**The Object and Art of Luxury Consumption**

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**Introduction**

A central aspect of luxury is value. Luxuries proclaim value: they suggest things that can readily be valued above others. Luxuries embody the promise of special things: not merely things of quality, scarcity and wonder that are beautifully made, but also eventful and sensory fulfilling experiences. Indeed, some luxury goods are deliberately made to be noticed: to embody authority and announce their experiential dimension. It is this power of luxuries to offer more, to hold out the promise of a process of familiarization which unfolds new aesthetic and sensory dimensions, that can evoke strong and even threatening social feelings about their exclusiveness, social cost and wastefulness. The making of luxuries can involve seemingly excessive investment of time and money, beyond apparent social need. The distinction between everyday necessities and luxuries is generally seen as central to the understanding of luxury. The dynamic of modernity is regarded as one in which many luxuries whose consumption was formerly restricted to aristocrats, courtiers and upper-class groups, become widely available (tea, sugar, spices, silk, dyes etc.). In pre-modern times luxury goods were generally prohibitively expensive and only available in limited quantities until European colonial expansion, the development of the slave trade and the opening up of the Americas, increased both the supply and the range of substitutes. This resulted in price falls, opening up the possibility of more widespread availability and the ‘democratization of luxury.’[[1]](#footnote-1) One of the dynamics of luxury, then is to produce copies and cheaper substitutes to extend the market. But this tendency also produces the opposite move, which is at the heart of luxury, the concern to possess the original, which has unique qualities and rarity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

From another perspective anything can become an indulgence, desirable or pleasing: hence anything can become a luxury. People may well have different hierarchies of goods and experiences they value at particular times of life, and hence a range of different luxuries they can enjoy or desire. These may range from the ‘little luxuries,’ the little treats mothers provide,[[3]](#footnote-3) to lottery-winner dreams of fulfilment and enjoyment replete with the finest things money can buy. The contemplation of luxuries draws on a rich discourse and imagery of comfort, sensory pleasures, elegance, style, prestige, glamour and excessive indulgence. In contemporary consumer culture there is a range of related thematics that are often associated with luxury such as beauty, romance and exotica, which can readily be found in advertising imagery. We are constantly subjected to publicity, which not only proclaims the allure of luxuries, but seeks to persuade us that we deserve them, or should feel compelled to provide them for others. Luxury is a potent quality to be attributed to things and experiences and for this reason within consumer culture the terminology, discourses and imagery of luxury are over-used and can be found practically everywhere. The internet and social media are currently adding a further dimension, by acting as a new set of resources for the presentation of information and images of sumptuous luxury goods and experiences. There is an expanding number of websites that constantly seek to outbid themselves in proclaiming superior levels of quality and distinctiveness, along with a high price tag: luxuries give way to ultra- or super-luxuries.

Most definitions of luxuries emphasise comfort, but elegance is usually mentioned and also expense. In effect the luxury object has been fashioned to provide maximum value with little concern for the amount of labour involved or the final price. This is particularly so with the type of ultra-luxuries designed for and purchased by expanding strata of wealthy people and the increasingly visible rich and super-rich. Such luxuries can be made to cater for direct sensory pleasures such as eating and drinking, but also bodily comforts as we find in tactile pleasures and proprioceptive feelings. Here we think of the touch of sumptuous fabrics, or other sensory elements such as relaxing sounds and music, careful subdued lighting and perfume to stimulate the senses, all of which help generate a certain mood and sense of care and warmth. The emphasis is on elegant and stylish craftsmanship, good design and careful construction as in furniture, *objets d’art*, interior design and architecture. But also clothing and adornment, through the care, skill and workmanship evident in the crafting, cut and design.

In addition, along with the general tendency in consumer culture to supplement goods with experiences, and to encourage the direct purchase of experiences, can we speak of luxurious experiences? Certainly advertising copy would suggest this is the case. Again the qualities shade into each other – comfort, elegance, memorable events, adventure, excitement, exotica become the repertoire to be drawn upon in the descriptions of the luxury vacation/once in a lifetime cruise/adventure holidays/destinations not to miss before you die - all inevitably proclaim their luxurious credentials. Likewise the purchase of expensive items with expert guidance and levels of personal service that provide tutorials and back-up on how to enjoy the new car, or choose the Savile Row suit, which not only confirm the status of the products as luxuries, but confer the status of having arrived on the owner – something which can be particularly important for new rich purchasers.

