

# HYPERESTHESIA, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism

*David Howes*

One of the great unfinished tasks of twentieth-century marxian theory has been to write a materialist history of the senses. How have the senses been organized by relations of production and exchange? How in particular have they been organized under capitalism? And how has this organization shaped capitalist society's cultural pursuits?

Margaret Cohen, 'The Art of Profane Illumination'

In this chapter, I would like to take up the task of writing a materialist history of the senses. I will argue that one of the reasons this task remains 'unfinished' to date is due to Marxian theory's failure to 'acknowledge consumption' (Miller 1995a, 1995b).<sup>1</sup>

The essay proceeds by first returning to Marx and examining the philosophical roots of his materialism; second, tracing the role of the senses in the transition from industrial to consumer capitalism; third, excavating what could be called 'the sensorial subconscious' of the state we are in now – namely, 'late capitalism' (Jameson 1990); and, finally, extending the practice of materialist analysis to encompass the social life of the senses on the margins of the global consumer society. There, as we shall see, capitalism's glitter is not all that it is imagined to be by those theorists whose senses have been 'massaged' (McLuhan and Fiore 1967) by living all their lives at the center.

## Sensory Deprivation and Industrial Capitalism

There are few more dramatic ruptures in the history of Western thought than Marx's apparent break with the idealist tradition of German philosophy (Synnott 1991). '[M]an is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with *all his senses*' proclaimed the young Marx in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx 1987: 108). Whereas Hegel had interpreted world history in terms of the progressive unfolding of Spirit, Marx held that 'the *forming of the five senses* is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present' (Marx 1987: 109). He was inspired to accord such primacy to the senses by the writings of the materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. In his doctrine of sense perception, Feuerbach argued that it is not only nature or external objects that are experienced by the senses but '*Man, too, is given to himself only through the senses; he is an object for himself only as an object of the senses*' (Feuerbach 1966: 58).

Marx's portrayal of the state of the senses in nineteenth-century bourgeois society was in turn influenced by the writings of the utopianist Charles Fourier. Fourier (1851) believed that societies could be judged according to how well they gratified and developed the senses of their members. He argued that the senses were debased by the civilization of his day, in which most people were unable to afford any sensory refinements and in which all people, no matter their rank, were continually confronted with disagreeable sensory impressions, such as the stench and din of the streets. Furthermore, even if sensory pleasures were to be made more available, most people would be unable to appreciate them as their senses remained brutish and undeveloped. These sensory ills, according to Fourier, were the result of a society obsessed with the accumulation of private possessions to the detriment of the general wellbeing.

There are numerous echoes of Fourier in Marx's discussion of the condition of the proletariat in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. For example, Marx describes how the senses of the worker, living amidst 'the *sewage of civilization*,' are deformed until he loses all notion of sensory refinement and 'no longer knows any need... but the need to *eat*' (Marx 1987: 117). Marx returned to this theme of the stripping of the senses in *Capital*, where he described the conditions of factory work:

Every organ of sense is injured in an equal degree by artificial elevation of temperature, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention danger to life and limb among the thickly crowded machinery, which, with the regularity of the seasons, issues its list of the killed and the wounded in the industrial battle... Is Fourier wrong when he calls factories 'tempered bagnios'? (Marx 1954, I: 401–2)

The sensory deprivation of the proletariat was to be expected, given the grueling conditions of factory work and so-called living conditions in the

industrial slums. But Marx insisted that not even among the bourgeoisie are the senses fulfilled. All of the capitalist's senses are ultimately fixed on one object – capital; and, while the enjoyment of wealth is one of the objects of capitalism; even better is sacrificing pleasure in order to accumulate more wealth. 'The less you eat, drink and read books; the less you go to the theater, the dance hall, the public-house; the less you ... sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* – the *greater* becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour – your *capital*' (Marx 1987: 118–19).

Developing Fourier's diagnosis, Marx laid the blame for the alienation of the senses in capitalist society on the dehumanizing regime of private property, and envisioned a world in which 'the transcendence of private property [would entail] the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities' (Marx 1987: 139). 'Only through the negation of the demeaning and oppressive tyranny of capitalist property relations could humankind's 'species being' come into its own. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short *senses* capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being' (Marx 1987: 108).

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels heralded the collapse of the capitalist economic order. The portents of this dissolution included, among other things: the concentration of the proletariat in ever greater masses, the increasingly agitated character of all social relations due to the constant revolutionizing of the instruments of production, and the reduction of personal worth to commodity status. In short, all of the contradictions of bourgeois society had become manifest on its surface, and the illusion of society could no longer hold.

Reading the *Communist Manifesto* now, when the capitalist system seems more firmly entrenched than ever, what most stands out about this text is how brilliantly Marx and Engels foretold *the future of capitalism*, rather than its demise. For example, Marx and Engels wrote:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property... The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. (Marx and Engels 1967: 84)

This passage encapsulates a remarkably prescient description of the phenomenon that has in recent years come to be theorized as 'global-

ization' (Featherstone 1990). The fine food halls and corner stores of Europe and America filled with produce 'from distant lands and climes' (see, for example, Cook and Crang 1996; James 1996), the global flow of capital (and people) that has resulted in the 'universal interdependence of nations' (see, for example, Robbins 1998), the Hollywood movies and other elements of American popular culture that have become the 'common property' (or transcultural patrimony) of everybody from Chile to Katmandhu (see, for example, Dorfman 1983; Iyer 1989; Appadurai 1996) all speak to the inescapable truth of this passage. Summing up their vision of globalization as cultural homogenization, Marx and Engels (1967: 84) wrote: 'In one word, [the bourgeoisie] creates a world after its own image.'

