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# Consumed: Stilled Lives and the Pathologies of Capitalism



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The aim of the research is to identify pathological relations between consumer culture and consumers. I explore the relation between people and objects, and the impact that images have as producers and disseminators of sign-value. Taking the term ‘advertisement’ loosely I refer to Dutch still-life paintings as advertisements for the craft-objects they depict and the lifestyles they suggest. The body is also considered to be an advertisement because of the commodities with which it is adorned and the socially prescribed ideals that it reinforces. I consider social networking sites as commercial spaces where body ideals are disseminated. Different forms of self-presentation, including selfies, thinspiration, and fat fetishism are examined as indications of the recuperation of aberrant signs in the system of sign-value exchange.

The analytical methodology for this enquiry is framed by theories of commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism through which I consider both the socio-economic and the psychosexual dimensions of the relation between consumer society and individual consumers. I examine sexual fetishism and kleptomania by reference to psychoanalytic case studies in order to chart how objects are inscribed with value. Fetishists and kleptomaniacs endow seemingly trivial objects with a value that is incomprehensible to other people. These unusual relations to objects offer an alternative model for evaluating the value of commodities in a manner that might liberate the body of the consumer.

The practical aspect of the research centres on the still-life. Taking my cue from Dutch still-life paintings from the seventeenth century that reflected a conflicting relation with material wealth, I produce still-life objects that reflect a contradictory relationship to consumerism. I produce still-life photographs in order to develop an alternative visual language for the commodified and objectified contemporary consumer body.

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### **Author's Declaration**

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

## Introduction

I am and have a female body, and to paraphrase the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it is visible and sensitive for itself.<sup>1</sup>

In ‘Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising’ Rosalind Gill identifies different advertising constructions that use sexualisation and commodification to express a form of empowerment.<sup>2</sup> She coined the term ‘midriff’ to refer to the generation of girls and young women in their teens and twenties in the 1990s. The ‘midriff’ is exemplified by Trevor Beattie’s 1994 *Wonderbra* campaign and the slogan ‘hello boys’. The advert caused controversy when first displayed, with some viewers claiming it was derogatory and others suggesting it had caused traffic accidents because it was distracting drivers. The advert was voted the ‘most successful campaign of all time’ in 2011.<sup>3</sup> The woman in the advert knowingly and humorously addresses the viewer; she knows she is desired and flaunts her attractive body as a source of power. Gill writes that ‘today women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly ‘liberated’) interests to do so’.<sup>4</sup> Liberation becomes a ‘new form of tyranny, an obligation to be sexual in a highly specific kind of way’.<sup>5</sup> She continues:

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1 ‘The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the “other side” of the power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself’. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. by J. M. Edie. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964 [*Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945] p. 162.

2 Rosalind Gill, ‘Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising’, *Feminism & Psychology*, 18 (2008), 35–60.

3 Daniel Farey-Jones, ‘Hello Boys voted greatest poster ever created’, 31 March 2011, <<http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/hello-boys-voted-greatest-poster-ever-created/1063405#>> [accessed 26 August 2016].

4 Gill, ‘Empowerment/Sexism’, op. cit., p. 42.

5 *ibid.*, p. 53.

Not only are women objectified (as they were before), but through sexual subjectification in midriff advertising *they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen* [...] women are endowed with the status of active subjecthood so that they can ‘choose’ to become sex objects.<sup>6</sup>

In tandem with the development of sexual subjectification, advertisers also increasingly use irony and parody to bypass Advertising Standards Authority censure relating to sexism. An ironic advertisement presents an image of a woman that is highly objectifying; because the sexism is overt and excessive the viewer interprets the image as ironic. Ironic adverts express two opposing messages, one that is sexist and another that disparages sexism. Viewers can identify with either viewpoint. Unable to grasp the ad’s intended meaning the viewer cannot adopt a critical position.

I was fourteen years old when the *Wonderbra* advertisement first appeared on billboards and ‘sexual subjectification’ shaped my relationship with my body. This led me to an artistic practice centred on the social construction of identity through commodification and objectification. Because of the destabilisation of meaning resulting from the trend in ironic sexist adverts I find it increasingly difficult to photograph the body in a way that does not refer to and reinforce objectifying images predominant in visual culture.

In earlier work I presented my body as an object of sight, a photograph, to explore my experience of looking and being looked at. Works such as *The Substitute* (2007-8) sought to criticise objectifying representations of the body that produce unrealisable models for desire. In each photograph a man embraces a cut-out of a female form and seems satisfied with a woman that has no substance and cannot reciprocate his embrace. I was aware that my

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<sup>6</sup> Gill, ‘Empowerment/Sexism’, op. cit., pp. 45-6.

work could be interpreted as presenting idealised and objectified female bodies even though it is intended as a criticism.