Furthermore, health and body care need to be considered. Body maintenance and health check-ups have their routine and mundane aspects, but the settings, the décor and interior design of top-end private hospitals, clinics and gyms can provide very high levels of comfort, service and personal care from staff. In major global cities that are home to the rich and super-rich, the expectation is not just of high levels of technical competence and equipment, but also of comfort and service, with the price less important (the Harley Street area of London being a good example). Health and body care can also be seen as ‘facilitators,’ necessary preconditions for enjoying the full the range of luxury lifestyles available to the wealthy. Like technological investments in transport such as private jets or luxury cars, along with advanced digital communication devices, they offer everyday savings of time for people with overflowing schedules and over-optioned lives. Communications technologies, then, can also be regarded as facilitators, to enable more efficient time economies.

A related issue is whether wealth itself can be thought of as luxurious. There are cases where people grow up in upper class or aristocratic households and learn how to handle and take for granted many of the objects, settings and experiences normally assumed to be luxuries. In effect habitual use of some luxuries can turn them into taken for granted necessities. Yet, for the vast majority of people and the nouveau riche in particular, money itself connotes luxuriousness. Certainly, money opens the door to a life replete with possibilities: the dreams can be realised, the goods, sensations and experiences sampled. Having a lot of money makes it possible to hire professional expertise and services, which can take the risk element out of choice, and make the selection process an interesting and reassuring status-confirming experience itself. In this sense money is the prime facilitator to unlock the treasure house of luxuries.

But it has also been argued that there is a more direct process at work: people do not just want the things money can buy, they want money itself (Yuran, 2014). They want the fetish-conferring and life-opening up qualities money itself provides. In consumer culture, then, we don’t just gaze longingly at the luxuries on display: the price-tag also does some work. There are of course top-end shops in the wealthy areas of global cities that never have price-tags for the goods on display, yet the fact that it can be readily ascertained that the goods are expensive, adds a certain exclusivity which for many people takes them in to the category of ‘special purchases’ and gifts. In contrast there are many instances of everyday consumption, where careful budgeting and price-sensitive purchasing are mandatory. Yet in the case of special purchases and luxuries the price may matter much less. Indeed, the knowledge that a certain item is extremely expensive itself confers status. This is something that Veblen and Marx in their different ways noted: ‘things are effects of money’ (Yuran, 2014:7).

While the fetishizing effect of money has been the subject of a good deal of analysis (Baudrillard, 1981; Dant, 1996; Hornborg, 2014; Silva, 2012), in the way that high price can summon up desire for goods, it is also possible to see the opposite process taking place, whereby the objects desired or purchased, take on a special quality, irrespective of monetary value. Walter Benjamin’s depiction of the thrown-away consumer packaging and material such as train tickets, handbills, confectionary wrappers etc., the discarded objects found in the street or junk shop, points to the potential for ordinary everyday goods to take on additional properties and retain a value (Benjamin, 1999; 2010; Featherstone, 2007). In such cases goods may develop a particular aura or affective charge, which becomes central to the desire for ownership, or possession. Indeed, it can be said that possession is reversed and it is their capacity to possess the owner, which is the attractor. There is a dynamic, then, which points us to consider the life history of objects and their movement in and out of luxury status and the way some can accrue value and attain the special quality of becoming powerful desired things. Some everyday objects which were mundane and unremarked in past ages, may end up in the museum and attain high cultural value – their special quality is that they have survived and are originals from a different time. They can be treated with extreme reverence and even fetishized and provide enormous pleasure for the connoisseur or expert who has the privilege of handling them, or even just being in their presence. At the same time as museums can be part of the process of creating luxuries, drawing things to attention and making them desirable *objets d’art*, or to be subjected to high craft value reproductions to adorn the apartments of the wealthy. It is also, of course, possible in the life history of objects for the reverse process to take place, for objects to become seen as outmoded and for them to disappear into the storeroom, or even be discarded as rubbish (see Appadurai, 1986; Brown, 2004; Boscagli, 2014).

If we ask the question: what must luxuries do if they want to attain even higher value? The answer is become art. This leads to some interesting scenarios in terms of today’s luxuries, for to have the status of art conferred on luxury goods is for many of the predominantly craft-based sectors, the highest accolade. Yet, from the art side, there has often been a feeling of superiority (and even contempt on the part of some avant-garde artists) towards the luxury sector. At the same time there has been a good deal of back-door and carefully controlled exchange mediation, given the financial power the luxury sector possesses. More recently, art museums have become increasingly commercial as opposed to educational enterprises, so such tie-ups and sponsorship deals can prove attractive. For the luxury houses, considerable prestige is conferred – often with the blessing of cultural establishments who may designate them as a boundary sub-category of art and welcome displays of ‘classic’ or ‘avant-garde’ luxury objects. To get closer to art and the art museum, one strategy is for the luxury houses to set up their own luxury brand museum, or sponsor exhibitions of artistic or related material, which is significantly close or resonates well with the brand. In such cases the expectation is there will be some transference of the aura and special status of art. There is, therefore, an interesting set of dynamics involving luxury objects that will be examined in the following sections of the chapter.

