern became prevalent in fast moving things typical of modern society, such as cars and trains to even submarines. Loo’s argument may be relevant in regards to streamlining because streamlining became an ideology. Its practicality and functionality were lost⁷, rendering it a means of ornamentation in Loo’s perspective—something functional became obsolete and lost its meaning. This is particularly true of the automobiles of the time. When initially presented, Ford and its famous T-Model were not about design and neither was General Motors. In the 1950s, however, all of the automobiles became indistinguishable from one another in that “there was little reference to function [that] the

⁶ John Heskett, *Industrial Design*. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980), 40

⁷ Erkki Huhtamo

manufacturers collectively embarked [...] to pure style”⁸. General Motors soon created and employed workers to an “Art and Color Section” in 1928 and eventually won the automobile battle due to more appealing external designs. This excess design can be attributed to a necessity to increase sales, which in turn can be attributed to its function as a product to be sold. The ornament then becomes functional, which puts those two dogmas completely in conflict with one another. The process of becoming ornament and the process of ornament becoming functional is at the heart of Heskett’s argument in *Industrial Design*. As long as form and function exist, they will always occur—it is the extent to which either occur.

Henry Cole proposed the compromise to ameliorate the dichotomy between utility and design. He stated that “design has a twofold relation, having in the first place, a strict reference to utility in the thing designed; and, secondarily, to the beautifying or ornamenting that utility. The word *design*, however, with the signification—with ornament, as apart from, and often even as opposed to, utility.”⁹. Building off of Henry Cole’s idea of a “twofold relation,” Terence Hawkes applied signification to ornamentation thus creating another level of meaning. “Every speech-act includes the transmission of messages through the ‘languages’ of gesture, posture, clothing, hair-style, perfume, accent, social context etc. over and above, under and beneath, even at cross-purposes with what words actually *say*”¹⁰. By reassigning ornamentation with signification, we are able to embed meaning to otherwise functionless decorative embellishments. According to Terence Hawkes’s *A Science of Signs*, there are six parts of function, three of which we will focus on: need, use and aesthetics. With regard to the automobile, “it has changed from useful

⁸ John Heskett, *Industrial Design*. (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc, 1980), 178

⁹ John Heskett, *Industrial Design*. (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc, 1980), 20

¹⁰ Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism & Semiotics: A Science of Signs*. (Great Britain: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977), 125

tool to gas-guzzling status symbol”¹¹. The “use” is the overall function of the vehicle—Does it work? The “need” encompasses an identity that we want or desire, one of status and luxury. And the last one, the aesthetics will be the form, dealing with perception and how you want others to perceive you. All three of those categories contribute to the function of an object, including aesthetics and form.

Although Loos was such a significant and influential figure to modernism, his views targeted the lower class and women. He insinuates that aristocrats have achieved a sort of hegemony over their individuality that it is not necessary to resort to superfluous ornamentation because their natural presence will permeate through. This can be applied to the Modernistic movement as well. To reject all forms of ornamentation would leave a bleak and stark world, where everyone and everything is at its most minimum and basic form. With a slight increase in women designers at the time, the trend was expected to sway naturally to more feminine design—or ornamentation—though Loos may not have been conscious of the underlying slur. Take for instance a light switch and its backing: when does the light switch transition from functional to ornamental? Functionally, it controls the flow of electricity to allow us to manually switch lights on and off when completing the circuit. Theoretically, this would serve its basic function as a light switch. But, the light switch has evolved to become enclosed with the backing. Does the backing serve as ornamentation if the function of the light switch is to turn on and off a light bulb? To different degrees, one can argue for either side. However, It comes down to the extent to which one considers ornamentation and whether it can be embedded into the function of an object. Also, the relevancy of the ornament should be considered in the context of the

¹¹ Victor Papanek, *What is Design? A Definition of the Function Complex*. (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2000), 14

object itself. Ultimately, I agree with Loos in seeking design that is free of anything extraneous or extravagant.

