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FRINGE

By Elaine Freedgood

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, edginess was experienced as a literal problem. The *OED* gives the first definition, occurring in 1822, as "the condition of having the outlines too clearly marked; angularity, hardness of outline." This problem of unsightly outlines was solved, I suggest, by an extensive use of fringe throughout the Victorian period. These many miles of trimming performed symbolic work for a culture whose anxieties seemed to gather at edges — of clothing, of furniture, of nations, of empires, and eventually, of selves. A few inches of fringe, after all, can make an edge wide and irregular enough to allow for error. A row of pompoms strategically placed can usefully blur the beginnings and endings of literal and figurative fabric. A border of lace can protect edges from unraveling or wearing down. The fringed, and thus indefinite border, suggests the value of being able to imagine and construct limits as variable, permeable, and attenuated structures, rather than as hard edges at which one must stop short. The befringed edge offers a margin for error, for exploration, for coming to an end slowly and gradually.

Can fringe really *mean* anything, much less create symbolic space for working out conflicts that gather at boundaries, limits, and edges? I contend that fringe, like other debased aspects of material culture, can perform cultural work precisely because it doesn't get taken seriously. Indeed, the debasement of fringe is part of what makes it interesting and significant. Even at the height of its popularity in the Victorian period, most serious (that is to say male and high brow) aesthetic theorists deplored its use. It would soon acquire a place in the new cultural category known as kitsch, and therefore become certified as too obvious, too ubiquitous, and too embarrassingly tasteless to require notice and interpretation. As a result, I would argue, fringe and similar cultural phenomena can get away with doing all kinds of symbolic work, the meanings of which are at once obvious *and* unapprehended, or too obvious to be worthy of apprehension.

I.

IN MRS. J. E. PANTON'S *From Kitchen to Garrett: Hints for Young Householders* (1889), almost everything gets trimmed. "[N]othing looks worse," she writes, "than the hard line of a curtain that is neither frilled nor lace-trimmed"(92). Reading on in this manual of decoration, we find that lamp shades need two inches of silk fringe; top sheets should be "frilled with Cash's patent frilling 2 and a ½ inches wide"(115); a honeycomb quilt is made

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more attractive by a "deep cotton fringe"(116) and a toilet table cover ought to be made of tapestry and "edged with a ball-fringe to match"(119). A cigar box covered with "plush, velveteen or tapestry" can be useful for storing gloves and shoe laces, but be sure to put fringe around it "in such a way that the opening is hidden"(119). Limits, borders, and openings need to be covered and their covering becomes so beguiling that extra (and superfluous) edges are actually added to clothing and upholstery to provide more areas for trim: dresses for example, begin to be designed in tiers and each tier requires its own trimming, or more accurately, trimmings. A description of a dress in the *Ladies' Newspaper* of 1848 notes that the skirt, made of Pekin with satin stripes, has three flounces, "each edged with green silk fringe, headed by two rows of green velvet" (qtd. in Davenport 871).

Charles Eastlake, author of *Hints on Household Taste* (1868), complains that his contemporaries "have lost sight of the original *motive* of fringe," which was to prevent the edges of fabric from unraveling, and bewails its use on valences "scarcely deeper than the fringe itself" and on stools and firescreens where it is "utterly inappropriate" (97). Eastlake's judgments are part of a larger and long-standing movement to reform the taste of the middle class, which was suspected of having been corrupted by the mass production of sometimes useless and often tasteless stuff: "[t]he idea that machines had ruined design represented only a small part of a much larger debate during the 1830s and 1840s, a period when design became an issue of national political importance in Britain. It was the subject of three Parliamentary Select Committees" (Forty 58). Indeed, machines were directly blamed for extra trimmings and their aesthetic depredations: with the increased use of the Jacquard loom after 1830, "the general improvements in power-loom weaving increased both the quality and quantity of woven textiles" (Beard 265) making trimmings more widely available than ever before. The sewing machine, in its early years, was only able to sew flat seams and attach trimmings: putting it to full use made for more and more trim. Two contemporary observers complained that "what . . . will characterize the present epoch in the History of Fashion . . . is the amount of trimming with which we have found it possible to load every separate article" (qtd. by Cunnington in Forty 54).

