**Luxury, Consumer Culture and Sumptuary Dynamics[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Introduction**

‘Today, luxury is everywhere.’ (Kapferer and Bastien, 200:1)

Luxuries are things which have power over us. They engage the senses and have the capacity to affect us by offering a range of pleasures. Yet luxuries also demand recognition, the capacity to know what they are, to tell the difference between luxuries and necessities. Because luxuries are things which are highly valued in both economic and social terms, an extensive body of knowledge has arisen about how to judge their value, use them appropriately and maximise their potential for pleasure and satisfaction. Luxuries can offer the user enhanced status, through membership of the imagined cultural community that possession involves, but luxury also demands knowledge about how to consume or use them, how to unlock their full potential. Although the common-sense view of luxury holds that the pleasures offered are self-evident and immediate, luxury entails a range of transformative social and economic dynamics. Over time the demand for things designated as luxuries can lead to an increase in their availability, devaluing their power and desirability, yet also increasing the allure and demand for new luxuries.

The power of luxury goods is not just their social exclusiveness and visibility as status symbols, but the image they have of providing sensory fulfilment: the prospect of experiencing new sensations and pleasures. The social restrictions to accessing luxury goods such as the sumptuary laws that operated in the past and contemporary exclusions via price, means that for many people the pleasures luxuries afford cannot be experienced directly, but only simulated via the work of the imagination. There is a tension between the education of the senses to enhance the experience and longing for luxury, that can potentially turn into its opposite: the taking of pleasure in their denial, in celebrating the simplicity and imperfections of the mundane world and everyday objects. A form of renunciation that can become associated with alternative life orders, based on the asceticism of curbing excessive sensations and pleasures, as we find in certain religious and political movements. Yet there are numerous possibilities between the extremes of lifestyles based on the sensory embracement of luxuries or their ascetic denial. One possibility on this continuum involving the distancing from the direct experience of luxury is to work indirectly with the traces of luxury, the memories of luxury and images of luxury; to experience the pleasures of the manipulation of concepts and categories. This is the game cultural specialists play. A game played by those who create, handle, interpret and disseminate culture: artists, intellectuals, bohemians, mystics, shamans, priests.

Luxury, then, has its own range of dynamics. There is the dynamic of consumer culture, with the breaking down of sumptuary restrictions to make some luxuries more widely available. As the range of luxury goods and experiences are extended, this also suggests that a more careful education and cultivation of the senses becomes necessary to learn to appreciate the full qualities of luxuries. Over time, there is often a further dynamic in this learning process entailing a shift away from the pleasures of immediate consumption of luxuries, the immersion in the immediate sensory experiences they bring, to the savouring, recollection and reflection on the basis of their powers, along with an interest in the classification of the types of experience they bring; a more distanced and cooler evaluation of luxuries which may offer its own set of pleasures. In the first experience of luxuries it is the power of direct immediate immersion in sensation which is often sought after and noted, as in tasting rare food and drink, or smelling expensive exotic perfume, or the feel of fine clothing, or carefully crafted *objets d’art.* Later this may open up to a greater interest in broader knowledge about the making, cultivation and classification of these objects. This dynamic, with its reflection on the quality of the luxury experience, the nature of sensory pleasure and plenitude, draws the user towards more distanced modes of aesthetic evaluation. This can entail a shift in focus away from the luxury experience, to category play, to the pleasures of knowledge of a particular set of luxury goods (fine wine, perfume, jewellery) and their recollection. It provides resources for the memory of luxury and the anticipation of luxuries. For cultural specialists and intermediaries, this opens up a further range of dynamics about how to harness and control the power of luxuries. In societies which become obsessed with luxuries, over time there can be a move away from material and sensory luxuries to immaterial luxuries. The fascination with the power of luxuries can also summon up the longing for the ‘impoverished,’ simple life, an immaterial world whose values are of an entirely different order to those of the market. In short, for those who dwell in the shadow of luxuries, who deal with or act as intermediaries, a range of questions arise about the power of luxury goods; along with the transformational dynamics at work which colour our experience of the quality of luxuries: how luxuries themselves are governed by changing conditions of supply and demand, their mass availability and democratization.

**The democratization of luxury**

If luxury is everywhere can there still be luxury? Today we increasingly live in a global consumer culture which celebrates the visibility of luxury. Luxury goods not only are more readily available in the exclusive high end designer shops, malls and departments stores, images of luxury abound in the popular media and the Internet. New categories of super-luxury goods are constantly being created for the rich and super-rich with luxury consumption presented as one of the defining features of their lifestyles (Featherstone, 2013a, 2013b). Consumer culture has become central to the globalization processes accompanying the expansion of neoliberalism and the market economy (Featherstone, 1995, 2006). As a consequence the fascination with luxury goods and brands has extended to many parts of the world. This has been particularly evident with the resurgence of China and Asia over the last two decades, with Western luxury brands with their recognisable styles and prominent logos, seen as status markers for the expanding middle classes and nouveau riche. Yet for much of history luxuries were regarded as dangerous and corrupting things which were forbidden for the majority of people with the virtues of poverty not only emphasised by the Church in Europe, but also in Asia with the Chinese philosophical traditions of Confucius and Mencius.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite these religious and philosophical condemnations, luxury consumption became central to the court societies of emperors, monarchs and princes, with excessive display and consumption of luxuries providing an important set of distinctions between royalty, aristocrats and the common people. Yet, the sumptuary laws forbidding the consumption or use of particular goods (certain foods and drink, types of clothing, fabrics and colours etc.) by people who were not royalty or aristocrats, proved very difficult to enforce both in Europe and East Asia. The spread of luxury consumption, then, should be seen as part of a long term process involving the decline of aristocratic power, the rise of the middle classes and pressures from below for increasing democratization (Featherstone, 2007).