**The Object of Luxury**

In some cases luxury objects may have such high investment value potential that the process of accruing additional value may be so compelling and attractive, that the owner decides to relinquish or delay their actual consumption or use. Some luxury objects, then, such as rare crafted objects from early civilizations, or paintings or jewellery, may be deemed so valuable that they are locked away in bank vaults. Or if displayed, this is done so only when elaborate securing measures have been put in place. Their high monetary value, gives them exclusivity, which means they are treated as special both by retailers, customers and marketers, irrespective of their actual qualities. Their desirability can feed the expectation that they will provide an emotional charge and open up a range of pleasures.

Some objects such as food and drink seemingly offer immediate pleasure, they are there to be consumed. For the rich and the super-rich, the capacity to sample and explore taste is a central aspect of the consumption possibilities that wealth opens up. On one level this offers the opportunity to explore the direct taste of fine food and drink. As the worldwide market for luxury food and drink expands with more and more brands and individual producers seeking to provide specialist gourmet food and beverages to be sold in high-end shops or featured in restaurant dishes, the pressure is on to produce new levels of taste experience for the extremely wealthy. This provides the opportunity for some luxury brands to diversify and cross over into different fields to develop new markets. A move which can appear particularly attractive at a time when sales of Italian luxury goods (handbags, shoes, clothes, accessories etc.) have stabilised, whereas Italy’s premium food industry has been steadily growing and enjoys a high reputation for its artisanal and biodiversity qualities. Many of the medium level luxury brands around the world are seeking such diversification and consolidation, as the opportunities to expand continue. Over the past twenty years the numbers of luxury-goods consumers worldwide has more than trebled to 330 million. The shares of luxury companies in the S&P Global Luxury Index have outperformed the S&P 500 by over 50 per cent since the 2008 financial crisis (Unger, 2014).

The expansion of the luxury market and the more general ‘democratization of luxury,’ (Featherstone, 2014; Pinkhasov and Nair, 2014), not only means that luxuries are everywhere, it also creates pressures to develop even more exclusive goods, stimulating ultra-luxury brands and the bespoke luxury market.[[4]](#footnote-4) The £10 million solid gold diamond-encrusted iPhone, created by British designer Stuart Hughes, is just one example of the excessive adornment of an everyday object, especially one with a limited lifespan.[[5]](#footnote-5) There was an estimated total spend on luxuries of $1.8 trillion in 2012, a trend which has seen the rise of a series of luxury brand billionaires, such as Bernard Arnault of LVMH and François-Henri Pinault of the Kering Group (Bain & Company, 2014). The demand for luxury consumables such as food and drink, then, can be bolstered if there is the assumption of a high level of quality crafted into them (Sennett, 2008). Their value is not only enhanced by scarcity, but also by rarity. For example, an individual bottle of rare Bordeaux wine can be valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is even the case when an exceptionally rare bottle, such the 1787 Chateau Lafitte, has survived for over two centuries, but is now clearly undrinkable, suggesting that its valuation at over $300,000 has to be understood in terms of its rarity value for a wine collector. This would also make it potentially attractive to display in a wine museum, or foyer of an exclusive wine merchant. In this case immense prestige value was added by the fact that it was not just the sole survivor from over two hundred years ago and produced by a top Bordeaux premier cru label, but the evidence that it had been owned by Thomas Jefferson. The fact that it is undrinkable, with all resemblance to fine wine gone, is overlain by its value in the abstract table of great wines, also compounded many times by the fact that it survived intact. This enormously adds to the immense delight of the collector or connoisseur who can gaze on such an extraordinary object, or even contemplate its purchase and the fact it would take pride of place in his or her collection.[[7]](#footnote-7) Again aura is at work along with distinction; but also property: the capture, ownership and possession of the item, is also important.

An opposite case could be the lack of reverence shown to highly expensive items, whose consumption is direct, immediate and excessive and by no means carefully contemplated or judiciously anticipated. Rather, it is their high symbolic and financial value that makes the consumption of the finest and rarest festive food and drink important. It is the gesture of excessive generosity (‘only the best will do’) and the wanton act of consumption or even destruction, becomes a sign of the special nature and high value of the group of people involved. Price is decidedly no object, and pales in significance against the need to demonstrate allegiance, and social solidarity by acknowledging their luck and good fortune: effectively recognising their debt to fate by consuming particular expensive festive drinks such as champagne, to excess. There are echoes of carnival reversals in which expensive wine flows freely, or the potlatch festivals of destructive feasting and gift and counter-gift giving here (Bataille, 1988).

