

# Critique of Loos's Anti-Ornament Through Lucretius and Adorno

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## Abstract

In this article, I will stop by an ancient source, *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius' unaccomplished two-thousand-year-old masterpiece, and try to delve into the centuries-old roots of ornamentation much older than from Gottfried Semper's *Bekleidung* (dressing) principle of the nineteenth century. Lucretius's approach, grounded on Epicurus' atomism, discloses how nature embellishes and creates existences with this queer principle, starting from atoms, with deviation from end to end. (In the twentieth century, though, we are now aware of the divisibility of atoms and the existence of subatomic particles.) After including these passages, I will try to take a closer look at Adorno's text, in which he sarcastically states that, the effort to purify has turned into a style itself. After a micro-investigation on the representation of nature, I will conclude my article with a discussion in which I expressed my concerns that the anti-ornamentalism sometimes haunts academic writing under the guise of being scientific.

**Keywords:** Adolf Loos, Lucretius, Ornament and Crime, Swerve, Theodor Adorno.

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**Received:** 15.02.2022 - **Accepted:** 17.03.2022

## ANTIDOTE FOR ANTI-ORNAMENTALISM: LUCRETIUS AND THE SWERVE

In *De Rerum Natura*, in his passages on the motion, swerve, and emancipation of atoms, Lucretius disapproves the rhetoric which scorns, disparages and dismisses ornamentation. In my opinion, Lucretius is contemporary and critical enough and to advocate radically that deviation from the rule is crucial and to discern that linear monotony is fatal. With this aspect, he is the eternal antidote to the opposition to ornament.

Martin Ferguson Smith, translator of *De Rerum Natura*, mentions that Lucretius's argument on the swerve of atoms has finally regained credibility in the modern atomic age, after two thousand years of scornful comments from Cicero to Lord Macaulay (2001: xxvi). Smith prefers to translate the book in prose form. The highlight of the book is that it is the first translation that deliberately refrains from using the gendered pronoun "he". Could Lucretius have laid the groundwork for ornament theory when he said that atoms swerve only to an infinitesimal degree? It is not effortless to answer this question confidently, but it does not seem possible to negate it entirely. Since in *De Rerum Natura*, which is virtually two thousand years old and is dated to the first century, we read that atomic types generate peculiar sensations; Lucretius launches inseparable causal links between concrete sensory differences and the formal properties of atoms. Two examples that follow:

*"...substances capable of affecting our senses pleasantly are composed of smooth and round atoms..."* (Lucretius, 2001: 45, 2: 403-405)

*"The truth is that the component atoms of every object that soothes our senses must have some degree of smoothness..."* (Lucretius, 2001: 46, 2: 421-422)

Atoms create pleasing objects by their smoothness; hence it would not be surprising to see sharp and stinging atoms in beings that cause pain and discomfort. Despite his naive appearance, Lucretius leans on facts with abundant intuition. Like dust particles soaring in all directions under the stimulus of a beam of light, he rationally demonstrates the order to which the seemingly ceaseless and scattered motions of atoms must be bound. But before that, I would like to quote here those renowned episodes about the swerve of atoms:

*"When the atoms are being drawn downward through the void by their property of weight, at absolutely unpredictable times and places they deflect slightly from their straight course to a degree that could be described as no more than a shift of movement. If they were not apt to swerve, all would fall downward through the unfathomable void like drops of rain; no collisions between primary elements would occur, and no blows would be affected, with the result that nature would never have created anything."* (Lucretius, 2001: 40-41, 2: 210-220)

(...)

*"So, I insist that the atoms must swerve slightly, but only to an infinitesimal degree, or we shall give the impression that we are imagining oblique movements"*

(...)

*"...but who could possibly perceive that they do not swerve at all from their vertical path?"*

(...)