The opening up of the Americas after 1492 and the subsequent increase in trade, especially between Europe, the Americas and Asia with Latin American silver exchanged for Chinese silk, porcelain and other manufactured goods, played an important part in this process. Pomeranz (2000:192) remarks that for the first two hundred years, most of the non-silver exports of the New World were luxuries: Brazilian gold, North American furs, tobacco and sugar. European luxury demand was crucial in opening up the Americas and the move towards a fashion system, with a more rapid turn-over of goods. Nevertheless, many of the goods we now regard as everyday necessities: tea, sugar, cocoa, coffee, cotton fabrics, remained luxuries until after 1850 (Pomeranz, 2000: 107). Court societies, perhaps the most influential being that of Louis XIV in France, were centres of luxurious consumption and display (Elias, 1983). Clearly defined rules and sumptuary laws operated to regulate consumption with elaborate court ceremonial and public events in the ‘gilded cage’ of Versailles, to produce a fine-grained set of distinctions in the use of luxury items (Featherstone, 2013b). Court modes of extravagant consumption became a referent point for rising merchant groups to emulate, but they also developed their own cultures and as trade intermediaries were at the centre of the provision of new exotic goods, fashions and styles (Goody, 1986). Changes in gentry and merchant consumption in China and Japan loosely paralleled those of Western Europe with upper class homes in Ming Dynasty China (1368-1644) crammed with luxury items such as paintings, sculpture and fine furniture etc. (Burke, 1993; Clunas, 1991; Featherstone, 2007). In both Western Europe and East Asia sumptuary laws gave way to fashion systems, with their more rapid turnover of goods, which further stimulated the demand for luxury items (Berg and Clifford, 1999; Berg and Eger, 2003).

One important vector of luxury dynamics, then, is the extension of the consumption of luxury goods and the enjoyment of luxury environments from aristocratic and upper class groups, to others lower groups in the social strata. Of course this may involve scaled-down consumption of ‘minor luxuries,’ which over time have become affordable for wider sections of the population and turned into necessities. Medick (1982; Pomeranz, 2000:135), for example, mentions there was a clear desire on the part of artisans and journeymen in some parts of Europe in early modern times, not just wealthy merchants, to purchase ‘minor luxuries,’ (belts, shoes, waistcoats with silver and gold buttons, alcoholic drinks, coffee, tea, sugar) and it is argued that the display of such items became an key part of urban plebeian culture. While this may have been stimulated by the wish to look different from peasants, we should not assume that peasants themselves were immune from the desire to purchase non-essential goods such as high-quality furniture, tableware and home decorations. Pomeranz (2000:136) cites DeVries (1975) work on the Netherlands between 1550 and 1750 in this context. He goes on to argue that there is little evidence to assume that the demand for these ‘everyday luxuries’ was significantly different in Europe from that in China and Japan (see also Brook, 1998). Even when the supply of luxury goods was restricted by sumptuary laws or price and consumption of luxuries limited to aristocrat and merchant groups, it can be argued that the demand for emulation was strong in other groups lower down in the social structure.

The expansion and extension of consumer culture from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, extended the availability and range of ‘everyday luxuries,’ through the proliferation of images (photography, advertisements, the cinema) to enhance the sense of their immediacy, intensity and desirability. It also provided new luxurious settings through the growth of sites for shopping, entertainment and leisure (department stores, hotels, dance-halls, resorts), which offered increased opportunities for pleasurable viewing, inspection and purchase (see Ewen, 1976; Featherstone, 2007). Images of luxury became more widespread with the expansion of the cinema in the twentieth century, especially through Hollywood films which became a global force in the 1920s. The luxurious lifestyles of stars and celebrities, their homes, cars, swimming-pools, fashionable clothing and accessories, featured both in movies and the publicity fan magazines, to the extent that many people in Europe and other parts of the world assumed that this was standard fare for all in the United States: that people there lived out the Hollywood dream. Apart from this capacity for imaginative identification, the practice of watching movies, the visit to the cinema ‘dream palaces’ with their plush seating, velvet curtains, spacious foyers and special lighting, offered a brief experience of luxury to ordinary people (Hansen, 1991).