These examples raise a series of interesting questions about value accumulation, the nature of collecting and connoisseurship, as well as the disposability and persistence of particular objects. Luxury food and drink provide fascinating case studies as they have relatively short lifespans and are produced with high levels of expertise and crafting to provide discernable quality taste. Yet in the case of champagne, there has been the accumulation of additional symbolic value, not only in the beverage’s deemed appropriateness or necessity for specific ceremonies (weddings, anniversaries, receptions, openings), but also in the case of events where the wine is deliberately poured away or destroyed in a rite to induce good fortune, as in ship launches. Another type of wasting and excess takes place at sporting events, notably Formula One Motor Racing, where there is a good deal of playful spraying around on the podium when the victors celebrate. Champagne may also appeal to the nouveau riche as a sign of wealth and luxury, that one can afford to waste it, to delight in the transgression in the deliberate wastage of a luxury as in the case of the billionaires super-yacht fitted out with showers that spray champagne not water (see Featherstone, 2013a, 2013c).

There is a further dimension that needs to be considered before addressing the special quality of the luxury object, this is its place in the wider set of objects we handle and use in everyday life, along with their typical life cycle: their durability, trajectory and transformations. It is possible to posit a continuum with at one extreme durable objects, which are highly crafted and sustain high value: diamonds being a good example. In the middle are everyday objects we have bought, some of which are in use, some of which hang around as stuff, things we might use but are generally deactivated; yet they still enjoy the status of things not objects (Brown, 2004; Boscagli, 2014; Miller, 2005). Then towards the other extreme are items of junk, former possessions that became stuff, then made their way into the storeroom, attic or shed. Finally, there are the thrown-away things that become seen as used-up objects and discarded as rubbish. Then, there is the afterlife of things as waste, which in some cases can have complex journeys, from the local rubbish tip, to recycle plants in Africa or China where the waste is turned back into more indeterminate materials.[[8]](#footnote-8) The speed with which objects pass down the line to become waste can vary a great deal, with luxury objects tending to have a slower cycle, given the fact that they are able to retain value longer. But our example of champagne also points to the existence of disposable luxuries.

It is the social scarcity and adjudged intrinsic qualities of the luxury object, which can make it desirable. It may also gain a great deal of attractiveness by being seen as part of a set, as having a particular place in the histories and genealogies of particular types of luxury goods. For the connoisseur and collector it is this place within the symbolic hierarchies and grids of a particular classification of luxury items, often condensed into a definitive catalogue, that is important. There is the pleasure in knowing how it can be contextualised and located, its authentic pedigree. But there is also pleasure in the object itself, in its thingness, in the way it engages our sense and pulls us towards it and seemingly wants to be handled and gazed at lovingly. The capacity to handle and know the object can of course be more easily sustained in close proximity to the thing itself and indicates the importance of ownership. In his famous essay ‘Unpacking My Library,’ Walter Benjamin (1970a:258) suggeststhat for book collectors ‘ownership is the most intimate relation that one can have to objects’ as this relation bypasses their functional and utilitarian value.’ Property, the ownership of things, as in the case of objects of art and paintings by famous artists which adorn the apartments of the wealthy, create the conditions for familiarity and the capacity to get to know objects in their fullness and potential.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in themes such as: ‘the allure of things,’ ‘the primacy of the object,’ the need to ‘save the particular,’ along with the need to investigate the nature of fetishism, objectification and techno-animism. These are themes that have engaged theorist from Benjamin and Adorno onwards (see Hornborg; 2014; Jensen and Blok, 2012; Lütticken, 2014; Miller, 2005; Schiermer, 2010; Silva, 2012). More recently, there has also been the emergence of new materialism (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010) and object-oriented ontology (Bogost, 2012; Bryant, 2011, Harman, 2011; Introna, 2009). These concerns also resonate with the rise of interest in affect theory (Blackman & Venn, 2010; Clough, 2008; Featherstone, 2010). There is, then, an increasing sense that we need to move beyond the human-centred frame of reference (things for us) to focus on ‘thing-thing’ relations, the power of things to affect each other, as well as how they entice and enchant us. This focus on ‘thing-power’ (Bennett, 2010) builds on the previous set of formulations which emphasised ‘the sex-appeal of the inorganic,’ the investment of libidinal energy or charge in the object (Benjamin, 1999; Johnson, 2006:70; Buci-Glucksmann, 1994; Periola, 2004); glamour (Gundle, 2008) and aura (Benjamin, 2010; Hansen, 2008).

