

Notes on Window Dressing as a New Means of Communication

Henriette-Friederike Herm

Ever since the first department store opened its doors—and windows—in the latter half of the 19th century, generations of art historians and sociologists have engaged in a theoretical debate surrounding the cultural and social significance of consumer goods and their display.

Georg Simmel describes the “shop-window quality of things”¹ as a three-dimensional still life:

The exhibition, with its emphasis on amusement, attempts a new synthesis between the principles of external stimulus and the practical functions of objects, and thereby takes this aesthetic superadditum to its highest level. The banal attempt to put things in their best light, as in the cries of the street trader, is transformed in the interesting attempt to confer a new aesthetic significance from displaying objects together [...].²

Previously, a shop window’s main purpose had been to let in light, its initial display function essentially akin to a noticeboard providing information, including on the identity and status of the retailer. But in the 1890s, partly due to electric lighting, shop windows started attracting attention as an advertising medium for the products inside.³ Associations were forged between the product and certain ideas, values, and perceptions; and communicating an emotional experience with the product became more important.⁴ The shop window offered a new interface for communication between the retailer and the customer. As a realm of temptation between the street outside and the shop interior, its purpose was to arouse curiosity and entice people to step inside.

This essay explores the dramatological and curatorial function of window dressing. By drawing on findings from sources uncovered in the *Bally* Historical Archives in Schönenwerd and

articles in the *Arola Hauszeitung*,⁵ it reveals how in the period 1930 to 1950 *Bally* specifically deployed this new means of communication as a channel by which to visually depict the “philosophy” of the *Bally* brand, thus making the shop window a tool of corporate identity. A critical turning point in this development was the foundation of the retail division *Arola Schuh*



144 [I, II] Schuhhaus Modern, Zürich
(*Arola Hauszeitung*, no. 6, 1932, p. 37)

AG in 1926. The *Bally* company thus had control over the entire process, from design and production to direct retail channels through *Bally-Schuhverkauf AG* (Basvag) and Arola, and indirect retail channels through department stores. The *Arola Hauszeitung* shows the shop window as a creative visual arena, the value of which went beyond the mere showcasing of stock to a space for advertising, sales arguments, and brand identity. This essay traces important actors, presentation motifs, and strategies for the development and fine-tuning of window dressing at *Bally*.

The shop windows were decorated by different people from different sections of the company chain. Well into the 1930s, the managers of the respective stores were the primary decision-makers behind window-display designs. They decorated their shop windows either with materials completely of their own choosing or by incorporating posters and other advertising material supplied with each new season by *Bally-Schuhverkauf AG*, along with a letter giving advice on presentation and sales. This circular, or rather “info pack”, contained sheets that could be inserted into frames and that bore images intended to create “a cheerful mood for shopping”.⁶ Also attached to the circular were drawings that underscored the concept of product quality and gave additional tips on how to arrange the individual elements in the shop window.

By 1931, we first see evidence of retail designers such as Berger, Klinger, and Dupraz, being mentioned by name (their first names, though, are not given), in their role as guarantors of new ideas, and suggestions for window dressing and retail design. The impact of the shop window on sales was accordingly emphasized early on.⁷ In the case of a certain R. Dupraz, the author is also keen to stress that the former worked in the Schönenwerd Advertising Office, in the implementation department. As a result, it is reasonable to see his recommendations as a set of concrete guidelines communicated by the *Bally* management to the respective stores, particularly by Agor Marketing A.-G., which, after its establishment in 1932, became the central organ responsible for the conception and design of advertising for *Bally* products. It is furthermore striking to note that the retail designers regularly went on research trips to cities like Paris,

New York, and London, paying particular attention to how shop-window styles in those cities captured the respective zeitgeist and flair of each place. Their impressions subsequently flowed into concrete design strategies that were published in the *Arola Hauszeitung*.

Well into the first decades of the 20th century, many shopkeepers still persevered with the traditional strategy of the so-called “stock display”—putting the widest possible range of products on show and making use of every available inch of the display area. Even though window dressing was by this time emerging as a design profession, with more sophisticated window displays being created as a result, the amassing of consumer goods behind the glass front persisted.⁸ At *Bally*, too, one finds evidence of shop windows following either of these approaches, the traditional and the new, into the 1930s. Indeed, examples of both styles received awards in the *Arola Hauszeitung* for being impressive window displays. New styles of exhibition can be simultaneously observed, in the sense of the quantitative (stock) display as well as the qualitative, narrative style of window dressing [FIGS. I, II].