Nevertheless, the apparent flash of insight that this passage contains must not be allowed to distract attention from the limitations of Marx's analysis of capitalism's laws of motion. Marx's gaze always remained centered on the factory and the stock market, and although he may have succeeded at exposing the secrets of the capitalist mode of production through his penetrating analysis of the manufacturing process and wage labor, he neglected an equally salient development – namely, the *presentation* of commodities in the department stores and world exhibitions that sprang up in the mid-nineteenth-century (Bowlby 1985; Cummings and Lewandowska 2000). The birth of these 'palaces of consumption' heralded a transformation in the nature of capitalism with far-reaching implications – the transformation from industrial capitalism (as Marx knew it) to the consumer capitalism of today. For capitalism does not work by surveillance and the extraction of the labor power and value of the worker alone; it also works by generating spectacle and creating consumer desires of all sorts in all people, including the worker (Galbraith 1958, 1967; on surveillance see Foucault 1979, on spectacle Debord 1983).

### **Sensory Stimulation and Consumer Capitalism**

The growing social importance of consumption in the nineteenth-century was evident in the new venue for shopping, the department store. With its theatrical lighting, enticing window displays and its floor after floor of entrancing merchandise – 'each separate counter . . . a show place of dazzling interest and attraction' (Dreiser cited in Saisselin 1984: 35) – the department store presented a fabulous spectacle of consumer plenty and accessibility. Previously, goods had been kept behind counters and it was presumed that a customer would enter a shop with the purpose to buy. In the department store, by contrast, goods were largely out in the open and anyone could enter simply with the purpose of having a look. The expectation was that the display of goods in such abundance would prove so seductive that even those who were 'just looking' would be lured into buying, particularly given the atmosphere of pleasurable self-indulgence that prevailed. In his novel *Sister*

*Carrie* Theodore Dreiser described the bewitching effect of the department store displays on a potential customer: 'Fine clothes... spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear... "My dear," said the lace collar... "I fit you beautifully; don't give me up"' (cited in Saisselin 1984: 36).

The department store thus appeared on the scene as an enormous candy store with a cornucopia of goodies to satisfy the taste of the bourgeoisie for fashionable but affordable style. It was able to do so thanks to advances in mass production – specifically, the mechanical reproduction of styled or imitation goods. Mass production brought previously exclusive luxury items within the reach of the bourgeoisie, and even the working class (Miller 1987). As Walter Benjamin (1969) noted with regard to art, what such imitation goods lose in authenticity they gain in mobility: 'fine' art, 'fine' furniture, 'fine' clothes can now go anywhere and everywhere as mass production finds its match in mass consumption.

The counterpart to the (often female) shopper in the new consumer palaces was the (male) *flâneur*, the voyeuristic idler who treated the whole city as though it were a department store, a variegated spectacle of goods to be viewed and occasionally sampled (Benjamin 1973). 'The prime requisite of an expert *flâneur*,' according to the American novelist Henry James, was 'the simple, sensuous, confident relish of pleasure' (cited in Saisselin 1984: 19). Yet, as a suitable admirer of the new society of spectacle, the *flâneur* found his primary sensory pleasure simply in watching, the watching which in a visualist age would increasingly seem to offer a total sensory experience in itself. In his study of the aesthetics of nineteenth-century consumption, Rémy Saisselin (1984: 25) writes: 'The *flâneur* [was] a conscious observer for whom the word *boredom* had become meaningless: he animated all he saw; admired all he perceived. He strolled, observed, watched, espied...'

As Saisselin goes on to point out in *The Bourgeois and the Bibelot*, the phenomenon of the *flâneur* went hand in hand with that of the photographer, both aesthetic observers, insiders and outsiders at once, both constantly skimming the surfaces of urban life for their rich bounty of visual impressions. The photographer, however, was equipped with the technological means to fix visual impressions on paper, turning the images themselves into objects of display and desire. The mass production of images, which occurred in the 1800s, thus complemented the mass production of styled goods or imitations. With this proliferation of images and imitations appearance increasingly came to overshadow – and even obliterate – substance (Boorstin 1962; Ewen 1988).

In an essay on photography published in 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: 'Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt cattle in South America, for their skins and leave the carcasses as of little worth' (cited in Ewen 1988: 25). The analogy to hunting here is

significant for it indicates that the photographic reproduction of the world is not a passive multiplication of images but an active appropriation of all 'curious, beautiful, grand objects.' The notion of the 'carcasses' of objects being left behind 'as of little worth' once their photograph was taken points to a state of affairs in which photographic (and shortly, cinematic) imagery would become more powerful and influential than objects themselves. In *All Consuming Images* Stuart Ewen (1988: 25) states that Holmes correctly 'laid out the contours by which the phenomenon of *style* operates in the world today.' Style deals exclusively in surface impressions, hence possessing the 'right look' becomes all important.