Walter Benjamin, for example, was long interested in aura, in the ways in which inanimate objects could possess a strange power and even seem to look back at us (Benjamin, 1999, Buck-Morss, 1989; Hansen, 2008). He wanted to explore ways of saving objects from the commodification process and developed a theory of the porosity of things to show how the wasted commodity object was capable of agency and affect. For Benjamin the commodity was multi-faceted and doubled as a poetic object, one that had the power to overcome the subject. As Boscagli (2014:50) puts it ‘Instead of being seduced by the sex-appeal of the inanimate, so that he himself becomes frozen into thingness, the subject is fascinated and made alive by the wonders that the object, now re-envisioned as an object closer to the anthropological fetish or medieval relic, can perform’ (see Benjamin, 1999; Buci-Glucksmann, 1994; Spencer, 1985). Benjamin emphasised the way that objects have the potential to produce happiness and here he was influenced by Marcel Proust’s discussion of how particular objects can act as signs which summon up involuntary memories that activate intense vivid experiences and moments of joy (Benjamin, 1970b; Deleuze, 2008; Featherstone, 2013b, 2014:60). Benjamin wanted to apply these insights to the fragments of discarded mass consumer objects abandoned in the city, or the things piled up in the second-hand shops in the arcades, things replete with potential which could be induced to open up to us and provide glimpses of happiness. While Benjamin wanted to take this in a particular direction, which we will return to shortly, it is evident that this type of auratic charge has often been associated with fine and rare objects – luxuries, objects of art and of course art itself.

**The Art of Luxury**

W J T Mitchell (1995,1996) asks the question ‘What do pictures want?’ The answer is ‘they want us to love them.’ Mitchell is interested in opening up a discussion about our desire for images in an effort to better understand the power images have over us: the uncanny vitality and animation often attributed to pictures. It is possible to extend the question from pictures to other art objects and there are numerous discussions of the capacity art has to attract and hold us through its auratic and generative powers. If we ask the related question ‘what do luxuries want?’ The answer could be ‘they want to become art.’ In effect, they want to develop or be seen to embody, the same powerful affective charge to that which is attributed to art. Then, they will express and deliver value in both the economic and cultural senses.

The promise of increasing prestige and value of luxury goods through a closer association with art, has long been seen as advantageous by the large luxury firms and conglomerates. Luxury houses in particular, are attracted to the art world, with Louis Vuitton, for example, publicizing its many collaborations with artists such as Takashi Murakami, [Olafur Eliasson](http://www.louisvuitton.com/front/#/eng_US/Journeys-section/Friends-of-the-House/Personalities/Olafur-Eliasson), [Richard Prince](http://www.louisvuitton.com/front/#/eng_US/Journeys-section/Friends-of-the-House/Personalities/Richard-Prince), [Yayoi Kusama](http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG9526252/Yayoi-Kusamas-sell-out-line-for-Louis-Vuitton.html), [Daniel Buren](http://www.vogue.co.uk/news/2012/12/13/daniel-buren-louis-vuitton-spring-summer-2013-catwalk-show-set) (see Vuitton and Jacobs, 2009). At the same time the art market has become a luxury goods business, being cited in luxury indexes such as the Knight-Frank Wealth Report, with greater numbers of high net worth individuals seeking to invest in art works. Business companies in the United States, Britain, France and other places, are given tax relief if they purchase works of art. The association with art confers great prestige practically throughout the luxury sector, with various institutions, such as luxury hotels competing to hold exhibitions or become associated with art. For example, in September 2014, the Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel, California, presented Club Level guests with the ‘once-in-a-lifetime opportunity’ to see an exhibition of Pablo Picasso’s works, drawn from several collections, including pieces on loan from Belgium’s Galerie Moderne. Deanne French, director of public relations at [The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/LagunaNiguel/Default.htm), commented ‘We anticipate it to be an exhibit that guests will want to experience so they will plan a visit to the resort just so they can view these famous works by one of the greatest and most influential artists of the 20th century.’ The emphasis upon an exclusive experience is interesting, club class wealthy guests at the resort hotel have the privilege to see art in a different setting away from the crowds and noise of the masses who stream through popular metropolitan exhibitions.