*"Moreover, if all movements are invariably interlinked, if new movement arises from the old in unalterable succession, if there is no atomic swerve to initiate movement that can annul the decrees of destiny and prevent the existence of an endless chain of causation, what is the source of this free will possessed by living creatures all over the earth?"* (Lucretius, 2001: 41, 2: 240-250)

If the parallelism Lucretius establishes between the swerve of atoms and the diversity in nature still impresses us, this influence lies in the privilege of free will that he grants to the atoms. Because, as described in *De Rerum Natura*, with minor deviations, detours and the manifestation of desire, all kinds of beings in the universe have been revealed in all their grandeur in sequences, and the basis of this is not divine but corporeal. Lucretius refuses to resort to dogmatic explanations to explicate existence and discovers all the power in the cosmos in the bravery to be unrestricted, exhibited by every separate atom. Furthermore, atoms, rather than an absolute definition, fabricate infinitely dissimilar derivatives in circulation that participate in more complex formations than themselves, and then break away from them and become free again.

Anti-ornamentalists assumed that they could dismiss ornamentation thanks to robust definitions that could bring universal, inclusive and universalistic explanations to distinct and abstract concepts. On the other hand, Baruch Spinoza removed the geometric axioms from being absolute and brought an explanation to the universe of shapes that equates action and result. Ulus Baker, in one of his video-recorded seminars, talks about "attributum" while explaining Spinozian geometry; this concept implicates "occupying space in active motion". (URL 6) Baruch Spinoza, in his 1662 *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (Joachim, 1958: 96), deals with the prime geometrical forms from this equation of motion / being. That is, the point in this explanation is where movement and inactivity are identical. Line is when the point both stops and transfers itself along a linear path. Baker points out in his seminar that transference is met with the word "translatio" (or translation) in Spinoza. Baker also explains this condition: It is assumed that one end of the line is fixed and the other is mobile. In this case, the circle is the plane formed by the rotation of a fixed line at one end. That is, the circle exists only through action. The sphere, in this case, is the shape formed by rotating the semicircle fixed at one end of its diameter around its axis (Joachim, 1958: 96) (URL 7). Baker adds that these geometric definitions are not permanent, because for Spinoza definitions are generic rather than encompassing all aspects of a being: "Causa proxima" or proximate cause (the sincere cause, Baker adds) does not attempt to encompass being as a description intends to, but only one dimension of a being. This leads the thinker to the conclusion that, there can be no real definition of the sphere, according to Baker. The sphere is a mental, rational being that does not exist in nature, that is, it is not physical. The existence of the sphere is closely tied to action: There is a sphere to the extent that we spin the semicircle around the diametrical axis. The semicircle that we spin was not a fixed definition, it was revealed by the movement of a line connected to an axis, as it will be remembered. In that case, what is active in the sphere is only that the point, which both rests and transmits itself along a linear path, creates the line; and from there, the circle and from it the sphere derive. The multi-layered sequence of acts moves from dimensionlessness to the third dimension. The "causa proxima" of the sphere, the moving and translating point, exist through movement, action; through "attributum". As can be seen, Spinozian geometry is opposed to modernist discourse, which fixes and interrupts. According to Baker, Leibniz's approach based on proximity rather than distance inspired Nikolai Lobachevsky, a nineteenth-century mathematical scholar known for his contributions to hyperbolic geometry and Bernhard Riemann's surface theory. Spinozian definitions of geometry, the concepts like "attributum" and "causa proxima", liberate thought from the purifying domination of certainty by directing it to the field of desire. Now, after Lucretius's swerve being considered let me take a detailed look on Adorno's critiques of Loos as well as Le Corbusier. And while doing so, one has to keep in mind that there is a connection between Spinoza's theory on geometry and the assertions of Adorno on grounds that the former shows the unconscious and unintentional dimensions of anything that can be said to be ornamental.