If the primary sensory mode of consumer culture was (and remains) that of visual display, the non-visual senses were not left to one side. As Ewen notes, the sense of touch was also appropriated by marketers as a crucial medium of sensory persuasion. Thus, in a 1930s book entitled *Consumer Engineering*, the business professors Sheldon and Arens write:

Manufacturing an object that delights this [tactile] sense is something that you do but don't talk about. Almost everything which is bought is handled. After the eye, the hand is the first censor to pass on acceptance, and if the hand's judgment is unfavorable, the most attractive object will not gain the popularity it deserves. On the other hand, merchandise designed to be pleasing to the hand wins an approval that may never register in the mind, but which will determine additional purchases... *Make it snuggle in the palm.* (Sheldon and Arens cited in Ewen 1988: 49–50)

Raymond Loewy, commonly regarded as the father of industrial design in the United States, was alert to the significance of tactile stimulation. In a seminal chapter on 'Design and Psychology' in his 1951 autobiography *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*, he wrote: 'The sensory aspects of the normal human being should be taken into consideration in all forms of design. Let's take the Coca-Cola bottle, for instance. Even when wet and cold, its twin-sphered body offers a delightful valley for the friendly fold of one's hand, a feel that is cozy and luscious' (quoted in Fulton Suri 2002: 163). Loewy's insight has been borne out by the rapid expansion of 'human factors' research within the field of industrial design. Initially concerned with solving problems of usability (such as efficiency, safety, learnability, adaptability), designers are now increasingly preoccupied with generating affectivity or 'pleasure with products' (Green and Jordan 2002). 'Pleasure is an emotional benefit that supplements product functionality' (Desmet and Hekkert 2002: 62), and has become a value in its own right. '*Don't think affordances, think temptation!*'; and, '*Don't think beauty in appearance, think beauty in interaction!*' has become the new design credo (Overbeeke 2002: 11). Indeed, tapping the subjective sensory preferences of the consumer and creating enticing 'interfaces' has come to take precedence over conventional design principles. Ornamentation

has been decriminalized, and not just in the museum (Drobnick, this volume) but in all things, from personal computers to toilet brushes (Postrel 2003; Kälviäinen 2002). A new, aesthetically charged understanding has taken shape, according to Virginia Postrel in *The Substance of Style*, an understanding attentive to all the ways in which visual and tactile qualities (color and form) affect people's feelings and evaluations of products. In place of judgments like 'This is good design' (the preserve of the designer, or rational expertise), now the desired response is one of 'I like that' (the preserve of the consumer, or personal pleasure) (Postrel 2003: 10; Kälviäinen 2002: 88): 'People pet Armani clothes because the fabrics feel so good. Those clothes attract us as visual, tactile creatures, not because they are "rich in meaning" but because they are rich in pleasure. The garments' utility includes the way they look and feel' (Postrel 2003: 77).

The social logic of *flânerie*, summed up by Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 346) in the phrase 'look, but don't touch,' has been eclipsed, leading to a breakdown in the consumer's defenses. This breach has been compounded by the recognition that physical contact between server and shopper 'exerts influence on customer's behaviors by enhancing liking of the salesperson and by creating higher emotional involvement with the shopping situation,' as well as heightening the shopper's inclination to comply with a server's request (Hornik 1992: 451). The invisible hand of the market has been transformed into the knowing touch of the salesclerk.

### **Branding the Senses: The Progressive Privatization of Sensation**

Factoring tactile stimulation into the design of products and strategies of salesmanship makes good business sense for two further reasons, according to the sensual logic of late capitalism. The first has to do with the problem of advertising clutter. The consumer landscape has been transformed into a visual jungle of logos, billboards and neon signs, such that 'advertising wear-out' through visual fatigue quickly sets in. *Touch revivifies*.

The second has to do with the progressive privatization of the visible spectrum of forms and colors as companies scramble to trademark and/or patent the aesthetic packaging or 'trade dress' of their products. For example, to protect their brand equity from would-be imitators, the Owens-Corning Fiberglass Corporation has trademarked the color pink for its residential insulation material, and Eastman Kodak has been granted exclusive rights to the use of the distinctive combination of yellow, black and red on its film products (Solomon et al. 1999: 49–51). This development raises the specter of the 'color depletion' or 'color scarcity' problem in trademark law – that is, the risk that the monopolization of all usable colors (and color combinations) by a few large competitors will place new entrants to the market at a significant competitive disadvantage because there won't be any

colors left to exploit (Jones 2003). *Adding feel provides an additional dimension for product differentiation.*

Consumer capitalism has, in fact, increasingly made it its business to engage as many senses as possible in its drive for product differentiation and the distraction/seduction of the consumer. 'Multisensory marketing,' or the new 'technocracy of sensuality' as Wolfgang Haug (1986) dubbed it, reached its height in the late twentieth-century with artificial scents added to a range of products from cars to crayons, with muzak modulating people's moods as they cruise the plushly carpeted or smoothly tiled aisles of department stores and boutiques, and with cafes and fast-food outlets always on hand for gustatory gratification. Everything seems designed to create a state of *hyperesthesia* in the shopper.

The sensual logic behind this makeover of the body of the commodity and the shopping environment is transparent enough: multiplying the sensory channels through which the 'buy me!' message is communicated enhances the likelihood of the message being registered and acted upon by the customer. For example, it has been found that 'when choosing between two similar food or beverage products, 81 percent of consumers would choose one they could both smell and see over one they could only see'; similarly, piping 'slow music' into grocery stores has been discovered to lead to shoppers paying longer visits and spending more money (Solomon et al. 1999: 53, 82). Marketers and designers now hold 'body-storming' focus groups (see Bonapace 2002: 191) in an effort to divine the most potent sensory channel, and within each channel the most potent sensory signal, through which to distinguish their products from those of their competitors and capture the attention of potential customers. 'Perceptual positioning' now means everything to moving merchandise.