There are increasing numbers of collaborations between art museums and luxury houses to set up exhibitions and longer-term art education projects. In addition to promoting exhibitions of famous artists, luxury houses also seek to create their own mythologies by highlighting the closeness of their founders or directors, to art and the art world. The French fashion house Christian Dior, for example, presented a series of articles in its online magazine *DIORMAG* in 2014, which took readers through the founder’s experience with art and how it influenced his fashion career. Again the experiential aspect was highlighted, with the introductory article in the series on July 21 2014 beginning by telling consumers ‘We’re setting off on a voyage...’ (Jones, 2014). Dior regularly holds exhibitions, which feature its own work and narrate its history. Some are held at its own Musée Christian Dior, as was the case with ‘Dior, The Legendary Images’ (May-Sept 2014); others moved around the world such as the Shanghai ‘Miss Dior Exhibition’ (June-July 2014) which attracted unprecedented numbers of visitors; or the ‘Esprit Dior Exhibition’ (October 2014-January 2015) in Tokyo, which explored the founder’s fascination with Japanese culture and relation to famous artists of his time.

Some of the luxury house or fashion house exhibitions are staged at conventional museums, as we find with the Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London March-August 2015.[[9]](#footnote-9) Or the Louis Vuitton exhibition ’Voyages’ at the National Museum of China in Tiananmen Square, May-August 2011. This demonstrates there is a good deal of public interest manifest in the capacity to draw in the legions of dedicated followers who want to explore the world of haute couture and bespoke accessories, formerly restricted to the very rich. Such exhibitions bolster the image of luxury brands and involve storytelling to enhance the craftsmanship and design skills of the founders to enable people to contemplate fashion and accessories displayed as art. As Sydney Toledano, CEO of Christian Dior, remarked about the Dior exhibition in Russia in 2011, which enjoyed a record-breaking attendance: ‘The 150,000 people who go to the Pushkin understand that Mr. Dior was an artist and that there is a way of contemplating the dresses with fine art’ (cited in Pellegrin, 2014).

This is an indication of the importance of the persona standing behind the brand and the attempts to present the founder or creative director as the key source of the brand’s aura. In effect the charisma of the founder becomes central to luxury. This is the argument developed by Dion and Arnould (2011) who prefer to speak about ‘charismatic experience management’ based upon the persona of the leader. In addition, there is a range of related strategies, which invite consumers to be involved in the processes whereby the magic is generated. These include: visits to the flagship store, brand museum, fashion shows, internet sites, to experience and witness the creative alchemy behind the brand. All this is designed to highlight the aesthetic vision of the creator, their uniqueness and capacity to explore radical difference and experiment. Hence dramatic styles of self-presentation and the transformative powers of successful figures such as: John Galliano, Alexander McQueen, Karl Lagerfeld and Marc Jacobs. These artistic directors are seen to stand apart in their dedication, personal sacrifice and force of will. They also face regular ‘tests’ to demonstrate their charisma and magical touch, such as the twice-yearly fashion shows.

In their study of luxury brands, Pinkhasov and Nair (2014:35) remark ‘Fashion is fast, seasonal and obsessed with imagery. Luxury is deep, timeless and obsessed with quality.’ This assumption proves to be more complicated in the case of the luxury fashion houses, which are pulled both ways, but also attracted to go beyond luxury and into art, to seek to enhance the value of their brand by associating the name with art. This in turn will depend to some degree on the extraordinary qualities demonstrated by the flow of auratic works from the gifted charismatic creator. There is a range of dynamics at play here. Luxury and fashion houses tend to have to look a number of ways: towards endorsement by cultural establishments, to wealthy rich and super-rich clientele, but also to the mass market. Items produced for the fashion shows are orientated towards the museums, to be preserved and displayed as experimental cultural prototypes. They need endorsement by cultural gatekeepers, intellectuals, artists, critics, curators and cultural intermediaries. The rich and super-rich will purchase exclusive top end-luxuries, not always for sale in city centre and airport shops frequented by the public. Louis Vuitton accessories can of course be purchased more cheaply on the internet, or at outlet stores such as Bicester Village in the UK, or the range of outlet stores in Italy, the United States and other places, which enjoy considerable popularity.[[10]](#footnote-10) For young women in particular, the first cheap £100 Vuitton bag purchase could indeed be an expensive luxury; an item which could carry a good deal of projected aura and represent the first step towards the intricate learning and purchasing curves that open up the new world of experience provided by the luxury brand.