## LOOS IN ADORNO AND THE PROBLEM OF ORNAMENT

We cannot seek an origin for ornament; however, knowledge of origin, a genealogy is evermore compulsory to locate the essential features. It can be said that the originlessness of ornament is its essential feature. This rootlessness is similar to the onion having no seeds. As we peel the onion, we get closer to the middle, but it does not have a seed like a fruit; each layer is the onion itself. Having trouble imagining ornament as a sovereign entity, modernists favoured to perceive it as a parasite clinging to essential elements. Therefore, it appears unthinkable to them to establish a structure on ornamentation. A structure would be achieved by decreasing its ornaments, and as nothing would be left of an existence consisting only of ornaments, it would probably end up in nothingness. Perhaps this "nothing" clarifies well how the ornament turned into a symbol. Ornamentation can also be, in a Nietzschean interpretation: One is surprised to see in things what one has put into those things from the beginning. One thinks these are things themselves, true and essential; which Nietzsche calls the causality fallacy. There are not always rational causes; there are also unconscious causes (Nietzsche, 2017: 36) (URL 5) Ornamentation is part of this unconscious zone. It means that those who panic a person with their unexpectedness and are therefore sent to the field of secondariness / otherness share the same fate with ornamentation. Although they are constantly expelled by the conscious, ornamentation cannot be ultimately expelled, because the conscious and unconscious are dialectically interconnected. Let's turn to Adorno on this:

*"There is barely a practical form which, along with its appropriateness for use, would not therefore also be a symbol. (...) [T]o Freud, symbolic intention quickly allies itself to technical forms, like the airplane. (...) What begins as symbol becomes ornament, and finally*

appears superfluous. (...) [T]he state free of ornament would be a utopia of (...) [being] no longer in need of symbols." (Adorno, 2005: 9, 10)

Ornament is rootless, but in capitalism's innovation cycle, every innovation is threatened to turn one day into mere ornament:

*"What was functional yesterday can therefore become the opposite tomorrow. (...) Criticism of ornament means no more than criticism of that which has lost its functional and symbolic signification. (...) [A]rticles for use lose meaning as soon as they are displaced or disengaged in such a way that their use is no longer required."* (Adorno, 2005: 6)

According to Adorno, what seems awkward today may become indispensable tomorrow. I cannot presume how much Loos relied on the anti-ornamentation, which caused the short-circuiting of forms by the ease of production provided by technological innovation, but it is a fact that what constantly provokes and burgeons ornament is the assembly line itself, which disqualifies the previous one and dooms it into mere ornament. Usefulness is a phenomenon that is being eroded day by day in our amnesic modern society; no commodity lasts long. The swerve shows itself here anew; for the social process progresses and despite all planning, aimlessness and irrationality re-emerge, according to Adorno (2005: 8). As a matter of fact, he draws attention to the ironic dimension of ornamentation inherent in commodity production:

*"Thus a self-mocking contradiction emerges (...) If an advertisement were strictly functional, without ornamental surplus, it would no longer fulfill its purpose as advertisement."* (Adorno, 2005: 8)

How could the consumer's desire be provoked without this tickling redundancy in an advertisement? Loos is also aware of the rhetorical dimension of this phenomenon. For Adorno, usefulness and concrete uselessness in commodities cannot be entirely allocated because this dichotomy is historical: Ornaments are remnants of mostly out-of-date modes of production; for this reason:

*"(...) there is no chemically pure purposefulness set up as the opposite of the purpose-free aesthetic. Even the most pure forms of purpose are nourished by ideas. (...) No form can said to be determined exhaustively by its purpose."* (Adorno 2005: 6-7)

*"Hence our bitter suspicion is formulated: The absolute rejection of style becomes style. (...) In turn, his rigid rejection of ornamentation is coupled with his disgust with erotic symbolism."* (Adorno 2005: 8)

The idea of purifying the structural created embellishment: an impossible project. These emphases of Adorno are about two different critical paths. The first is laid out extensively in the 1990s by Mark Wigley in *White Walls, Designer Dresses*: Whiteness is worn as an ideal, a stage and style. As a matter of fact, the thinker pierces the deep historical ties of whiteness with the eugenic project that reached its peak with Nazism and fascism (Wigley, 2001). The other goes hand in hand with the first and falls within the domain of feminist criticism in general. As a matter of fact, Loos's discourse on ornamentation was widely criticized and condemned. On this subject, you can refer to the parts of the article published in 2008, which deals with the critical studies on sexist, misogynic and homophobic emphases in Loos. (URL 1) Ornamentation is a deceptive concept: Ornament emphasizes something essential; similar to the rhetoric of masculine discourses in which the masculine is always regarded as primary over the feminine.