These new consumer culture sites, complimented the department stores, also frequently referred to as ‘dream worlds,’ first established in the late nineteenth century (Miller, 1981; Nava 2002; Tamari, 2006; Williams, 1982). Department stores also sought to provide opulent and luxurious surroundings, evident in the use of show windows and other displays to provide carefully designed settings for goods, which emphasised glamour, extravagance, exotica. There was also the additional capacity to not just look, but touch, to walk around, handle and try-on goods and clothing. Both the cinema and department stores fostered dreams of luxurious lifestyles, which were given an immediacy and tangibility through the potential to actually touch the goods, or zoom-in on details through photography and cinema close-ups (Friedberg, 1994). The new sites of consumption along with the proliferation of images, stimulated dreams of the consumer culture good life lived amidst luxurious abundance and style, rare and beautiful things and people. It isn’t just a question of the ready availability of luxury goods, or the emergence of new ranges of what has been termed ‘masstige’ goods (combination of mass and prestige) in which luxury brands as they seek to expand to benefit from the opportunities of globalization are pulled down market and develop low price ranges (Ogilvy, 2007:xv). Rather, luxury hovers over the surface of consumer culture goods, sites and people.

In this it works well with another aspect of consumer culture: glamour, which refers to the capacity to transform surfaces, to delude through illusion. Glamour operates as a force which can make things seem more alluring and splendid, better than they really are (Gundle, 2008:38).[[3]](#footnote-3) This emphasis upon illusion and transformative powers points to the fetish power of objects, ‘the anorganic sex life of things,’ (Schiermer, 2011; Featherstone, 2007). Glamour differs from beauty, in its dependence on the cultivation of personal style: glamour can be worked at. Consumer culture publicity presents glamour as within the reach of all, especially women, with endless advice on how women can transform their appearance and rework ‘the look.’ This is notable in the recent fascination with celebrity and the spate of reality television programmes concerned with ‘makeovers,’ featuring the transformation of ordinary men and women into celebrities (see Turner, 2004; Gundle, 2008; Featherstone, 2010). Glamour is about image and transformation; it offers a seductive aura which can be attached to objects and places as well as people. In the same way that it is possible to conceive of the veneer of luxury in the same way as the veneer of glamour, both are readily mobilised by consumer culture advertising and publicity. Both have been subjected to democratization dynamics.

When we consider the setting for luxury goods there are clearly two contradictory processes at work. On the one hand there is the attempt to add value to luxury items, through elaborate or exotic display as we find in the interiors of luxury chain boutique stores. There is also the investment in prestigious exteriors, the employment of high-profile architects like Rem Koolhaas, who designed the startlingly innovative Prada Building in Tokyo (Sklair, 2010). On the other hand there is the opposite tendency to negate the luxury setting, to dismantle all the traces of avant-garde innovation or aristocratic exclusivity, which could be intimidating for the potential expanding market of lower class people. In the United States there has been the expansion of outlet stores which offer luxury brand jewellery, clothing and other goods at massive discounts in warehouse or factory unit setting (Thomas, 2007). In some locations such as Las Vegas it is possible to see both processes underway – the growth of down-market outlet stores and at the same time the expansion of upper-end malls in casino hotel complexes which feature luxury brands such as Gucci, Vuitton, Hermès. Both processes are increasing the visibility of luxuries and helping to stimulate further the rapidly expanding global luxury goods market. One problem with buying discounted luxuries at an outlet store, is that a good deal more work is needed to learn how to use luxuries, to integrate them into accustomed networks of people and things and there is always the danger of inappropriate use, in the absence of detailed knowledge of consumption practices. Yet, consumer culture offers to help the uninitiated with an endless supply of reality television programmes, magazines, advice books, Internet sites and blogs, many of which draw on an array of experts and stylists who encourage the discussion of performance and display skills.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Connoisseurship and the cultivation of the luxury sensibility**

Some luxury items, may survive over the centuries in the manner described by Appadurai (1986) to enjoy complex life histories which can take them from sacred relics through sumptuary exclusivity or rationing, to commodity status in the market-place. In some cases they can be transformed back again, to become removed from circulation and listed as national treasures or relics, to be re-sacralised and displayed in museums and galleries. Other luxuries, such as certain types of food and drink, but also flowers and plants, are clearly perishable. Yet in the case of rare wild plants or animals, items which are gathered with difficulty, or those involving careful cultivation or preparation, a short life may not impede their luxury value, rather it may enhance it. Items which were once luxuries may become redefined as the hallmark of a certain style of craftsmanship or era, some may even be even elevated to the status of works of art. This can stimulate the enterprise of collecting, the searching for similar or associated objects.

The enjoyment of the luxury item may be more intense not in the act of consumption or use, but in the anticipatory mode, not just in the imagined gaze or sensory encounter, the contemplation of the object, but also in the location of the object in its set, the pleasures of playing with classifications. Luxuries seem to demand exclusiveness, to know them in their singularity, to experience them in full sensory engagement in the act of discovery or use, or anticipated use. But they may also be seen as representative of a class, a category located in a classificatory grid and offering pleasure in the play with distinctions and permutations. The first type of knowledge can be regarded as knowledge-with, knowledge gained in close contact with the object, the potential for an intense affective experience through the opening up to the object, the promise of a full engagement with the senses. The second type, is more knowledge-about, a relativization of the object’s value within various symbolic hierarchies, including monetary value and technical systems (see Introna, 2009). These two types of knowledge should be seen as linked, with frequent swings between them as the object is allowed to unfold before us. The luxury object can offer moments of powerful sensory intensity, which impact on our memories or demand us to record. The object stops us and commands us to look again, inviting the involved or immersive look of the ‘tactile eye’ and not the measured detached gaze. It makes us refuse to relinquish the aesthetic intensity of the experience. Yet, in the aftermath, there is the need not just for the recollection of its intensity and sensory immediacy, but the need to, to locate it in a broader frame of judgement, which points to the gridding process, the placement of the object in a set, to explore the play of communalities and differences, the dissection of the object’s qualities and genealogies.