Not surprisingly, there has been a drive to privatize the auditory and olfactory aspects of commodities as well as the visual in recent years. The first trademark of a scent was secured in 1990 by a California company, which used a floral fragrance reminiscent of Plumeria blossoms to odorize its sewing thread and embroidery yarn (Classen et al. 1994: 201). Likewise, Harley-Davidson recently sought to trademark the (allegedly) distinctive 'hog' sound of one of its motorcycle engines revving. These legal maneuvers to protect (and expand) market share – that is, to colonize by canalizing the 'mind-space' of the consumer – have not gone uncontested. All of the original concerns around 'color depletion' are now being trotted out again around sound and smell scarcity, as courts give in to demand after demand for the registration of this and that sensory aspect of trade dress (Edelstein and Leuders 2000; Jones 2003). The question arises: how long will it be before every aspect of sensation is brought under the thrall of intellectual property rights?

This hyperestheticization of everyday products may seem excessive from a strictly functional perspective. But it is, in fact, strongly motivated,

commercially speaking. The aesthetic functionality of odorizing products, for example, has been confirmed by the results of a survey that involved asking a group of subjects to identify a range of odors. The researchers found that product scents such as crayons, baby powder and bubble gum proved to be more recognizable than such distinctive natural odors as lemon and coffee. Moreover, subjects consistently associated a brand name with a product scent: *Crayola* crayons, *Johnson & Johnson's* baby powder, *Bazooka* bubble gum (Classen et al. 1994: 203). This evidence of recession in the general population's consciousness of natural odors, and *precession* of branded scents, is of acute interest to marketers. To them, it confirms that 'the unique sensory quality of a product can play an important role in helping it to stand out from the competition, especially if the brand creates a unique association with the sensation' (Solomon et al. 1999: 49).

It is in the domain of taste that capitalist sensualism (forget realism) has enjoyed some of its greatest successes with respect to the commodification of 'subjective *human* sensibility' (Marx). No business is more shrouded in secrecy than that of the artificial flavor industry, where the great 'Flavor Houses' of the New Jersey industrial corridor, and elsewhere, compete with each other, and with Nature, to divine and develop new tastes to gratify the ever-changing palates of consumers. Many of the flavors consumers crave today have no natural prototype (for example, the cola in Coca-Cola), and even those that do have for the most part been turned into 'larger-than-life' savors in the process of being synthesized. It is in this connection that the society of the spectacle looks to have mutated into something much grander: the society of the simulacrum. As noted in *Aroma*:

The widespread replacement of natural flavours with artificial imitations which we find in the contemporary food industry exemplifies how, in Jean Baudrillard's words, the world has come to be 'completely catalogued and analysed and then artificially revived as though real' [1983: 16]. Artificial flavours are created by the synthetic reproduction of individual flavour notes present in the original natural flavours [though never all of them, only those deemed 'essential']. The flavorist may thus be regarded as the arch-agent in the process of production outlined by Baudrillard where: 'the real is produced from miniaturized units . . . and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times' [1983: 3]. (Classen et al. 1994: 204)

## **Welcome to the Experience Economy: Tapping the Sensorial Subconscious**

Capitalism has evidently come a long way since the days when production was the keystone of the economy and the reproduction of capital seemingly depended on stripping the senses of the laborer and curbing those of the bourgeoisie. Now the focus appears to be on seducing the senses of the

consumer in the interests of valorizing capital. This sea-change in the sensual logic of capitalism is what lies behind the transformation in 'values' whereby work discipline, thrift and moderation have been replaced by self-fulfillment, impulse buying and conspicuous consumption. It was the new modes of implanting the body and senses of the consumer in the world of goods that brought about this mutation in attitudes, not vice versa (see Bauman 1983; Clarke 2003: 133).

The hypersensuality of the contemporary marketplace has been theorized by a new generation of business professors. In an article entitled 'Welcome to the Experience Economy' published in the *Harvard Business Review*, Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore assert that forward-thinking companies no longer produce goods or supply services, but instead use services as the stage and goods as props for creating 'experiences' that are as stimulating for the consumer as they are memorable. The authors identify a series of 'experience-design principles' that include: *theme the experience* (for example, 'eatertainment' restaurants such as Planet Hollywood or the Rainforest Cafe); *mix in memorabilia* (for example, an official T-shirt for a rock concert); and, above all, *engage all five senses*:

The more senses an experience engages, the more effective and memorable it can be. Smart shoeshine operators augment the smell of polish with crisp snaps of the cloth, scents and sounds that don't make the shoes any shinier but do make the experience more engaging... Similarly, grocery stores pipe bakery smells into the aisles, and some use light and sound to simulate thunderstorms when misting their produce.

The mist at the Rainforest Cafe appeals serially to all five senses. It is first apparent as a sound: Sss-sss-zzz. Then you see the mist arising from the rocks and feel it soft and cool against your skin. Finally, you smell its tropical essence, and you taste (or imagine that you do) its freshness. What you can't be is unaffected by the mist. (Pine and Gilmore 1998: 104)

The examples cited by Pine and Gilmore could be multiplied. There has been a veritable explosion in the number of ads touting the sense appeal of commodities in recent years. Typical of this trend is the following advertising copy for a particular luxury automobile:

*You Might Expect A Luxury Sedan To Cater To Your Senses. But All Six of Them?*

The sixth sense is a keen, highly intuitive power – a power of perception – that goes far beyond the five senses. That's according to the dictionary.