A supplementary comment to the impossibility of getting rid of ornamentation: According to Adorno, Loos has to refrain from expelling ornamentation from all arts to its end, just as the positivists could not go all the way in expelling poetry, and they acknowledged it on the condition of keeping the poetry neutral and unchallenged (2005: 7).

Adorno's lecture entitled "Functionalism Today" of 1965 predates Mark Wigley's book on the hypocrisy of whiteness in architecture. Adorno clearly sees the puritan, bourgeois style in Loos. He well finds and illustrates the point where Loos' un-ornamenting moralism and the capitalist business ethic coincide (2005: 8):

*"Pleasure appears, according to the bourgeois work ethic, as wasted energy. Loos: (...) "Ornament is wasted work energy and thereby wasted health. It has always been so. But today it also means wasted material, and both mean wasted capital. (...) [According to the] norms of profitability (...) nothing should be wasted."* (Adorno 2005: 9).

1965 is also the year Le Corbusier died. In addition to Adorno's commentary on Le Corbusier in the same text, I can say: Le Corbusier must have seen something unassuming, in need of refinement, in the complex and unequivocal, scattered measures of things. If these random measures were brought into order with the *Modulor*, it would be possible to get rid of these decorations, these random differences, which are nothing but a waste of time and energy, in one go. This immanent, mathematical mechanism that goes beyond the Loosian simplicity, which is not seen at first glance, and therefore impossible to read from the outside without an intermediary, is the mediator of the unity to be established. This false unity which is unacceptable for Nietzsche (Nietzsche, 2017), undoubtedly includes a deep and esoteric utopianism aiming to curb not only society but also the capitalist system, beyond being a deep puritanism. Capitalism, which restrains and regulates, *Modulor* will tend to establish a kind of meta-sovereignty by subjugating it in the first place. Indeed, it did not.

## THE INEVITABILITY OF ORNAMENT:

### A Micro Investigation on Nature and Representation

Let's look at the ornament from the theological aspect; from the window of divinity and subordination. Is the manifestation of God's will in humans direct or indirect? Human is a mortal, contingent being; can it be considered secondary, material, "ornate" in its ephemerality? In the face of the idea of an absolute god, it is impossible to find a being free from mediation; everything is – inevitably – secondary.

Today, absolute and pragmatist explanations of nature are out of date, and more grotesque scientific theories are replacing positivist ones. From popular documentaries about the unique properties of octopuses or about the uniqueness of the earth in the universe (*What if the Earth Were Really Unique?*), we are on the way to the sciences that are more playful. (URL 2, URL 3)

Is a pattern in nature completely non-ornamental, being necessary and functional (evolution-tested)? Patterns are constantly repeated in nature: "Li" textures in mathematics, the geometry of the sunflower's seed arrangement spiralling out from the centre, the shapes of snow crystals, etc. Can it be said that these are nothing but ornamentation?

If folding Architecture is a kind of absolute non-ornamental phenomenon, isn't it but extremely baroque and symbolic in Adorno's Freudian interpretation?

What is a pure phenomenon if ornamentation cannot be separated from the subject? Is it pure existence, free from ornamentation and expression? This is a paradox. Unornamented facts: Is this harmonography? (URL 4) Are Harmonograph drawings the direct manifestations of the sound phenomenon (Ashton, 2003)? Is it pure mathematics or pure diagram? Even if we assume for a moment that it is, putting the craft required to make this pure phenomenon visible aside (perfect balance of pendulum assemblies, refinements and sharpening to reduce friction and lengthen the swing, a special pen to register the subtlety of the swing with sufficient precision, arms and knuckles to balance the pen, etc.), what is the resulting "drawing" other than ornamentation in terms of its immeasurability, its non-functionality, its excessiveness?