These processes are central to connoisseurship, which involves both training the senses and the accumulation of knowledge. Entailing not just knowledge of systems and histories, but more direct affect-based tacit knowledge grounded in the senses: the judgement of the eye, the hand, the ear, the tongue and the nose – and the gut (proprioceptive sense). All these judgements involve an elaborate process of training and education of the senses (Jütte, 2005).[[5]](#footnote-5) How to know, handle and classify luxury objects became part of the education of gentlemen. Processes which became more evident in both Ming dynasty China and Western Europe in the sixteenth century as the range of new luxury goods and experiences expanded. To have the necessary knowledge about luxuries was central to being a gentleman and guidebooks became available on many aspects of etiquette, manners and consumption.

In Ming China guidebooks and taste manuals not only detailed the fields of luxury consumption (high value works like painting, calligraphy and bronzes) but a whole range of other objects important for the presentation of self of members of the cultivated gentry and merchants (Clunas, 1991:13). It can be argued that guidebooks (especially those which went through many editions) are significant at times of rapid social change and the increased social mixing of different strata, when members of aspiring groups are uncertain about their conduct, manners and modes of civility, along with the ways to handle goods (Elias, 1994). It can also be ventured that the proliferation of new luxuries and the ways in which fashions travelled more widely through the social structure in late Ming Dynasty, with the common people aping the gentry, created considerable tensions (Brook, 1998:221). In a time of increasing complaint about luxury, extravagance, waste and excess, guidebooks offered reassuring advice; they also offered important practical advice about how to tell genuine goods from fakes and how to avoid the danger of fraud; important advice at a time when huge sums were paid in silver for calligraphy, paintings and rare books by collectors.[[6]](#footnote-6) Nevertheless, the distinction between the connoisseurs and those who were mere possessors of luxury objects, was sharpened as we find in Wen Zhenheng’s influential *Treatise of Superfluous Things* (1615-20), where he emphasises the importance of elegance and the manner of possession of high status goods. Another influential guide, *Eight Discourses on the Art of Living* (1591) by Gao Lian, in addition to the more mundane advice on furniture, writing utensils, interior design, paintings, bronzes, lacquer and ceramics, had sections entitled ‘Discourses on sublime theories of pure self-cultivation,’ ‘Discourses on the pure enjoyment of cultured idleness,’ and ‘Discourses on wandering beyond the mundane’ (Clunas, 1991:18).

**Austere luxury or the sense of luxury within**

This tension between the gentlemanly virtues and those of conspicuous consumption, were significant themes in Europe since the Renaissance and became particularly strong in the ‘luxury debate’ in Eighteenth Century England (See Berg and Eger, 2003). As was the concern of the gentry and merchants to fix benchmarks of discrimination between different types of goods under conditions of increasing flux in status categories through pressure from below. The mere possession of luxury goods was clearly insufficient, rather the virtue of the gentleman demanded practical knowledge about how to consume along with knowledge of the cultural value of priceless goods and antiquities, not just the shifting market value resulting from the introduction of new goods under conditions of inflation.

An interesting phase of this tension involving the connoisseur and the dandy, took place in late nineteenth century France. Here we find the attempts to resist both the democratization of luxury, the flood of cheap imitations of luxury goods and clothing and the ‘vulgarizations’ and bad taste of the rising bourgeoisie. The dandy adopted the aristocratic virtues of fastidious cleanliness and understated elegance, coupled with cutting wit, a general reserve and creative superiority. This involved a carefully cultivated lifestyle and creative choice of the whole range of possessions: not just dress, but household furnishings too. Indeed, Edmund de Goncourt (1822-1896) considered the décor of his house important enough to write a book about it (*La Maison d’un artiste*, 1881). He enthuses about objects from the past and Japanese art, while providing caustic readings of the mediocrity of the interior decoration choices of others (Williams, 1982:123).[[7]](#footnote-7) Another figure who became seen as part of the late nineteenth century aesthetic movement, Robert de Montesquiou cultivated a distinctive lifestyle as a poet, collector and interior designer.

De Montesquiou became the model for des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans’ *À Rebours* (1884), who endeavoured to preserve the idea of ordered elite consumption in the face of the rise of the masses. Des Esseintes not only sought to furnish the interior of his house with strange and exotic objects which were on occasions arranged and designed into a world – the ‘underwater dining room’ crafted as a ship’s cabin with a concealed aquarium’s mechanical fish visible ‘swimming’ behind the portholes (Huysmans, 1959). This imaginary world was meant not just to provide immediate sensory stimulation or hallucinatory immersion. Rather the effect was achieved by the careful construction of a world, requiring the sensitivity to aesthetic forms and the training of the senses – des Esseintes at one point wore gloves around the home to enhance his sense of touch. This was a complex process of invention in the construction of illusions, the immersion in sensory worlds and the stimulation of the power of the imagination. It required the craftsman, curator and animator’s skills of construction: involving artifice, lighting and display, along with the sensory training necessary to open up new registers, by restricting or enhancing particular senses or synaesthesia combinations, to produce new effects. Des Esseintes buys tapestries and paintings, develops new perfumes to stimulate his senses and imagination. Yet he does not seek to know luxury objects merely as luxuries, the jewel-encrusted tortoise or the exotic flowers necessarily wilt and die, but can be easily be replaced. Rather they should be understood as part of an experimental assemblage, a temporary configuration which can be consumed and then discarded. Such objects soon become dissatisfying and breach the boredom threshold; they can then be laid aside, or broken down. It is a very different form of searching and accumulation, a different passion from that of the collector who is concerned with ownership, completing the set, historical placement and archiving.