Is the object of trimming to obscure edges or to call attention to them? The historian of fashion Phillis Cunnington notes that by the 1870s, "the construction of women's dresses was . . . so complicated that it baffled description even by contemporary experts and, except for the 'house dress' . . . all dresses were overloaded with trimming" (149). Trimming hides and augments the beginnings and ends of dresses; it confuses the issue of construction and baffles the inquiring eye. Not so much camouflage or decoration, trim becomes a kind of sartorial aggression in which a dress is a metaphorical suit of armor — it is nearly impossible to reduce it to its component parts.

Cunnington's harsh judgement of the byzantine design of the dress of the 1870s is a common one when it comes to the excessive ornamentation of the period. Trimming in general and fringe in particular seem to be especially embarrassing ornaments from which various writers — Victorian, modern, and postmodern — take pains to distance themselves. A contemporary historian of curtains (a specialty that would seem to incline one toward an affection for trim) initially describes Victorian fringe in rather alluring and apparently approving terms: "fringes were usually deep and topped with braids bearing geometric patterns or appliqued flowers. There were ornate bullion or ball fringes. Persian fringe had a wide border separating 'eardrops'or graduated balls; there was often an inset braid with a 'Persian design'"(Gibbs 143). But the same writer also notes that "drapery

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was taken to extremes in the latter half of nineteenth century. As the century progressed, the same sort of excesses that existed in interiors could be found in the costume of the day, which was covered with applied trimmings such as tucks, flounces, frills, ruching, piping, binding and artificial flowers" (Gibbs 146). Of course artificial fruits should be added to this list, and in the 1860s there was a brief craze for adorning oneself with dead animals as well; whole grouse and pheasants, for example, were routinely worn as hats (Gloag 153). And fringe and trimmings become increasingly multimedia productions: glass beads, wooden dowels, shells, and even fish scales are used to extend, camouflage, and beautify edges. But the point here is (and we see all too clearly that writing about trimming leads to rhetorical trimmings that cause ornamental digressions) that the chronicler of curtains must make clear her critical distance from this edgy excess.

The softening effect of fringe is associated with both the feminine and with the "Oriental." Accordingly, fringe is rarely found on men's clothing or on the furniture designated for male spaces. The "Oriental" associations of fringe seem to have a long genealogy: a Victorian historian of costume contends that "the simplicity of the old Roman dress was abandoned after the seat of empire was removed to Constantinople. A greater love of ornament is visible; fringes, tassels, jewellery appear in profusion; the Spartan simplicity of the old dress was overlaid with the ornament and gay colouring of the East" (Fairholt 22). A more recent historian points out that "textiles influenced the sensory character of the parlor, affecting vision and tactile sensation in particular and softening the world of sensation overall" (Grier 99). Even hard fringe softens: think of the way a beaded fringe on a lamp shade makes edges mobile, delicate, and invitingly separable by fingers or a breeze. Fringe provides softness, gayness, and luxury: qualities that are at one and the same time demonized and coveted in mainstream Victorian culture so that three fringe groups, women, "Orientals," and, covertly, queer men, gain limited but significant symbolic clout in the workings of fringe, from their places on the fringe. But this clout is simultaneously undermined by the fact that fringe can be condescendingly consigned to the realm of either group, and thereby any desire for its softening and attenuating effects can be disavowed.

But the fact is that Victorian critics of frills, fringe, and trimming made very little headway: the exuberant decoration of edges maintained a resilient popularity in Victorian fashion, upholstery, and drapery throughout the century. The sight of an unadorned edge, or opening, gathered around it a rough and unfinished aspect, a sense of notable incompleteness — it produced Victorian edginess, which, as we recall, concerns outlines that are too hard, too marked. In response, nineteenth-century women of all classes wielded needles, hooks, and bobbins to an extent previously unknown. According to Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, "one of the great silences about women's lives [in the nineteenth century] was undoubtedly filled with needlework. From the long flat-fell seaming of sheets to the embroidered chair cushions, from making up boys' suits to exquisitely-worked velvet slippers for papa at Christmas, middle-class women were constantly sewing, and their daughters were taught to do so from the age when they could grasp a needle" (387). Women are in a literal sense oppressed by the need for trimming: they must be vigilant about their domestic edges, keeping them properly decorated and finished.