At the end of the article, at a threshold where we have come to the end of the sectarian debates in the field of science on the issue of ornament, this time I will engage in a critique of the normativism that prevails in academic writing.

## CONCLUSION

### The Kingdom of Refraining from Scientific Writing or Ornamentation

The debate on whether ornamentation is permissible or not, is completely out-of-date today; however, the discourses about what counts as ornaments and what should be rejected, particularly in the academy, remains valid.

What counts as creativity and what doesn't, seems to be a discussion of form. What is peculiar, which is genuine production; which one is an ornament, which one should be considered redundant? All these questions have parallels with that form debate. These questions do not simply rise out of the blue but can be said to be outcomes of the former debated I have been putting forward throughout the article. These debates have concentrated around Loos's provocations around ornamentalism and the rejections that were brought by Theodor W. Adorno. I also took Spinoza's geometry as well as the



two-thousand-year-old *De Rerum Natura* as allies for my discussions.

Let's take the verb "to write" as it is understood in the academic world of writing, which prioritizes will and reason: I write, which means I know clearly what to write and that I direct my action (writing) with my will and my ideas through language. I write, so I knew from the beginning what I was going to write; with this information, I went to my computer and started to write down my thoughts word by word. Can one really expect the situation to be so straight, that is to say, artless, from the point of view of the writing body: At best it can be argued that we speak and act "smoothly" from this perspective (I have discussed this point in the context of Lucretius' atomism).

When writing is posited as one hundred per cent "unadorned" and "consisting only of essential elements", it is presumed that no deviations take place between words and letters, between spaces and punctuation, between rests and accelerations—to use a Lucretian expression. No spark of passion, no creative lightning, no sensual shudder could be heard in such writing, just as the straight strides of atoms in space cannot create diversity. In academia, however, this legalized, judgment-like style is internalized and accepted as the norm.

In the practice of academic writing, language is claimed to be transparent; neither the author nor the writing exists: Mere instrumentalization reigns. The text consists almost exclusively of the unflinching neutrality of the measured, impersonal coding scheme suitable for an academic career: It is the "scientific scientificness of science", the tautology of tautology. Academic chameleon: I do science with my scientific writings: That is, with my text, from which everything unnecessary and unscientific is thrown out, after throwing away everything unnecessary and unscientific in me, it is precisely the case that there is not a single unnecessary (that is, unscientific) thing in it. I am practicing itself, the science: "The science of all of us". However, this mute language is nothing but style that claims to be purified from form, as Theodor Adorno argues in response to Loos' polemic that ornament is crime: I have already said enough on this subject above.

As long as making sense and comprehension are in question, expressions and sentences will be present. Since the expression cannot be without assuming the subject that expresses it, ornament is also necessary and inevitable. As a matter of fact, the route drawn by the subject who says "I am writing" does not resemble the exact route of a person who knows from the beginning the destination when setting out to work: Writing is creating the conditions for writing until one reaches the inscription; to ensure that the act eventually leads to some concrete literary formations; if text blocks can be conditioned to turn into densities, the text begins to form. That is not the only thing. The blocks evolve into unexpected expressions by engaging in more and more intricate interactions. Writing is a state of complete indecision; the expression appears in the midst of spiralling indecisions. Writing is the sum of letters that deviate, just as the atoms of Lucretius swerve, words that escape, words that appear, disappear, and are then allowed to reappear elsewhere. If it were not for their escapism, perversions, and excesses, there would never have been such a thing as the universe of writing. Honestly, I can't think of anything that would make a substantial number of academics happier than this dryness, this disaster, this lack of passion; that is, lack of literature.

#### **Financial Disclosure**

The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

#### **Ethics Committee Approval**

Ethics committee approval was not required for this article.

#### **Legal Public/Private Permissions**

In this research, the necessary permissions were obtained from the relevant participants (individuals, institutions, and organizations) during the survey and in-depth interviews.

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URL 2: <https://evrimagaci.org> (14 02 2022)

URL 3: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCatnasFAiXUvWwH8NISdd3A> (14 02 2022)

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