Huysmans was no doubt aware that in depicting des Esseintes he was presenting us with a picture of activities which cross over into ethical, spiritual and religious traditions and could not be thought of as solely aesthetic or sensory. An exemplary case to mention in this context is that of Sen no Rikyu who had a major impact on the Japanese tea ceremony. Rikyu (1522-1591) is famous for his development of the *wabi* (poverty) tea ceremony, in which he sought to move away from finery and display, evident in the use of rare and expensive cups and utensils in the ceremony within a sumptuous tea house, which acted as an elite status contest rather than pathway to spiritual enlightenment. Indeed it was this disregard for luxury and his complex relationship with the Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) who had built a gold tea-house, yet had also appointed Rikyu as his tea-master and sought to follow his code of simplicity, along with Rikyu’s fame and alleged arrogance, which led him to be ordered to commit suicide by *seppuko* (Weston, 1999). Ironically Rikyu’s emphasis upon a simple tea-hut with bare walls and humble implements, did not stop his advice been sought on particular utensils, which once endorsed by the master rapidly increased in value (Ikegami, 2005:125). At the same time Rikyu’s capacity to define standards of beauty, was based upon a democratization of the tea ceremony in that the tea-room was reduced to a modest single level hut which brought people together in close proximity; it had a small entrance which required all to crouch to enter; it also spoke to people from different backgrounds, favouring a break with hierarchy, offering people a certain informality, which suggests it can be seen as part of the process of the formation of an aesthetic public sphere in Japan (Ikegami, 2005; Featherstone, 2007). Rikyu’s aesthetic, can, therefore be understood as a further interesting example of the ‘ethic of aesthetics’ (Maffesoli, 1991), in its emphasis upon spiritual purity and ways of inventing new perspectives on the value of material objects, taste and the ceremonial which involved a sort of inversion of luxury, or the discovery of luxury and beauty amidst simple things and everyday objects.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Rikyu was also known for his use of flowers in the tea ceremony – often just a single ordinary flower in season, carefully selected and arranged. This contrasts with des Esseintes who talked about surrounding himself with rare and exotic flowers, and sometimes ordered flowers to excess. He was also disappointed that the lower orders could now afford flowers and other luxuries. Flowers are interesting in this context as Jack Goody (1993; see also Featherstone, 2009b) points out that flowers are frequently used in worship and representation – decoration, art, fabrics. Yet at times they are also rejected because of their association with conspicuous consumption and the improper cultivation of luxury. At certain points in history various regimes (especially the literati with an egalitarian drive) have gained power and sought to resist or proscribe the ‘wastefulness’ of the use of flowers and other luxury objects such as silks, cosmetics and haute cuisine. Puritans were against the use of flowers at funerals, Islam too rejected the use of flowers in worship (Goody, 1993:417ff). In general flowers were cultivated with a more elaborate and intensive system of horticulture and used more widely and lavishly in Asia, in particular China and Japan. Yet, during the Cultural Revolution in China in the mid-1970s flower shops were closed or smashed and the planting of flowers seen as counter-revolutionary.

**Sensing and simulating luxury**

Flowers have long been cultivated as objects of distinct aesthetic pleasure, but also for their symbolic value to bind people together through their use in rituals and as gifts. Their extensive secondary life in forms of representation in both domestic and personal space – in paintings, prints, household furnishings and decorative schema such as wallpaper, curtains and upholstery, crockery and ceramics, and of course women’s dresses is interesting. This suggests they often leading a double life in which they stand for the luxurious while imprinted onto cheap necessities.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The reproduction of images of luxuries within an expanding consumer culture increasingly presents the aura and veneer of luxuriousness spread across a wide range of media forms (magazines, newspapers, billboards and neon signs, but also the increasingly ubiquitous screen culture, not just the cinema, or household television, but the screens that increasingly adorn streets, vehicles and means of transportation, along with personal mobile devices such as laptop computers, tablets and cell ‘phones (see Featherstone, 2009a). This is the simulational world depicted by Baudrillard (1983), the floating world of signs and images, often encountered under conditions of distraction, in which the hallucination of luxury hangs over everything. Consumer culture generates a process of the aestheticization of everyday life, which as Baudrillard suggests, leads to *an*-aestheticization, as the drive to aestheticize commodities and endless construction of aesthetic models and publicity, leads to a sort of aesthetic banality and the exhaustion of the aesthetic sensibility (Sassatelli, 2002; Featherstone, 2007). Against this process Baudrillard sees the promise of going beneath art to the level of sensations; involving as he puts it: ‘reinventing a body, sensations, sentiments. To reinvent sensation as passion somehow, *aesthesis*, the aesthetic of the sensible and not of the sensational!’ (cited in Sassatelli, 2002:530).

