

A Thoroughly English Gentleman?

Towards an Analysis of Adolf Loos's Cultural Critique

By Janet Stewart (Aberdeen)

Over the last 15 years, significant progress has been made in both the appreciation and analysis of Adolf Loos's work. However, the focus of much of this scholarship has been the illumination of his architecture through the medium of architectural history, and Loos's textual output (journalistic texts and lectures) has mainly played a subsidiary role, resulting in an incomplete analysis of this aspect of his work; Loos the architect has effectively obscured the *Kulturkritiker* and erstwhile theorist of modernity. In contrast, my study places the cultural critic and critique in the centre, and so gains a fresh perspective on Loos's work. The method employed in examining Loos's *Kulturkritik* in this way is derived from Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer and centres on processes of investigation and excavation, casting the researcher in the role of detective.¹ Using this method to investigate both the form and content of Loos's texts reveals that his textual work is a complex intertextual entity. Circulating throughout his texts, suggesting that his cultural critique is similar in form to the work of Benjamin, are a variety of cultural signifiers: national cultural figures such as the American, the English Gentleman, and the German; social types such as the Peasant, the Artisan and the Aristocrat; locations in Vienna such as the Prater, Loos's *Haus am Michaelerplatz*, and the *Siedlungen* of the 1920s.

A continually recurring cultural signifier in Loos's texts is the figure of the English Gentleman which cuts across these somewhat arbitrarily, but necessarily, imposed categories of nationality, social structure and urban location. An analysis of the interplay between fashion, modernity, and the figure of the English Gentleman in Loos's texts provides us with a paradigmatic insight into his *Kulturkritik*, exposing two distinct, yet interrelated moments of his thought: his texts and lectures were the vehicles through which he hoped to achieve his bourgeois project of introducing 'Western culture' to Austria, and yet they also contain a compelling analysis of the cultural forms of

turn-of-the-century Vienna. In his short-lived journal *Das Andere* (1903), and elsewhere, Loos sets out to write fashion and inscribe a particular logonomic system.² In so doing, however, he also provides a description of the relationship between fashion and modernity. The most complex signifier in this analysis, the English Gentleman, combines both the prescriptive and the descriptive aspects of Loos's work. The prescriptive moment in Loos's critique of fashion is ultimately concerned with a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of difference. However, his critique transcends its own intentions to describe Viennese modernity in terms of a dialectic between the display and the disguise of difference. Embracing both a yearning for cultural homogeneity and an awareness of cultural heterogeneity, Loos's texts are explicitly predicated on a prescriptive view of modern Western culture. However, this is subverted by the more complex description of the ambivalence of Viennese modernity articulated in his writings.

The front covers of both issues of *Das Andere* contain illustrations of the English Gentleman in the form of advertisements for the Viennese tailors' firm, Goldman & Salatsch; in the first, in sporting dress, wearing blazer, trousers and nautical cap, while in the second, dressed for the city, in frock coat, top hat and cane. The heading for both advertisements reads 'Tailors and Outfitters. Goldman & Salatsch'. English is used in the original, and this is significant in that it reiterates Loos's argument, writing in 1898, that London represents the contemporary centre of culture.³ At the level of denotation, these advertisements provide illustrations of Loos's ideal of modern men's clothing described in the journal itself: 'Wie soll man angezogen sein? Modern. Wann ist man modern angezogen? Wenn man am wenigsten auffällt.'⁴ The modernity of the clothing of the English gentleman, Loos claims, lies in its rejection of the fetish of fashion. This form of clothing, in comparison to women's fashion or the dress of the *Gigerl*, is neither ephemeral

nor transitory. Rather, it functions as a disguise, or a mask allowing all men to appear formally equal while simultaneously protecting their individuality. Insisting that 'the riches of individuality' are hidden behind the mask of clothing, Loos echoes the sociologist Georg Simmel who, in *Zur Psychologie der Mode*, asserted that fashion as disguise has a levelling function which protects the particularity of the individual being.⁵