In contemporary design, there are countless examples of ornamentation, but more specifically, ornamentation in interior design. It is not only reserved to personal homes but also to showroom in stores such as IKEA and Target use ornamentation as an integral part of the dominant visual in creating certain atmospheres and moods. Specific to stores such as IKEA (See Figure 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) is its ability to bring streamlined, de-ornamented designs to average consumers. This transition bringing high-class design to affordable prices encapsulates the idea of practical designs and form following function. The overall idea becomes rather convoluted as we enter terrains of product merchandise that have confounding functions as a design and as a product to be marketed and sold. John Heskett exquisitely states, “Although utility was constantly emphasized, ornament was also accepted as an integral function. The problem was to establish harmony between the two”¹². Due to the Industrial Revolution and designers and thinkers such as Adolf Loos and John Heskett, we are able to continually gain knowledge and raise questions regarding ornamentation and its roots.

¹² John Heskett, *Industrial Design*. (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc, 1980), 23



Figure 1.1 John Kemp Starley's Rover 'safety' bicycle (From Heskett's *Industrial Design*)



Figure 2.1 Sample bedroom, colors and furniture used to create soft mood



Figure 2.2 Similar to figure 2.1, Sample Kitchen, use of color and furniture to create mood

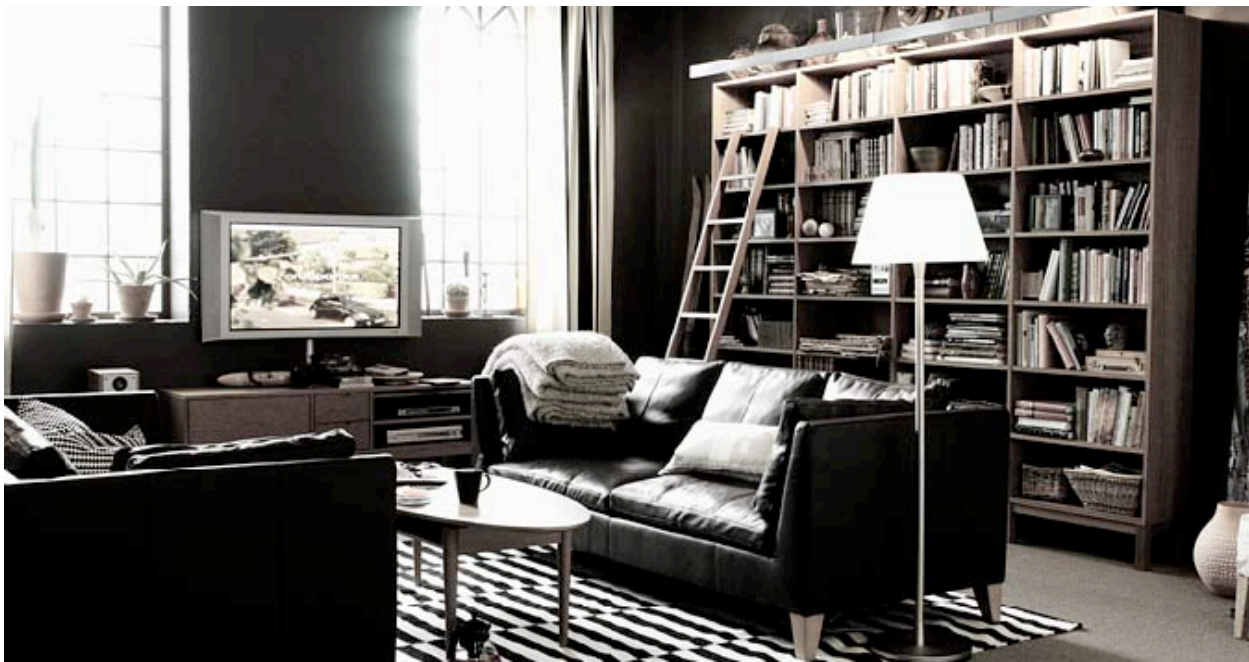


Figure 2.3 Similar to figure 2.1 and 2.2, Sample living room