We might speculate that this form of border patrol may well have lent psychic and symbolic aid to the larger designs of the imperial project, in which the edges of the nation are not political or economic limits any more. The geographical edges of the nation and

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its colonies, in other words, need attenuation and qualification. In late Victorian histories and geographies of the British Empire, colonies are sometimes imagined as a kind of fringe on the fabric of the metropole. In the very titles of Charles Dilke's *Greater Britain* (1868), in J. R. Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883), and in J. A. Froude's *Oceana* (1886) the potential unknowability and agoraphobia of a far-flung empire is rhetorically mitigated in metaphors of contiguity and connection; empire is reconfigured as suburban sprawl. These metaphors could resonate all the more efficaciously in a culture in which literal fringe is plentiful in its length and breadth, providing in its threads vestment, vocabulary, and visual aid.

II.

IN AN ESSAY about the relationship between representation and fashion, Anne Hollander argues that in the eighteenth century, fashion plates (the precursors of the fashion photograph) were themselves truly a high art form and they consequently asked that fashion make itself a worthy object for representation. But these plates declined in aesthetic merit during the nineteenth century, taking fashion down with them:

> fashionable dress itself began to seem more and more like vain folly; steadily losing moral and aesthetic prestige as its components became more elaborate and its image less serious. As fashion plate imagery became more frivolous, suggesting insipidity and moral nullity even while it purveyed the effects of puckered taffeta and draped satin, the very details of fashion seemed more spiritually burdensome, more at odds with earnest pursuits and dispositions. Manifold flounces and braid, feathers and veiling, trains and crinolines took on the ambiguous and limiting flavor of feminine narcissism. An exquisitely clad woman became an unaccountable apparition, fascinating to the eye but obscurely threatening to the soul, disconnected from the reasonable arrangements of life. (144)

Fashion declines — and indeed falls — both aesthetically and morally in Hollander's description of it. The Victorian woman in all her finery fascinates but threatens: she is wonderful to look at, but the pleasure she incites must be quickly disavowed: she will deter us from nothing less than "the reasonable arrangements of life." We might note the considerable power conferred on the absurdly dressed Victorian woman in this accusation.

Hollander, like so many writers on Victorian design, both past and present, seems to relish the extensive listing of the very excesses she apparently abhors: "flounces and braid, feathers and veiling, trains and crinolines" decorate her prose as they decorate the fashions she criticizes. These things are in awful taste, we can all agree, but unlike, say the symptoms of cancer or the details of urban blight, it is delightful to catalogue them, until this catalogue, in its excessive piling up of example, imitates the very superfluity it is being used to chide. Hollander is not alone in this rhetorical trimming: the enjoyment of the excesses of nineteenth-century style are typically pursued through imitating them. The attitude this imitation produces works as a kind of insulation from the seductions of over-the-edge edginess. But many of us are indeed seduced, as Hollander's prose so eloquently if unwittingly demonstrates. And this is something I think we need to understand more about: the attraction and repulsion that certain forms of Victorian excess beget in their modern and postmodern beholders.

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Obviously, trimmings — although a chief emblem of Victorian excess — are not new in the nineteenth century. What is new is their availability and affordability, and this makes for the excesses that undermine (for many) the aesthetic value of Victorian fashion. In the eighteenth century, fringe was "costly, fine, and rare" (Collier 20) largely because it (or its component parts) were not yet machine made. But "in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, factory-produced textiles became available that paraphrased the characteristics of what were still expensive, hand-loomed fabrics. . . . Factory-made fabrics with complicated figures or a high degree of surface texture were still considered as 'rich' as their earlier counterparts, but the connection between appearance and cost had been altered"(Grier 99). So that fringe, like other previously costly and rare but now mass-produced textiles, became cheaper and more widely available, but paradoxically, and eventually ludicrously, continued to symbolize luxury. Or rather, it attempted to symbolize luxury and began to fail vividly. So that one cause of our own squeamishness about some aspects of Victorian decorative style might be the extent to which luxury was increasingly symbolized, loudly and insistently, by its opposite. Some artists in Munich, beginning in the 1860s, called this kitsch.

Kitsch is defined (albeit elusively and problematically) as the debased opposite of anything that is "art"; it is an ephemeral and throw-away cultural category filled, in Clement Greenberg's famous description, with Tin Pan Alley songs and *Saturday Evening Post* covers (Greenberg 5–6). It is the all-purpose other of every aesthetic production that wants to be taken seriously. In this role as other, kitsch suggests the instability of ornament. Like a predator, ornament comes "into the body of a practical object from without"(Bloomer 35). In its predatory role, ornament can create anxiety because of its supplementary, non-essential nature, its potential to be not only frivolous, but also fatuous.