However, despite Loos's emphasis on the levelling function of fashion, in the advertisements for Goldman & Salatsch, English culture is connected explicitly with the Viennese aristocracy through the reproduction of the seals of royal approval granted to the tailors. Moreover, the location of the shop reiterates this connection to the nobility; its address is given as 'Wien I., Graben 20'. Functioning as signifiers, these images of men's fashion connote a culture which is at once bourgeois and aristocratic, leisured and yet also urban. The figure of the English Gentleman, ostensibly the representative of Loos's prescriptive view of the modern, actually serves to illuminate the putative aristocratic-bourgeois nature of Loos's anti-bourgeois critique. Although his ideal of the English Gentleman is indeed predicated on the ideal of a bourgeois style of clothing which is no longer dependent on the outer symbols of power and wealth typical of the old aristocratic style, this style of clothing is not the simple uniform of the 'man in overalls', attainable by all. Instead, it represents a fusion of bourgeois and aristocratic elements. Ostensibly functioning to disguise difference and thereby enable the creation of a bourgeois public sphere in which all modern persons are able to interact on an equal basis, the clothing of the English Gentleman actually upholds difference through the display of fine distinctions. Thus, men's fashion, defined elsewhere by Loos as the 'style of the present', not only entails the disguise of difference, but also simultaneously, contains a moment of display. In other words, the English Gentleman embodies, to paraphrase and modify Veblen's term, a form of non-conspicuous 'conspicuous consumption'.⁶

This insight, contained in Loos's texts and yet diametrically opposed to the ideal of cultural homogeneity that he intends to signify with the figure of the English Gentleman, is strikingly similar to Simmel's analysis of fashion in *Zur*

Psychologie der Mode. Describing the dialectic of fashion, Simmel argues: '*Die Mode ist eine besondere unter jenen Lebensformen, durch die man ein Compromiß zwischen der Tendenz nach sozialer Egalisierung und der nach individuellen Unterschiedsreizen herzustellen sucht.*'⁷ According to Simmel, the two tendencies which characterise fashion – equalisation and individuation – can be explained sociologically if one regards fashion as the product of class differences, representing a method of identifying oneself with others of the same status, while simultaneously serving to close off this group to the lower classes. However, the members of the lower classes will constantly strive for upward mobility and so imitate the fashions of the higher classes. They in turn, in order to preserve difference, must dispose of the style which has been appropriated in favour of a new style.

This dialectic of fashion corresponds to the model for social change presented in Loos's texts, in which the upper classes are spurred on to the eternal change (*ewiger Wechsel*) of forms through the impulse of the lower classes.⁸ This notion of *ewiger Wechsel* is taken up by Simmel in his analysis, in which he recognises the dialectical nature of this characteristic of fashion, arguing that 'die Thatsache, daß der Wechsel dauert, gibt hier jedem der Gegenstände, zu dem der Wechsel sich vollzieht, einen psychologischen Schimmer von Dauer'.⁹ Moreover, it represents a central aspect of fashion reiterated later by Benjamin in his description of fashion as the 'eternal return of the new'.¹⁰ This close examination of the ambiguities in the position of Loos's English Gentleman reveals that although Loos would have him stand outside the transitory world of fashion, in reality, he is subject to the mechanisms and machinations of the fashion industry. Indeed, the English Gentleman is the embodiment of the 'psychological shimmer of permanency', that represents a central illusion of fashion and by extension, of modernity. In Loos's texts, men's fashion signifies a tension between the permanent and the fleeting, between disguise and display. The paradoxical image of Viennese modernity is embodied in the figure and clothing of the English Gentleman.