This means that shop windows packed with as many shoes as possible, in essence presenting the store inventory, were initially valued just as much as shop windows designed to present a specific, temporary theme. This becomes clear in a 1932 article published in the *Arola Hauszeitung*, entitled: “Schaufenster—Musterbeispiele” (Shop-Windows—Textbook Examples). Both windows of Schuhhaus Modern in Zürich are cited as valid examples. In the “Price Series Window” [FIG. I], the author highlights how effectively and clearly the 144 shoe types are put on view.⁹ By contrast, the sports window, “The Mountaineering Group” [FIG. II], places the mountaineering boots in a narrative context. Here, the display makes clear visual reference to a specific event through materials and ideas that were apparently the brainchild of a certain Mr Günther, the manager of the store. The article stresses and describes in detail the manager’s personal initiative of featuring the mountaineer—cut out of an existing *Bally* poster and glued to cardboard backing—alongside real granite blocks piled on top of each other and decorated with freshly plucked alpine roses and edelweiss. In conclu-

sion, the article declares: "All these shop windows did in fact nicely bump up sales!"¹⁰

Two years later, the staff writer J. Honegger wrote in the *Arola Hauszeitung* encouraging managers and sales staff to visualize specific events in the window display in order to catch the eye of passers-by and bring them to a stop. Honegger advises that the appropriate themes for the window decoration should therefore be, for example, seasonal changes to the weather, and annual or temporary events. The author makes the case that variety would appeal to the regular passer-by. Honegger goes into great detail describing the window design of a francophone Swiss store manager as a shining example of a salesperson being inventive and taking the initiative.¹¹ The manager in question, of a store in La Chaux-de-Fonds, took the Salon d'horlogerie and Le Comptoir Industriel, two trade events which were taking place at the time, as an opportunity to present *Bally* "in the right light":

The back wall of the display window is formed by a cut-out map of the world, and wires hanging from telegraph pillars on either side of the display connect the various cities of New York, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna, with each site relating to the Bally



[III] Sample window display for the Christmas holidays
(*Arola Hauszeitung*, no. 3, 1931, p. 9)

company and each name of the city spelled out in cut-out letters. The whole ensemble makes an impression and arouses interest among passers-by.¹²

The 1930s saw a new focus at *Bally* for window displays that incorporated an element of story-telling which was seen as an added value. Including visual references to external factors—seasons, holidays, and other events—was praised in detailed descriptions, replete with photographic documentation, as examples to be replicated by store managers and sales staff. The display space was now given over not just to the shoes available for purchase instore, but also to outside objects not even for sale that only acquired a symbolic meaning through the narrative told by the assemblage. This—at the time experimental—form of marketing was very modern and progressive [FIG. III].

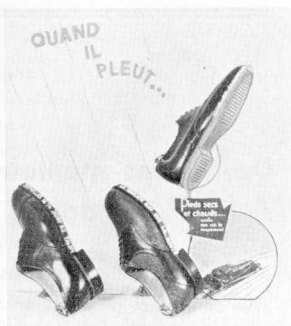
The *Arola Hauszeitung* was also quick to show far more daringly abstract examples of window dressing, such as the photograph of an experimental shop window for the Christmas season designed by R. Dupraz [FIG. III].¹³ This case in point is a simple arrangement of goods in a minimalistically decorated shop window featuring a trimmed selection of winter shoes and display shelves, reminiscent, at least in their pyramidal outline, of Christmas trees, with steel frames branching out on three tiers, the shoes on them almost appearing to be free-floating. The pairs placed directly on the floor are arranged beneath each metal “Tannenbaum” like presents beneath the Christmas tree. The novelty here lay in the fact that the design was neither purely narrative in content nor of the “stock display” kind. It is, however, impossible to determine whether and to what extent this window arrangement was actually adopted by *Bally* stores out in the field. The text accompanying the image suggests that sales staff should take inspiration for the coming festive season from these examples and “above all remember the decisive impact that the shop window has again and again on sales today”.¹⁴ The importance of the shop window for sales was evident in the increasingly strategically motivated discussion and distribution of advertising materials, guidelines, and out-and-out rules for window dressing with an avowedly modern look—and how this was to be implemented in creative terms.