**Concluding Remarks**

In a world that is forever producing new consumer goods driven by the dynamics of fashion and technological innovation, luxuries could be seen as a point of stability. They stand out as goods produced through fine craftsmanship and an obsession with quality; they are things that tend to retain their value. Many traditional luxury goods purchased and used by aristocrats would fit this description. The luxury brand houses want to feed off this image of tradition and quality, in which goods appear singular and bespoke, individually crafted by the human hand and not the machine. Next to the craftsman stands the artist. If it is possible for the luxury house to appropriate the aura of the artist and artistic production in the ways we have just discussed, then the prestige of their goods will necessarily rise. Yet this move can be played out in a number of ways. The luxury brand houses may elect to increase prestige and move nearer to art and endeavour to maintain their reputation for creativity, originality and exclusiveness. Or they may be drawn to the potential of the new luxury markets, which have emerged over the last twenty years or so for the new rich and middle classes. Yet catering for the democratization of luxury by producing more affordable brands may well undermine their hard-won reputation for high craftsmanship, artistic creativity and exclusiveness. The danger is that the move towards mass luxury can devalue the brand narrative. Luxury houses and other purveyors of luxury goods such as luxury car manufacturers play out this dilemma and often engage in a dual strategy. For example, BMW, which produces a range of premium and prestige vehicles under the BMW brand, is also owner of Rolls Royce motorcars.

For those in the know, the expert, collector or connoisseur the differences between models are apparent, given their knowledge of the ‘back catalogue,’ the relational grid of the full range of different objects produced over time and awareness of the similarities, differences and distinctiveness of each set within a particular field. The relational grid provides the contextual knowledge, but it also points to the distinctiveness of the particular luxury item in question. This can involve appreciation of the ‘thingness of things’ and ‘thing power’ Bennett (2010).[[11]](#footnote-11) It can involve the distinctive features which engage the senses: the smell of expensive leather in the new car, the deep throated throb of a high-powered engine, the proprioceptive push of the body back into the seat with acceleration. These are the distinctive features that advertisers endeavour to capture in advertisements, which go beyond an image or photograph and ocular-centric vision, being more multi-sensory and synaesthetic. They are most strongly evident in proximity to or involvement with the object. Here the object engages the body in an affective relationship. In part the affective response is shaped by the object’s structure and capacities that are built, or ‘crafted’ into it. In part, the response is also shaped by the specifics of the encounter and how the particularities of the object reveal themselves.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is this promise that: firstly, technical experts and craftsmen seek to design into the object; and secondly, advertisers seek to accent, emphasise and promote within a broader context involving complex imagery, word and sound-play, to make the prospective object encounter ’eventful.’ It is this combination that helps to develop the fascination for the object and its ‘seductive’ qualities. In Baudrillardian terminology this is the excess of ‘sign-value’ that can become attached to objects, but tends towards overload and detachment. This process of fetishizing the luxury consumer object works in much the same way for the work of art as for the luxury object such as a motorcar or handbag. But in many ways it is not the object which is being marketed by the advertisers, but a range of desired qualities or properties – comfort, beauty, prestige, freedom, romance, style, uniqueness of experience – which are more intangible marks of distinction, which can be contrasted to the common, average functional and utilitarian everyday models.

This is evident in the way some luxury motorcars embody excess – not in terms of the quality of their luxury interior passenger comfort, but in terms of the power of the engine, as is the case with top range sports cars.[[13]](#footnote-13) The luxury sports car is a long way from an efficient safe utilitarian vehicle to move around urban areas. Yet as Bataille (1988) has argued excessive expenditure can be considered in a positive light when contrasted with the production and circulation of commodities in our dominant ‘restrictive economy’ with its emphasis on acquisition and saving. In contrast, the ‘general economy’ aims not at necessity but luxury: at the expenditure and consumption of wealth.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The luxury object, like art offers the promise and the dangers of excess. It points to the strong affective forces working within social life, which at times can be destructive and even catastrophic. Governing excess and handling the tension between saving and wastefulness, between calculation and expressivity, between restricted expenditure and exuberance, between economy and luxury, is at the heart of social life. Yet there is another side of luxury to the wasting of energy involved in excessive consumption, there is also the promise of indulgence and security. It is this dimension that Peter Sloterdijk (200:34) points to when he remarks:

Luxury makes humankind possible and it is also through luxury that our world is born. Humans are, and have been since the very beginning, animals that mutually indulge and exonerate themselves by taking care of each other and by treating themselves with more security than any other living creature could ever dream of enjoying. Humankind arises through its secession with Mother Nature. We can then relate the birth of humankind with the spirit of taking-care-of. (Sloterdijk, 1993: 334; cited in Elden, 2011: 14).