According to our engineers, it comes standard with every Lexus ES 300. Let us explain.

Have you ever been in a new place and felt like you had been there before? Some call it déjà vu, but we call it ergonomics: the uncanny ability of our cabin to have everything in exactly the place you would most likely want it. So whether it's the knob for the climate control system or the switch for the power window or the buttons for the optional six-disc CD auto-changer, or

whatever – the first time you reach for it, the very first time, it will be there, as if you had placed it there yourself. Kind of spooky.

Of course, we also do a lot for your other senses: the look of a sleek, aerodynamic body, the feel of gentle lumbar support, the smell of available handcrafted leather upholstery, and the soothing sound of eight strategically placed speakers. As for taste, it's in everything we do. Figuratively speaking, of course.

As this copy brings out, thanks to advances in 'human factors' research, no sense is left unturned in the contemporary marketplace. In fact, they may even be multiplied in order to promise ever more consumer satisfaction.

The strategy of appealing to all five senses is a compelling one, to be sure. However, this strategy cannot of itself overcome 'advertising wear-out' when, as is increasingly the case, all of a given brand's competitors are doing the same. This has led to the emergence of an alternative technique, which involves tapping the sensorial subconscious, instead of simply blanketing all of the consumer's external receptors. This alternative stratagem is best exemplified by ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique) invented and patented by Gerald Zaltman of the 'Mind of the Market' Lab at Harvard University. Before examining this technique, however, it is instructive to consider some of its precursors, such as the 'art' of subliminal persuasion.

In a famous (if flawed) experiment carried out at a New Jersey drive-in movie theater in 1957, the Subliminal Projection Company flashed messages saying 'Drink Coca-Cola' and 'Eat Popcorn' during a screening of the film *Picnic*. The images went by at too fast a rate for viewers to be aware that they had seen them. This subliminal messaging nevertheless had the effect of augmenting popcorn sales by 20 percent and Coke sales by as much as 60 percent. A public outcry ensued when the experiment was reported in the press, for how could consumers make rational decisions about consumption choices if their minds were being 'broken and entered' in this way? These fears, however, only stoked the fad for marketers inserting and vigilant consumers trying to spot visual and aural 'embeds' everywhere (for example, suggestively shaped ice cubes or barely audible soundtracks) (Key 1974; Solomon et al. 1999: 60–2).

A similar furore erupted in the mid 1990s at the height of the olfactory revolution in the marketplace (when all manner of commodities came to be imbued with signature scents), this time sparked by media reports of the notorious case of the scented Las Vegas slot machines (Classen et al. 1994: 196). The concern here was that marketers were once again circumventing the consumer's conscious awareness, or 'rational faculties,' by targeting messages directly to the most primitive part of the brain, the limbic system, seat of the emotions and memory. In other words, consumers were being led by the nose instead of being addressed through the more legitimate (read: 'rational') channels of visual and verbal communication.

There is an undeniable thrill to the experience of the subliminal, which may explain the popularity of these subconscious perceptual techniques for purposes of moving merchandise, however damaging to 'rational choice' models of consumer behavior they may be. Another undeniable source of pleasure (and hence attention) is synesthesia. Synesthesia involves short-circuiting the conventional five sense model and experience of perception. It establishes cross-linkages between the modalities at a subconscious level, and so opens up a whole new terrain – the terrain of the inter-sensory – for marketers and designers to work their magic.

The genius of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique consists in the way it maps – or better, excavates – these cross-linkages, and models them in 'actionable ways' (for example, to guide the development of ad copy or to divine the best product design and packaging). This ten-step research tool involves image-collecting, sorting, storytelling, digital imaging, and creating videos on the part of the research subjects. The videos are used because: 'People think differently when they think "in motion" than when they think in still images or pictures' (Zaltman and Coulter 1995: 42). ZMET also involves subjects being asked to say 'what is and is not the taste, touch, smell, color, sound and emotional feeling' related to the particular research topic (for example, a brand name or a product design) being investigated. For example, one subject's 'nonvisual sensory images' of a certain brand of intimate apparel included: 'the taste of medicine, but not dessert; the feel of sandpaper and silk, but not of cream; the sound of static, but not that of a waterfall; the smell of sulfur, but not of roses; the color brown, but not red; the feeling of anxiety, but not of peacefulness' (Zaltman and Coulter 1995: 42). By tapping the sensorial subconscious in this way, a wide range of synesthetic equations is uncovered. These equations are then worked (along with the visual and verbal material elicited by other means) into 'consensus maps' by ZMET researchers. Marketers and designers in turn use these 'consensus maps' to identify those sensory transfers that best 'focus our attention, capture our imagination, please us, and enhance persuasion' (Nelson and Hitchon 1999: 355).

The inter-sensual logic behind this latest revolution in marketing can be discerned behind such advertising headlines as 'Taste the Rainbow' for *Skittles* candy; 'the Loudest Taste on Earth' for *Spicy Doritos* corn chips; and, 'A Gentle Whisper of Color' for *Chanel* pastel eye color makeup. As for product design, synesthesia is the idea behind all the new computer programs that enable users to transform music into color graphics. But this is obvious. Other design applications of synesthesia (using other sensory combinations besides sight and sound) are being developed all the time (Kälviäinen 2002). For example, the cleaner *Vim Oxy-Gel* (with 'active oxygen') offers 'Pure cleanliness you can see and feel!'