Modern and postmodern design is often devoid of ornament, unless it can be deployed with some degree of irony. Even kitsch can be acceptable as long as it is recognized as kitsch; old kitsch in particular can be used knowingly and therefore the potential for aesthetic humiliation can be mitigated through a carefully indicated intentionality. But ornament always threatens to become kitsch or to become kitsch in a new way: it is unstable in the extreme and subjects its users and owners to a constant cultural vulnerability. To mainstream modern and postmodern taste, Victorian culture is an awkward case of ornamentation gone much too far because of what we now experience as its seemingly unstoppable and unselfconscious additive strategy.

Kitsch, whether or not it is actually fringe, works at the fringe of culture. It is an embarrassed and embarrassing category from which the beautiful, the tasteful, the artistic, must be constantly separated and dusted off. But high art, precisely because of what we reflexively comprehend as its aesthetic, or in more recent accounts, its ideological, purity is not seen as — or experienced as — capable of doing certain kinds of symbolic work: many acute anxieties are not amenable to its difficult and usually partial resolutions.[1] But cultural productions on the fringe of culture, including fringe itself, can symbolize, with a salubrious semiotic abandon, the resolution of conflicts lurking unhealed in the political unconscious. And they can do so, as I've suggested earlier, precisely because we don't suspect them of really meaning much of anything.

This may be why kitsch is not only crucial to modernity, but one of the most telling symptoms of it. Matei Calinescu argues that "the link between kitsch and economic development is indeed so close that one may take the presence of kitsch . . . as an

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unmistakable sign of 'modernization'" (Calinescu 226). Premodern cultures don't have the leisure, the material surplus, or perhaps the restlessness aroused by jaded desire to produce ephemeral souvenirs of quotidian existence. But "modernized" cultures need a form of symbolization in which particular kinds of cultural work can get done quickly and easily. Obvious and heavy-handed, kitsch repeats itself, like Yogi Berra's déjà vu, over and over again, and it doesn't ask much from its audience.[2] It can do lots of symbolic work rapidly and imperfectly; it offers up analogies for general usage that are obvious and probably even trite, including the one about fringe I've been elaborating thus far in this essay. But somebody's got to do it, if my argument about the debased or trivialized bits of material culture is even half-right: they harbor all kinds of meaning and do all kinds of work that gets ignored consciously, producing all kinds of unconsciously generated ideological unguents, salves, balms, and emollients.

Fringe, in all its excess and frivolity, makes all kinds of edges available, interesting, approachable, and tactilely inviting. In this way, fringe may have helped Victorians work out their considerable and well-founded anxieties about actual and symbolic limits, borders, and boundaries. Fringe brings its observers counter-phobically close to the edge, all within the safety and privacy of home, or of homely surroundings. Like the "domestic aquarium fad that hit Victorian England during the 1850s and 60s," fringe was a "true mass-culture phenomenon: one where an object or cluster of objects becomes the focus of an obsessive and pervasive consumption that, despite its seriality or multiplicity, is felt as intimately personal" (Olalquiaga 6). Perhaps there was (and is) a need to feel that one's own particular form of trim is special. Each of us deserves to suffer from a unique form of edginess that requires just the right color, depth, and texture of fringe to allow us to remain safely inside the folds of our clothing, upholstery, and domestic space; in short, to maintain a convincing outer semblance of our secure residence within the invisible but hopefully well-trimmed boundaries of our interior worlds.

Perhaps the Victorian sense of edginess and its deployment of fringe has had an impact on modern and postmodern ideas about actual and metaphorical edges, borders, and boundaries, including those that we now imagine enclose the self. A literal problem in the nineteenth century, edginess moves inside in the twentieth: it comes to mean by 1963, simply, "irritability." We have certainly developed the ability to face the edges of our clothing, furniture, and window treatments with considerably less chagrin than did our Victorian forebears. But we have internalized and metaphorized the edginess that they apparently experienced in literal and external terms, and indeed its twentieth century transformation heralds a new conception of the self as bounded and bordered and therefore at once secure *and* vulnerable to breach. And we have no predictable system with which to trim our edges, to cure our own edginess. The apparent excesses of so much Victorian design gather new meaning in this light. Fringe (and other seemingly absurd ornaments) worked hard and in some senses, got results. Caught up in the afflictions produced by our own edginess, we certainly cannot yet claim to have found its replacement.

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NOTES

1. See Freedgood, "Introduction."

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2. See Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."

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