For Sloterdijk, who wrote these remarks well in advance of his discussion of foam in volume 3 of *Spheres* (Sloterdijk, 2004), there is an onto-anthropological propensity towards luxury. This suggests the need for a theory of ‘constitutive luxury’ as a means of conceptualizing the origin and endpoint of mankind (Sloterdijk (2004:676). Luxury involves discharge and exoneration, but also indulgence (Elden, 2011). The Western-inspired Crystal Palace, the 1851 exhibition which brought the goods and exotica of the world under one roof as ‘the world interior of capital’ (the title of another of Sloterdijk’s books [2013]), signals the way luxury started to seize more extensive social power. These issues remain highly contemporary; they still point to the difficulty of reconciling the claims of those who live in poverty and scarcity and can only look at the consumer luxury world through the glass panes of the crystal palace, or through the ubiquitous screens of mobile media, while those inside still wander in fascination amidst the world of goods, trapped in the perpetual 24/7 mall. For both luxury objects are important powerful motivating forces that speak to human care, indulgences and pleasures. Yet the questions of access to luxuries, the sustainability of their production, their just distribution and the possibility of a space beyond, still remain compelling.

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1. See discussion in Featherstone (2013c) on how sumptuary laws gave way to fashion systems and the eventual development of consumer culture and extension of luxury (also Pomeranz, 2000; Burke, 1992; Clunas, 1991;Berg and Clifford, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an argument that sees substitutability as central to the definition of luxury see Berry (1994:41; also Armitage and Roberts, 2014 for a critique). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the description of Sunday afternoon tea described by Richard Hoggart (1958) in his portrait of life in a working class city in the north of England. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The term ‘ultra-luxury has been applied to ‘classic cars,’ which have become the top luxury good investment over the last ten years with ‘ultraluxury brands’ such as Bentley, Lamborghini. Rolls Royce, Maserati, Ferrari and Aston Martin enjoying an unprecedented sales record in 2014. It is also predicted that this segment will grow by 40 percent in the next five years. See ‘Golden Age for ultra Luxury brands,’ by Luca Cieferri, *Automotive News*, March 1 2015. <http://www.autonews.com/article/20150301/RETAIL01/303029986/golden-age-for-ultraluxury-brands> accessed 23.3.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Inside its special shell, the phone is no different from any iPhone in terms of hardware components. The iPhone was commissioned by an unnamed Chinese businessman (*Luxo* 1st April 2013); <http://www.luxuo.com/most-expensive/iphone-5-black-diamond.html> accessed 20.3.2015; (See also discussion in Armitage and Roberts, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One of the most expensive bottles of wine on record is the 1787 Chateau Lafitte, selling for $160,000 in 1985 (equivalent to $315,000 today) to Malcolm Forbes - allegedly part of Thomas Jefferson's collection with his initials on the bottle. The 1947 Château Cheval Blanc sold for $304,375 by a Swiss collector at an auction at Christie's in Geneva, is said to be one of the greatest Bordeaux of all time and is still drinkable and will keep for another 50 years (‘12 of The World's Most Expensive Bottles of Wine,’ Posted: 11/10/2011 2:24 pm EST Updated: 12/18/2014 8:00, *Huffington Post*. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/10/most-expensive-wine_n_1084988.html> accessed 23.3.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See discussion of a Chinese Ming collector’s feeling on handing a rare bronze in Featherstone (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Waste has become an increasingly complex category through recent research on waste dynamics (see Cubitt, 2015; Hird, 2015; Reno, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The exhibition was first staged at the New York Metropolitan Museum with some 661,409 people visiting over five weeks, ranking it alongside the museum's top ever exhibits: the 1963 Mona Lisa and the 1978 tour of King Tutankhamen’s treasures (Byrnes, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The cheapest Vuitton handbag from a quick internet search was the ‘Authentic Louis Vuitton Pochette Bag’ priced at £103.76 from Diannas Boutique. <https://www.etsy.com/uk/listing/221789784/authentic-louis-vuitton-mm-crossbody?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=shopping_uk_en_gb_bags_and_purses_mid&gclid=CISWjersz8QCFQf4wgod6FIAsg> accessed 30.3.2015. Louis Vuitton website contains warning about purchasing cheap Vuitton handbags online as they will be fakes and directs people to its stores and official website. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jane Bennett (2010:xvi) notes that thing-power ‘gestures towards the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects,’ along with their capacity to animate and engage us. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is possible to conceive this process from the perspective of object oriented ontology and new materialism, in ways which stress the selectivity of object-object encounters and play down the psychosocial understanding of affect (see Bogost, 2012, Ash, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Ferrari Testarossa sports car featured in the popular television series *Miami Vice* had a 5 litre 12 cylinder engine which produced 380-hp with a top speed of almost 180 mph. This type of car is driven around urban areas with 30 mph speed limits, such as the London district of Knightsbridge, where predominately Middle Eastern young men and boys from super-rich families parade their cars on a regular basis each August. Generally the cars cost hundreds of thousands of pounds, with one Dubai-registered Bugatti costing £1 million (Spillet, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As he puts it ‘it is not necessity, but its contrary ‘luxury,’ that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems’ (Bataille, 1988:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)