Is synesthesia the ultimate weapon in the 'sign wars' (Goldman and Papson 1996) of contemporary advertising and product design? Not quite, for it is

not uniformly persuasive across all categories of products (see Nelson and Hitchon 1999; Howes 2003b). But in its subliminality it comes close to being the perfect weapon.

### **The Social Life of the Senses on the Margins of the Global Consumer Society**

We have glimpsed something of the sensual logic of late capitalism. We have examined its ingenious battery of sensory (and inter-sensory) techniques for overcoming the separation of subject and object or environment. But do these techniques work in practice? Do '[the] data we receive from our sensory systems *determine* how we respond to products' (Solomon et al. 1999: 49, emphasis mine)? Here it is instructive to shift focus from the center to the margins of the global consumer society.

The captains of global capitalism certainly assume that exposure to the representational machinery of capitalist sensualism will induce changes in the consumption behavior of those on the periphery. For example, the fact that Western-style public displays of affection are considered improper in India does not stop Star TV from beaming American movies and television shows with such content into India, nor Indians from watching them. Global marketers expect that this viewing will quickly turn to imitating, and, in turn, create a need for a whole new range of personal care products. As one global marketer explained: 'When you want to be physically closer to people a lot, then you tend to want to look better, smell better. So the [Indian] market will grow for cosmetics, perfumes, after-shaves, mouthwashes and so on' (Dyer 1994). This case (for further examples see Classen and Howes 1996) seems to confirm Marx's and Engels' point: 'In one word, [the bourgeoisie] creates a world after its own image' (Marx and Engels 1967: 84).

Marx's and Engels' vision of globalization as cultural homogenization finds further support in the way national élites in many African countries are called 'white men' by their less affluent countrymen, as among the Hausa of Nigeria. The traditional Hausa sensory or 'aesthetic order' may be seen as vulnerable to capitalist makeover as the trappings of social standing displayed by these (Westernized) role models 'trickle down.' What is more, the premium attached to 'brilliance' in the Hausa aesthetic order has made quartz watches attractive substitutes for silver bracelets, and enamelware for gourds. 'Brilliant!' says the global marketer, perceiving yet another niche opening up.

However, when we exchange the perspective of the global marketer for that of the ethnographer Eric Arnould (1989), we begin to appreciate the multiple respects in which Western products are, in fact, being *re-made* in Hausaland. According to Arnould, the emphasis in Hausa consumption practices remains on what is *done* with objects rather than having them, and the prime context for the encounter with novel Western goods is the bridal

display, not the department store. The Hausa marriage ceremony provides an emotionally, aesthetically and socially charged atmosphere for the transfer of cultural meanings to novel objects, and significantly conditions personal choice. What is more, the most desirable products, from an islamized Hausa perspective, are 'Meccan goods,' which are infused with grace. Grace is one quality no Western designer or marketer has so far been able to simulate, or likely ever will.

The Hausa case is not unique. 'Preference formation' is always a cultural matter, not simply a personal one. When Temiars of Malaysia dream of Western consumer goods, or use strips of plastic (on account of their much prized 'glitter') in the construction of their spirit altars, it is not the American dream they are dreaming (Marchand 1985; Roseman, this vol.). When Papua New Guineans buy Johnson & Johnson's baby powder at their local tradestore, it is not for use on infants but for purifying corpses and mourners, asperging the heads of ritual performers, and for body decor (Howes 2003: 217–18). Zimbabweans use Lifebuoy Soap not to wash their bodies but to add a much-valued sheen to their skin, and for fish bait (Burke 1996). These striking examples of consumer-added values or 'meanings' and uses underscore the importance of factoring local 'modes of consumption' into any account of how the senses have been organized by the expansion of capitalist relations of production and exchange.<sup>2</sup>

The above examples also bring out how consumption cannot be grasped exclusively in terms of the reception or internalization of the 'messages' of some hypostatized 'code' (to use Baudrillard's terminology). As the growing body of research on cross-cultural consumption shows, there is no guarantee that 'the intentions of the producer will be recognized, much less respected, by the consumer from another culture' (Howes 1996: 6; von Gernet 1996; Foster 1996/97; Coote, Morton and Nicholson 2000; Stahl 2002). Consumption is an *active* (not a passive) process, where all sorts of meanings and uses for products are generated that the designers and marketers of those products never imagined.

Quite apart from the way in which consumers from the margins consistently override the 'directions for use' of globalized commodities in their practices of everyday life,<sup>3</sup> there is the growing phenomenon of local rejection of transnational commodities and resistance to Western-style consumer capitalism. Consider the rise of *Ostalgie* in the former German Democratic Republic – that is, the new demand for old GDR products (including lemonade, washing powder, coffee, transistor radios, TVs and cars, such as the *Trabant*) as a matter of conscious preference to (Western) brand name goods.

[The] very otherness of GDR products, manifest in their physicality that can be seen, felt, tasted, smelled, and heard, serves as the starting point of these journeys into the past [i.e. East German people indulging in *Ostalgie*]. These

products, however, are not only the basis for individual acts of remembering, but they also signify a group identity for their former consumers: since all former citizens of the GDR were – by necessity – also consumers of its goods, they can find an exclusive identity as former consumers and purchasers of these products since they all have once shared the specific [un-branded] knowledge about these products. (Blum 2000: 231)

Suffice it to say that the handling, the rumble, the fumes, and especially the sight of a Trabant is unlike the sensory surround of a Lexus.