It can be ventured that consumer culture constantly seeks to transcend the sensational and banal image overload. Here luxuries play an important role as it generally assumed and even proclaimed that luxuries are unlike other goods, that they will re-involve people on a deeper sensory level. The promise is for a more intense engagement of the senses, not just the overburdened roving scanning eye, but more the ‘tactile eye,’ along with touch and proprioception, which generate affective contact, the potential for new synaesthetic experiences (Featherstone, 2009a, 2010). In this the questionable status of luxury as possession rears up again. Luxuries are generally owned by someone, they are property. But luxuries invite possession in another way, despite the endless deferring through the consumption of images, or disappointment with the eventual experience, the promise of sensory fulfilment in the actual engagement with the object leads to longing and fetishism. The glamour or magic of goods, the promise of sensory immersion beyond the surface images, generates the longing for deeper involvement and even possession by the goods – for the luxuries to take us over to subordinate and instruct us. It is here that the promise of luxury goods merges with that of works of art. In this context it is instructive to recall the overwhelming experience that the encounter with a rare work of art generates in the collector. As an associate of the Ming Dynasty art collector Gao Lian recorded in his diary in the year 1600:

On the seventh day of the second month, when the weather had just cleared up, I climbed Master Gao’s tower to gaze upon the snow upon the mountains. My host produced a copy of the ‘Wangchuan Villa’ by Guo Zhongshu [910-977], and an ‘Illustration to the Odes of Lu and Shang’ by Ma Hezhi [active twelfth century] to show me. Both were pieces I had been hoping to appreciate all my life, and my heart and eyes were both delighted to an unspeakable degree. When I left him, I made this note in recognition of a rare experience in connoisseurship. (cited in Clunas, 1991:16)

There is, then, the expectation that some luxurious objects, and rare and beautify things will produce a sensory charge and engagement of the passions; indeed, it can entail longing and emotional intensity similar to that associated with falling in love (Featherstone, 1998).

This suggests that, in many ways it is not the luxuries themselves that are sought; rather it is what they stand for, the memorable and fulfilling events they are associated with and meant to trigger. In effect they are signs - signs that stand for something else more inchoate, that might at some point suddenly emerge and flood us with happiness. Luxuries, then, could be expected to operate as potential signs on the road to both happiness and art. Marcel Proust’s discussion of memory is instructive here,[[10]](#footnote-10) for he tells us that the most powerful memories are not of a recollected past event, the past which is relative to the present, which we voluntarily recall like a series of snapshots. Rather it is the ‘pure past,’ delivered by involuntary memory, which Proust refers to as ‘A morsel of time in the pure state’ (cited in Deleuze, 2008:39). This is the ‘time regained’ found in the work of art, the ‘lost time’ that is opposed to successive ‘passing time,’ the time generally wasted. The revelations of involuntary memory are extraordinarily brief and are akin to the bewildering kind of experience we feel ‘sometimes during an ineffable vision, at the moment of falling asleep,’ reminiscences that yield to us the pure past. Hence, it is argued that involuntary memory gives us ‘the instantaneous image of eternity’ (Deleuze, 2008:41). There are a range of sensuous signs which act like hieroglyphics and can stimulate involuntary memories that vividly burst into our lives to summon up momentary intense feelings of joy. This is a world akin to the one promised by luxury.

From one perspective, then, luxuries are not art, they cannot be seen as ‘purposiveness without purpose,’ as they have clearly been designed, gathered or collected with a particular purpose in mind: to impress, provide comfort, to give sensory pleasure, to be excessive. Yet they can draw us into the same space, the pre-experience from which art initiates and in their finished state, stand in the annexe or waiting room next to works of art. But in an age of contemporary conceptual art, still under the shadow of Marcel Duchamp, anything can be considered as art, and the framing or setting of the installation in the gallery demands we continue to ask the question ‘is this art?’ Likewise the world outside the gallery can be seen as replete with everyday objects and detritus, which inhabit the seen but unnoticed taken for granted mundane world, the prospecting-ground for the contemporary artist. The world, then, becomes full of potential material and signs which are proto-art, a world which can be reproduced, copied, rearranged and highlighted to ask us to look again and open up our aestheticizing and de-aestheticizing sensibilities.[[11]](#footnote-11) Luxury objects are usually designed from a more traditional aesthetic framework, that of beauty, and only flirt occasionally with ugly-beauty or the sublime (see Nutall, 2007 on contemporary art ugly-beauty). Contemporary art has extended the space for aestheticization and the notion of the art object. Although luxuries may inhabit the space next to art, their beauty comes from craftsmanship, the skilled eye and hand capable of capturing detail, colour and sense of proportion to summon up the promise of harmony, comfort and fulfilment. Unlike contemporary art, they rarely aim to shock.