Three main strands emerged as strategies for window dressing: quantitative merchandising (presenting as much of the product range available in store), narrative, and abstraction. What some articles preferred to outline in rather essayistic pieces of corporate journalism accompanied by photographs of shop windows, others expressed as clear instructions requiring action. The focus also now shifted away from different store managers bringing their own personal touch to window dressing towards professional retail decorators and comparisons with stores in territories much further afield, such as in Manhattan. As late as 1932, R. Dupraz wrote an article in the *Arola Hauszeitung* under the heading “Ideas That Any Salesman Worth Their Salt Would Benefit from by Putting into Practice”.¹⁵ His article outlines nine points, or rather, rules that a salesperson should follow when designing their shop window. In addition to cleanliness, order, and lighting, a frequently rotating display and a personal touch are listed as important points to remember. One idea is notably given a whole passage of its own: Not only could the store manager decorate the shop window himself, but he could do so entirely at whim and without following any advice. Most important of all, however, was point seven—this time not a suggestion, but an unavoidable, indisputable, golden rule: “Your display *must sell*, that is its sole purpose in life, and all other considerations must take a back seat to this end.”¹⁶

Two years later, the window’s commercial use was again emphasized, but this time the possibility of decorative ideas by store managers or sales staff was definitely off the table. In the article “Qu’est ce qu’une vitrine commerciale...?”, published in 1934,¹⁷ the importance of the shop window as an advertising space was pointedly described in light of increasingly aggressive competition. Window dressing became more professional, and *Bally* founded the “Department of Merchandising”, which provided stores in the field with specialist staff who would know how to present the goods in the display case in a more original fashion than the competition. These retail decorators had one goal in mind: grabbing the attention of passers-by and enticing them to come inside to consider a purchase. According to the article, the decorators were expected to apply the following criteria in examining the various shoe models:



No. 1



No. 2



No. 3



No. 4

Ces chiffres prouvent que la deuxième idée, très commerciale, a obtenu le meilleur résultat; aussi, le Gérant était-il tout heureux d'avoir autorisé son décorateur, lorsque *celui-ci lui a proposé* ces inscriptions faites à même la semelle. Un autre, par crainte de défraîchir sa marchandise aurait manqué «une bonne journée» et contrarié son «collaborateur en vitrine». Avis aux amateurs... il faut si peu pour faire *vivre* et *parler* les beaux modèles de la grande collection «BALLY».

«Du...re»

1. What is special about this particular shoe?
2. What is its distinctive feature?
3. Wherein lies its value?¹⁸

For the article's author (and presumably its readers), it went without saying that the trained window dresser would present the product in the best possible light. The author goes on to strongly recommend that the (female) retail decorators be given the greatest possible freedom in designing the shop window to present the product in the best possible way. The author advises that even seemingly "outlandish" ideas should be accepted as long as they sell [FIG. IV].

In specific terms, the article discussed the shop-window models seen in FIG. IV and the idea of adding to each welt the inscription: "Quand il pleut ... – Et ... forcément c'est du *Bally!*" (If it rains ... it has to be *Bally!*)¹⁹ Of these four shop windows, no. 2 reportedly achieved the best results in getting people's attention.

The new strategy of professionalized as opposed to amateur window dressing was made clear to the public at a store opening in St Gallen in 1937, expressed not merely through the storefront itself, but also in the opening speech delivered by a Mr Kuhn, during which he announced:

The jewels of any street are its shops.

The jewels of a shop are the shop windows.

The jewels in the shop windows are the goods for sale.²⁰

Kuhn spoke of upheavals in architecture that were contributing to a change in the storefronts of modern businesses. Ornamentation and architectural flourishes were giving way to smooth, clear lines and surfaces, whose value was now recognizable through the use of fine materials rather than fine forms. The jewel in the façade was now the shop window, a frontage of glass for changeable displays. Thanks to *Bally's* progressive management, a number of stores and their buildings' façades had already been given a facelift, adapting them to modern tastes.²¹