Essentially, this means that definitions of Loos's English Gentleman which focus exclusively on its role as the signifier of a modernity

which is bourgeois, rational and masculine do not do justice to the complexity of Loos's analysis.¹¹ Circulating through Loos's texts like a commodity in the money economy, the figure of the English Gentleman assumes a fantastic form, revealing more about the paradoxical nature of Viennese modernity than Loos intended it to. Indeed, in Loos's texts, both women's fashion and men's fashion are complex signifiers which function, to borrow a phrase from Wigley, to 'unsecure the line' which connects men's fashion and modernity.¹² Moreover, it subverts Loos's own definition of the continuity and stability signified by the figure and clothing of the English Gentleman, suggesting that this was an illusion. However, it was an illusion necessary to provide Loos with a hold in the increasingly giddy maelstrom of the new.

In its emphasis on the pre-modern aspects of the clothing and life-style of the English Gentleman, the form of Viennese modernity expressed in Loos's texts demonstrates direct affinities with the experience of modernity in the nineteenth century in general, which Berman describes as 'an inner dichotomy, this sense of living in two worlds'.¹³ These two worlds, one of which is structured on the feeling of living in a revolutionary time, the other, on the memory of living in a world which was not at all modern, encapsulate the view of modernity articulated in Loos's critique, in which his proclamation of modernity is juxtaposed with the eschatological hope of a pre-modern Utopia. In his texts, the ideal of cultural homogeneity, signified by a lack of ornament, directly contradicts the yearning for the endless play of difference. Although Loos's ideal of culture is based on the balance between man's interior and his exterior,¹⁴ his solution to the modern dichotomy between interior and exterior – signified, amongst others, by the figure of the English Gentleman – is no solution, since it is dependent on pre-modern social relations.

Not only do Loos's texts contain a critique of the non-contemporaneity of social life in Vienna at the turn of the century, but his critique and analysis of modernity is itself also located in non-contemporaneous structures. To reiterate Bloch's distinction,¹⁵ the paradoxes upon which Loos's *Kulturkritik* is predicated are not the contemporaneous paradoxes of the capita-

list mode of production, but are grounded in the subjective non-contemporaneity of the petty-bourgeoisie. The non-contemporaneity of Loos's critique means that implicitly, the modern 'tragedy of culture' described by Simmel¹⁶ is articulated in his texts, for he counters the impossibility of reconciling interior and exterior, subjective and objective culture with a regressive Utopia.

¹ Walter BENJAMIN, *Ausgraben und Erinnern*, in: Vol. 4, Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt/Main 1972, 400-401.

² A 'logonomic system' is a second-level construct, such as formulated politeness conventions or rules of etiquette, containing rules for the production and reception of meanings. - See Robert HODGE and Günther KRESS, *Social Semiotics*, Cambridge 1988, 5.

³ Adolf LOOS, *Ins Leere gesprochen*, Vienna 1981, 57.

⁴ Adolf LOOS, *Trotzdem*, Vienna 1982, 40.

⁵ Georg SIMMEL, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1894-1900*, Vol. 5, Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe, Frankfurt/Main 1992, 111.

⁶ Thorstein VEBLEN, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, London 1925.

⁷ SIMMEL, *Aufsätze*, 106-107.

⁸ Adolf LOOS, *Die Potemkin'sche Stadt*, Vienna 1983, 80.

⁹ SIMMEL, *Aufsätze*, 113.

¹⁰ Walter BENJAMIN, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1, Frankfurt/Main 1974, 677.

¹¹ See Mary MCLEOD, *Undressing Architecture: Fashion, Gender and Modernity*, and Mark WIGLEY, *White Out: Fashioning the Modern*, in: Deborah FAUSCH et al. (eds.) *Architecture: In Fashion*, New York 1994, 39-123, 148-268.

¹² WIGLEY, *White Out*, 302.

¹³ Marshall BERMAN, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, London, New York 1983, 17.

¹⁴ LOOS, *Trotzdem*, 1982, 91.

¹⁵ Ernst BLOCH, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Vol. 4, Ernst Bloch Gesamtausgabe, Frankfurt/Main 1969.

¹⁶ Georg SIMMEL, *Philosophische Kultur*, Vol. 14, Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe, Frankfurt/Main 1996.