Even in those countries, like Japan, which have gravitated to the center of the capitalist world economic order, one finds pockets of people deploying their senses to resist the commodification of experience:

To some Japanese nativists, their people's best hope of liberating themselves from Western cultural domination and rediscovering their Japanese souls lies in the process of *jikkan* – 'retrospection through actual sensation.' Thus the smell of incense at a shrine or the tactile and kinesthetic sensations of sitting on tatami (*suwaru*) rather than sitting on a chair (*koshikakeru*) can produce a reconnection with the eternal, authentic Japanese culture and soul. (Tobin quoted in Classen and Howes 1996: 179)

The cases of domestication and resistance to the forces and products of global capitalism discussed above point to a significant lacuna in the marxian theory of the value of the commodity form. Let us shift our focus from the margins back to the center of the global consumer society to explore this lacuna.

Commodities do not only conceal the social relations of their production (as Marx showed); they are also used by consumers to *express* social relations by virtue of their materiality – that is to say, their sensory properties. Consider Table 16.1, a 'Table of tactile oppositions in fabrics' found in a North American textbook of consumer behavior. As Table 16.1 shows, the sensual relations between different sorts of fabrics serve to express gender relations, and thereby render sensible the categories of male and female, in addition to providing individual consumers with the means to articulate their 'identity' or social location.

**Table 16.1** Table of tactile oppositions in fabrics (after Solomon et al. 1999: 55, Table 2-1)

<i>Perception</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
High class	Wool	Silk	Fine
Low class	Denim	Cotton	↕
	Heavy	Light	↕
	←————→		Coarse

The marxian theory of value notoriously occludes the sensuous or aesthetic characteristics of the commodity form. This is because the system of industrial capitalism that reigned during Marx's day, and which constituted the ground of his thought, foregrounded production and free-market exchange, just as it privileged a utilitarian attitude toward the value of commodities (for example, the use-value of a coat consists in the protection from the elements it affords, never mind its cut or quality of its cloth). Indeed, according to Marx, at the moment a commodity becomes an object of exchange (an exchange-value) 'all sensuous characteristics are extinguished' and it becomes 'supersensible,' which is to say 'interchangeable' with the exchange-value of any other commodity, or of money (quoted in Keenan 1993: 165, 181). As noted in Howes (2003a: 205) 'by analysing commodities exclusively in terms of their use- and exchange-value, Marx elided what could be called their ["sense"] – namely, the sensuous contrasts which set one commodity off from another and give expression to cultural categories as well as express differences in social location.' It is tempting to call this 'sense' the 'sign-value' of the commodity, following Baudrillard (1970, 1981, 1996), but the matter is more complex than that. The notion of 'sign-value' ushers in the idea of the 'system of objects' as 'structured like a language.' Many voices now caution against such a 'simplistic equation between language and materiality, mainly due to the unordered and seemingly unstructured nature of consumption' (Blum 2000: 234; see further Miller 1998; Dant 1999; Stahl 2002).

In the 'aesthetic plenitude' of the current conjuncture, it is increasingly difficult to discern any evidence for a 'code of objects' (*pace* Baudrillard). Tweens use Kool-Aid – that gustatory icon of middle-class family life – as a flamboyant hair dye, and it is not only Rastafarians who sport dreadlocks. Table 16.1 only holds to a limited extent in the age of mix-and-mutate when no one wants to match. Code-scrambling has become the order of the day. Virginia Postel puts it well when she writes:

A sort of chemical transformation through recombination is, in fact, where much of today's aesthetic plenitude comes from. Like atoms bouncing about in a boiling solution, aesthetic elements are bumping into each other, creating new style compounds. We are constantly exposed to new aesthetic material, ripe for recombination, borrowed from other people's traditional cultures or contemporary subcultures. Thanks to media, migration, and cultural pluralism, what once was exotic is now familiar (Postel 2003:12)

While Postrel's point in *The Substance of Style* – namely, that there is more substance to style than was previously thought, and 'personalization' now rules the wardrobe – is well taken, the fact remains that there is something endearingly and dangerously naive about her privileging of hedonics over semantics and social status (see above on people petting Armani clothes). The sensory properties of commodities have been multiplied dramatically in 'the

aesthetic age,' as we have seen, but the cultural (as opposed to personal) logic behind this development should not be lost from view. Postrel appears to be guilty of 'taking the ideology of consumption for consumption itself' (Clarke 2003). What she calls 'the aesthetic imperative' is but the velvet glove that fits 'the imperative to consume.' The latter imperative 'demands, above all, that the body "be *made fit* to absorb an ever-growing number of sensations the commodities offer or promise"' (Bauman cited in Clarke 2003: 146). Hence the growth of 'human factors' research and all of the ways designers now 'think beauty in interaction' (Overbeeke 2002) the better to make the fit between subject and product a seamless one. Hence too the growth of self-instruction manuals like *The Bluffer's Guide to Wine* which instill routines geared towards 'ensuring that the consumer might will and act to absorb *more* of the sensations on offer' (Clarke 2003:146; see further Joy and Venkatesh 1994). As the proliferation of such self-help treatises attests, the age of simulation has taken on a very personal meaning for its denizens. Don't think disappearance of reality in representation; think disappearance of the self! In postmodernity it seems that simulation has become the existential ground of personality itself.