Gabriel Tarde highlights a further aspect when he remarks that the future of luxury is not in bodily comforts, or vanity but art (Tarde, 1902, vol. 2: 117; Williams, 1982:363). This suggests a sense of ‘interior luxury,’ or ‘inner riches,’ which points beyond the productive work of the harried leisure class. For Tarde, unproductive luxuries make up the whole charm of life and are responsible for ‘all the grandiose or miniscule innovations which have enriched and civilized the world’ (Tarde, 1902, vol. 1:169-70; Williams, 1982:365). Many items which are now necessities began their existence as luxuries. At the same time, it is possible to argue in a similar manner to Sen no Rikyu, that the reverse may also be true. Luxuries can be found in the interstices of the mundane everyday world of necessities, and not just careful detection, but inventive switches in perception, may reveal their potential. Artists of life have been fascinated by the potential inventive play with the range of possibilities here. In some cases this involves disguise and artifice in constructing austere luxuries: to use the finest fabrics along with simple designs and cuts in dark dull colours to make a wabi sabi garment. Or there is Des Esseintes’ complex aesthetic play with ugliness and beauty, austerity and luxury, evident in his endeavours to design a room in the manner of a monastic cell, with unbleached cloth on the ceilings, saffron silk hangings on the walls and fine rugs on the floor with simple uneven designs that connote worn flagstones (Huysmans, 1959)*.*

**Luxury: openings to the space beyond**

Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* noted that the rise of consumer culture involved not just a commodification process which reduced everything to the same register, but also generated a cornucopia, a bewildering jumbled range of objects juxtaposed to each other. Important here was not just the luxury objects in the department stores, but also the power of the little discarded objects, ephemera such as the exhibition ticket, the handbill, the image on a food wrapper, the little pictures on tobacco packets, as well as those on the billboard and poster, to speak to us. The detritus of consumer culture has a voice. Benjamin called attention to the capacity of certain things to have the strange power to ‘look back at us’ in his earlier writings on aura (Hansen, 2008). But now the banal abandoned objects of consumer culture, in their design, packaging and illustrations, could awaken in us something akin to aura, albeit in a fragmentary and allegorical way, through their potential to ignite half-formed memories, or prompt utopian longing (Benjamin 1999; Buck-Morss, 1989; Hansen, 2008). Aura, then, should not be seen as lost with the new conditions of mass reproducibility and commodification.

Mass objects (the image on a bus ticket, a tin of sweets, a handbill, an advertising poster) could work in allegorical ways, to suggest something lost that could be recovered. In effect aura was not exclusive to art and luxury objects, but could be transferred to mass consumer goods, providing a re-enchantment of the urban landscape. Banal discarded mass objects could effectively be conceived as hieroglyphics in a lost code in the way Proust described, yet in Benjamin’s case they failed to yield up the fullness of their associated involuntary memories. Rather they were destined to remain broken fragmented allegories, which were unable to reveal their secret message, but left behind a tantalizing longing and sense of incompleteness, which also contained a positive charge. The implication is that for Benjamin, we do not need to go in search of luxury, for there always remains, the capacity for humble things to yield up something valuable and significant, a promise of riches and treasures in everyday life which have potential to transport us beyond the mundane.

Finally, to think beyond luxury also calls to mind a discussion of Georg Simmel about the problem of the accumulation of objective culture in modernity. For Simmel (1997) this leads to an uncomfortable imbalance in our capacity to develop our own subjective cultures, as there are too many cultural elements brought within our sphere of interest and possibilities which cannot be discarded as meaningless, yet are not profoundly meaningful enough either. In effect the accumulation of culture (which in the contemporary world we do not just think of in terms of traditional cultural forms, but also consumer goods, media images, the Internet and constantly regenerating social media forms which provide a global cultural melange) resists our capacity to assimilate, order, archive and evaluate. In terms of the discussion of luxury, this would suggest the contemporary world is generating too many luxury possibilities for us to adequately know, handle or select from. The presence of the range of luxuries in this sense can be something we might long for, but then find disturbing in our incapacity to devise adequate strategies for selection and acculturation, to incorporate them within our life sphere. Rather, the ones we encounter or possess, just lie there in their actuality, inadequately known or assimilated, alongside the vast numbers of constantly generated luxury goods and experiences we do not possess, but might aspire too. Yet it is Simmel’s insight to also remind us that this dilemma summons up its exact reversal, which he recalls in the maxim of the early Franciscan friars: ‘*Nihil habentes, omnia possidentes,’* (having nothings, yet possessing everything). This maxim he suggests points to the Franciscans blissful liberation from all things that would divert the soul from its path (Simmel, 1997:73; Featherstone, 2000:162). It suggests the absolute freedom of those who have nothing, yet can still appreciate the beauty around them in nature and the world. In effect those who enjoy the immaterial luxuries that accompany the gaze from within as it opens to that which is without.