This new view was undergirded by comparing the domestic situation with that of abroad. International trips were vital in this, even, for example, to as far away as the USA. Records show that such trips were not merely attended by management, but also by members of *Bally's* team of inhouse retail designers. The first trip with at least some time designated for a professional examination of the art of window dressing stateside was reported on in an issue of the *Arola Hauszeitung* in 1939. The article notes:

The decoration of the windows is very different from ours. In shops that are *au courant*, the window is given a new background four times a year. That means a new coloured background every season. [...] The storefront of department stores usually conveys a general theme. Each window then has to present a variation on this theme, each time through a different article. As a result, often only two or three pairs of shoes are displayed in any given window. The display scheme most similar to the ones back home are found in the speciality shops that are relatively few and far between, selling high-end products.²²

In this article, published in 1939, one detects an underlying sense of uncertainty about the strategies for window dressing as practiced in the USA. However, in another article in the same staff magazine in 1948, almost a decade later, such uncertainties have all but vanished. In place of doubt, the techniques and advertising strategies of American window dressing are now roundly lauded. The European author is now keen to stress how the United States is the beacon for retailers in other territories, and "due to relentless competition is constantly forced to break new ground, which in some areas provides the lead for us to follow".²³ The megacities of the United States were centres of frenetic activity, so it naturally took a great deal more to get the inhabitants, beleaguered by the hustle and bustle of their urban environment, to show an interest in anything at all. It was therefore imperative that the basic rules of advertising be followed:

152 The American is positively ruthless in ensuring that this distinctive feature determined by the management (in our case the Bally-Arola

unique feature of great service) is never diluted, not by anything, not even by a strong individual sense of self among staff. Because any deviation, however good it may seem in and of itself, spoils the character of the business, which is a guarantee, a mark of trust for the customers.²⁴

This shows very plainly that *Bally* was more than aware of its corporate identity and the importance of upholding it, even before such a term was common currency. Furthermore, the article goes on to report that the customer base essentially fell into two categories. Most of the consumers fell into the first category, and in their case it still made sense to apply the old-school “stock display” style of window dressing in the belief that: “With enough crammed in, there’s to be something for everyone.”²⁵ This category of customer gravitated solely to the storefronts, and it was there, in public, that they searched for the right shoe. Only having found it in the window would they go in and enquire if it was in stock. And then there was the second category, the luxury, more private, clientele, who, the article explains, “go for individual elegance, who want shoes that document personality and social standing through quality, form, colour, and grace”.²⁶

This comparison, which can be read as a reflection of the spirit of the times, clearly shows that the window display at *Bally* was also perfectly in keeping with international standards. The simultaneity of the three different strategies—quantitative merchandising (stock display), narrative, and abstraction—was, in fact, in step with the times and consciously adapted to fit the respective clientele, whether in city or country, targeted luxury segment or general foot traffic off the main street.

1 Simmel 1990, p. 257.

2 Ibid., p. 257.

3 König 2009, p. 125.

4 Nina Schleif has provided a comprehensive study of shop-window design with her 2004 book “SchaufensterKunst”, in which she examines the artistic forms, guidelines, and visual and commercial strategies adopted by window dressers in Germany and the United States from 1900 to 1960.

- 5 An internal staff magazine issued quarterly by Bally Arola Schuh AG. It informed its readership of company news, but also included features on fashion, travel, and recipes.
- 6 Circular with tips and sales advice issued by Bally-Schuhverkauf A.-G., 15 April 1948.
- 7 Arola Hauszeitung, no. 3, 1931, pp. 34f.
- 8 See Schleif 2004, p. 34.
- 9 Arola Hauszeitung, no. 6, 1932, p. 37.
- 10 Ibid., p. 37.
- 11 Ibid., no. 13, 1934, p. 8.
- 12 Ibid., p. 8.
- 13 Ibid., no. 3, 1931, p. 34.
- 14 Ibid., p. 35.
- 15 Ibid., no. 4, 1932, p. 18.
- 16 Ibid., p. 20.
- 17 Ibid., no. 14, 1934, pp. 20f.
- 18 Ibid., p. 20.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 20f.
- 20 Ibid., no. 20, 1937, p. 40.
- 21 Ibid., p. 40.
- 22 Ibid., no. 24, 1939, pp. 20f.
- 23 Ibid., no. 49, 1948, pp. 26f.
- 24 Ibid., p. 29.
- 25 Ibid., p. 30.
- 26 Ibid., p. 31.