Some cultural critics, most notably Frederic Jameson, author of *Post-modernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, rail against the new 'depthlessness,' demise of affect (along with the subject), and cannibalization of styles in our postmodern times. Jameson points, for example, to the new urban ensembles around Paris where 'there is absolutely no perspective at all' with the result that 'one cannot position oneself' (Stephanson 1989: 47–8). His antidote to all this is something called 'cognitive-mapping' (Jameson 1991)

While one might agree with Jameson that the situation is critical, one must question the feasibility of his strategy of critique. How can cognitive-mapping possibly find the purchase – or generate the (transcendent) depth – necessary to cut through the sensory profusion of late capitalism? The best antidote, I suggest, is *sensitive-training* of the sort practised by Japanese nativists when they cultivate the capacity for *jikkan* (see above), or the gustatory curriculum introduced in French schools to counter the hegemony of *fast-foodisme* by instilling in pupils a (renewed) taste for *haute cuisine* (Puisais and Pierre 1987). The latter strategy may pale in comparison with the sensory reforms imagined by Charles Fourier in his designs for the utopian society of Harmony, where gastrosophers and amateurs would rule the world (see Fourier 1851; Classen 1998), but at least it offers the possibility of finding some sort of purchase within the system, rather than apart from it, like cognitive-mapping – for what if there is no apart?

Other theorists question whether our situation is as critical as Jameson maintains. Mike Featherstone, for example, points to evidence showing that the individual subject, affectivity, and reality have not really been eclipsed – at least, not to the extent claimed by Jameson and other postmodern critics

(or aficionados like Baudrillard). Taking the example of Disneyland (which is treated as paradigmatic of postmodern hyperspace and simulation by Jameson), Featherstone notes:

It has been argued that increasingly the contemporary tourist (or 'post-tourist') approaches holiday locations such as resorts, theme parks, and increasingly museums in the knowledge that the spectacles offered are simulations and accepts the montaged world and hyper-reality for what it is [Urry 1988]. That is, they do not quest after an authentic pre-simulation reality but have the necessary dispositions to engage in 'the play of the real' and capacity to open up to surface sensations, spectacular imagery, liminoid experiences and intensities without the nostalgia for the real. (Featherstone 1989: 130)

If Featherstone is correct,<sup>4</sup> then it appears that the age of simulation has collapsed into one of mere stimulation (not that one should underestimate how powerfully commercially *motivated* the stimuli on offer are). In other words, capitalist sensualism has fallen victim to its own success, its own hype, as far as '*determin[ing]* how we respond to products' (Solomon et al. 1999) is concerned. It doesn't (Howes 2003a).

One of the precipitating factors of this collapse would seem to be the makeover of the body of the commodity. As noted above, massive resources are now being poured into getting the sense appeal of things 'just right.' It is understandable why this strategy backfired: multiplying the sensory stimuli emitted by the merchandise and designing for affectivity (i.e. pleasure with products) was bound to undermine the very instrumentality, the very rationality of the system whose ends it was supposed to serve. The hyperestheticization of the body of the commodity has deconstructed its utility. With utility now in recession, a space has opened up where people can 'make sense' of things in all sorts of non-commercial, 'non-rational,' but aesthetic ways, like using Lifebuoy soap to give a sheen to one's skin, or deploying Kool-Aid as a hair dye.

Could it be that in the sensory profusion of the contemporary marketplace, the consumer has been let out of the glove? Not likely. But this question leads to another equally perplexing one: what theory of value could possibly capture the 'aesthetic plenitude' of the current conjuncture? Certainly not a labor theory, unless consumption be considered a form of labor. But think of the implications of that! Whether the next calculations that give us the gross national product if the productivity of consumers must be counted too? How is it conceivably possible to measure the value of the endless innovation in the 'senses' (meanings and uses) of things worked by latter day consumers?<sup>5</sup> Consumer-added value undermines the valorization of capital even as it appears to confirm it insofar as some item of merchandise has, admittedly, been bought, has changed hands. This exchange-value is, however, nothing more than the 'ghost' of the commodity, whereas the 'senses' of the commodity are palpable, and subject to multiple

appropriations (see Howes 2003: 221–9). This points to a looming crisis in the circuits of capitalist production and exchange. Now that consumption, rather than production or exchange is the ‘scene of action,’ there is increased risk of those circuits short-circuiting.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, it is for the consumption of the senses themselves in late capitalism that our epoch will be remembered.

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## Notes

1. I would submit that ‘acknowledge consumption’ when she asks only ‘How have the senses been organized by relations of production and exchange?’

2. To take an historical example, the Algonquian Indians traded furs for glass beads with the French in seventeenth-century Quebec and there was also quite a traffic in prayer beads. But the Algonquians did not admire the beads simply for their ‘brilliance’; they also occasionally ground them up and smoked them because ‘the respiratory route’ was the standard route for the ingestion of power-laden substances (von Gernet 1996: 170–6).

3. It should not be overlooked that the creative misuses discussed here can have destructive as well as subversive consequences, as in the tragic case of the ‘misuse’ of infant formula in many Third World countries (see Classen and Howes 1996).

4. It is not clear to me from Featherstone’s account how ‘post-tourists’ acquire ‘the necessary dispositions.’

5. Of course, if Western consumers were all that ingenious or creative at ‘using commodities otherwise,’ recycling would be far more advanced than it is (Coote, Morton and Nicholson 2000). Also, entrepreneurs are always seeking to ‘recuperate for capitalism’ the latest novel usage, whence the endless proliferation of ‘labor-saving devices’ on supermarket shelves.

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