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**Abstract**

The production of an expanding range of consumer goods and luxuries is generally seen as one of the main engines driving the global economy. Contemporary consumer culture and media advertising reveal an endless fascination with the luxurious lifestyles of celebrities and the super-rich. If luxury is central to social life today, we should be aware that for much of western history up to the eighteenth century, luxury has been depicted as a dangerous thing, corrosive of morality and social order. This paper examines a number of dynamics and vectors of luxury which include: the democratization of luxury; austere luxury; connoisseurship; the shift from material to immaterial luxuries; the move from sensual pleasures to more contemplative recollections and mediations. The various dynamics in their different ways seek to explore some of the crossovers between art, luxury, imagination and everyday life as well as inquiring into the imputed power of the luxury object.

keywords/terms  consumer culture, luxury, senses, connoisseurship, object

1. This paper draws on and substantially revises material which has appeared in two previous papers ‘The Sense of Luxury: Consumer Culture and Sumptuary Dynamics,’ *Les Cahiers Européens de l'Imaginaire,* No. 2,Mars 2010:166-72; and ‘Luxury Dynamics and Consumer Culture,’ *Academic Journal of Shaanxi Normal University*, no. 6 (November) 2012 (in Chinese). I would like to thank Couze Venn and Jonathan Faiers who read earlier versions and made a series of helpful suggestions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luxury consumption aroused considerable ambivalence, being regularly condemned by religious and cultural specialists. In the European Middle Ages, for example, there was also the belief that luxuries and luxurious opulent settings should be only for God’s eyes and pleasure. This was evident in the fine craftsmanship that went into the elaborate gilded and bejewelled reliquaries commissioned by aristocrats (‘luxuries for God’), often in penance for earlier sins and the excesses of youth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to Sir Walter Scott glamour has its origins in magic: the ‘magical power capable of making ordinary people, dwellings and places seem like magnificent versions of themselves. This was the magic power to alter the perception of spectators,’ to make ‘the appearance of an object… totally different from the reality.’ Scott first used the term in a poem ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel,’ published in 1805. Etymologically the term can be traced back to two Scottish sources: ‘glimbr,’ meaning splendour and ‘glam-skygn,’ meaning squint-eyed (Gundle, 2008: 37). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Important here is the advice from those who have risen meteorically up the social scale, such as Victoria Beckham, the ex-Spice Girl, who has her own book about style, lifestyle, celebrity and glamorous self-presentation (see Gundle, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. New recruits to the perfume industry have to learn subtle distinctions in smell and undergo the ‘training of noses’ (Latour, 2004:206). Likewise there is the training the tongue of the tea-taster or wine expert, the training the ear of the musician, or training of the eye of the artist or photographer. For arguments about ‘ways of seeing’ (Berger, 1973) and the dominance of ocularcentrism in Western thought see Featherstone, (2009a; 2013c). For a discussion of the artist as theorist of visual perception see Merleau-Ponty’s (1964; 2004) on Cezanne. Chinese culture, it has been argued, has cultivated a different register of taste, traceable back to early Taoism and Confucianism. *Blandness* of taste is learned and valued, not as a lower taste (e.g. children’s preference for bland food), but as a higher form of taste involving ‘plenitude’ and ‘potential’ – much more than the detection and isolation of the syncretised elements. This is something which was extended to taste in painting, poetry and other art forms (see Jullien, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Various strategies were used to authenticate luxury goods – date stamping, marking with the name of the master craftsman or workshop that made them. Brooks (1998:226) mentions that the maker’s mark in some cases served as a ‘brand name’ with some craftsman’s work making then ‘the social equals of gentlemen of the gentry.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. here discussion by Simmel about the influence of *Jugendstil* (*Art Nouveau*) in *fin-de-siècle* Germany, – and his remarks about the tendency towards the ‘aestheticization of every pot and pan’ (see Featherstone, 1991). There are strong echoes in the current phase of consumer culture over the last twenty years, especially with the over-consumption of the new rich (Featherstone, 2013a, 2013b). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sen no Rikyu’s aesthetic was based upon Zen Buddhism and there are similar influences in both the martial arts and *za* arts in Japan (Richie, 2007). For a discussion of Eugen Herrigel’s writings on *kudo* (archery) see Inoue (2006); for a discussion of *ikebana* (flower arranging) see Gustie Herrigel (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The related case of indigo is also interesting. This highly prized blue plant dye used in clothing in the Middle Ages was at times restricted to aristocratic groups through sumptuary laws. Its price was often higher than luxuries such as sugar, tea, coffee and spices which stimulated Eurasian trade. The aesthetic pleasures of the blue garment, often visible in medieval paintings, and associated with aristocratic luxury and exclusivity, crossed over the class lines in the 19th and 20th centuries as the colour of the ubiquitous denim jeans (Taussig, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As mentioned earlier Comte Robert de Montesquiou is seen as the model for Huysmans’ Des Esseintes in his novel *À Rebours*. It is also noteworthy that de Montesquiou was reputed to be the inspiration for Marcel Proust’s (1871-1922) character, Baron de Charlus, in [*À la recherche du temps perdu*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_Search_of_Lost_Time) (1913-1927). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. One of the many examples from Contemporary Art which continues to court publicity and controversy is the work of Damian Hirst ‘For the Love of God’ (2006), a diamond-studded skull involved some 8,500 diamonds. The skull, dubbed ‘the most expensive work of art ever created,’ was placed on show like the most sacred auratic art object, in a new gallery with special high security for sale at fifty million pounds. It was an art object, yet the embedded diamonds made it a valuable luxury object for the global new rich to covert. Hirst sought to emphasise its transgressive nature: ‘I just wanted to celebrate life by saying to hell with death. What better way of saying that than by taking the ultimate symbol of death and covering it in the ultimate symbol of luxury, desire and decadence’ (O’Hagan, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)