My strategy to overcome this problem lay with the still-life. The still-life enables me to consider the relation between images, objects, and bodies in consumer society without depicting the body itself. The still-life genre began as a marginal artistic practice, denigrated because it brought attention to trivial things rather than religious parables or stories of the nobility of the human spirit. As Norman Bryson writes in *Looking at the Overlooked*, still-life painting ‘assaults the centrality, value and prestige of the human subject’.<sup>7</sup> Instead of people, things were placed centre stage. Whether in the food of the common man depicted in Dutch Lenten meals or the lavish fare ostentatiously rendered in *pronkstilleven*, the objects in still-life alluded to the unavoidable bodily requirements of eating and drinking.

The term ‘consume’ describes the act of eating as well as purchasing a commodity. The still-life table expresses the dual meaning of the term because the objects on display are edible and connote an individual’s social position through the ability to buy expensive artefacts. Whether the still-life image is interpreted literally or allegorically, it implies the wealth and/or moral character of the consumer. I therefore approach the still-life table as a portrait of a particular type of consumer. This allows me to consider the food in a still-life as an expression of a relation between an individual and consumer society, as well as a figuration of the effect of commodity consumption on the consumer’s body (rather than the consumer’s soul as suggested by allegory).

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<sup>7</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, London: Reaktion Books, 1990, p. 60.

The aim of my research is to produce still-life photographs to develop an alternative visual language for the commodified and objectified contemporary consumer body. I consider different types of consumer, whose body types, gestures, or styling could be used to disrupt the process of objectification and enable a 'return to the body' in my work.

The analytical methodology for this enquiry is framed by theories of commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism through which I consider both the socio-economic and psychosexual dimensions of the relation between consumer society and individual consumers.

I examine sexual fetishism and kleptomania by reference to psychoanalytic case studies in order to chart how objects are inscribed with value. The objects of fetishists and kleptomaniacs enable sexual pleasure or prevent pain and anxiety; they are substitutes for lost objects and retaliation for past injuries. Seemingly trivial objects are endowed with a value that is incomprehensible to other people. These aberrant relations to objects offer an alternative model for evaluating the value of commodities. By employing the model when producing art work I could present commodities in a manner that might liberate the body of the consumer.

The anthropological fetish object is also a site for the transformation of value and an intersection between individual psychosexual value and social economic value. The discourse of fetishism developed in the marketplace between African traders and merchants from Europe. The fetish enabled them to 'translate and transvalue objects between radically different social systems [...] triangulated among Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist social systems'.<sup>8</sup> Seventeenth-century merchants viewed

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<sup>8</sup> William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish I', in *RES* 9 (1985), p. 6.



the fetish as an object that had been endowed with supernatural properties due to the naivety or delusion of worshippers.

It was an object with radically different significances depending on the value system of the person who owned it. For example, a piece of gold had sexual, social, and religious value for the fetish worshipper and monetary exchange value for a European merchant. In order to buy the gold the merchant had to appear to recognise its value as a fetish. By swearing oaths upon the fetishes and maintaining the illusion of their fetishistic power, the merchants were able to buy valuable materials such as gold inexpensively. However, the legal contract of economic exchange had been contaminated by religious superstition; according to Bosman, a Dutch merchant, fetishist worship was:

the specific social force that blocked otherwise spontaneous and natural market activities that would bring about a healthy economic and a truly moral social order. Fetish religion was thus a priestly conspiracy; priests and merchants acted from the same motives (economically rational self-interest), but whereas merchants were honest and moral, priests were hypocritical and immoral.<sup>9</sup>

Fetish worship was not only a perversion of enlightened monotheism but also a perversion of capitalist exchange. In his discussion of Dutch still-life painting Hal Foster claims that the Dutch Protestant desire to banish religious fetishism concealed another agenda: to replace it with commodity fetishism operating within a capitalist exchange system. The Dutch traders 'denounced one overvaluation of objects only to produce their own'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bosman, W., *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*. London: Cass, 1967 [1703], quoted in Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish', op. cit., p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Hal Foster, 'The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life', in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. by Emily Apter and William Pietz, Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 255.

According to Pietz, fetishism is always judged from a ‘cross-cultural perspective’<sup>11</sup> of degradation. The term originates from Latin and Portuguese words meaning human-made, artificial, and fraudulent and was used in a derogatory manner. The fetish cannot be a divine object because human hands fabricate it. The fetishist incorrectly determined the value of an object in a state of ‘absorbed credulity’,<sup>12</sup> and the fetish priests and merchants discerned the ‘real’ value of the object from a position of ‘distanced incredulity’.<sup>13</sup> The fetish priests perpetuated belief in the supernatural power of material objects in order to exploit the worshippers for mercantile gain, and the merchants cynically participated in fetish worship to purchase the goods inexpensively. In substituting one form of fetishism with another, the Dutch merchants simply seized the position of ‘distanced incredulity’ from the priests and took over their mercenary role.

According to the accounts of European traders the fetish had a dual meaning – it was revered as a deity and esteemed as an ornament.<sup>14</sup> This duality inscribed the fetish with an erotic character. The English slave trader John Atkins used the term ‘fetishing’ to describe African women decorating their bodies with paint. In an account of the Grain Coast he says, ‘the Women are fondest of what they call *fetishing*, setting themselves out to attract the good Graces of the Men’.<sup>15</sup> To the female fetish worshipper the fetish appears to bestow sexual desirability upon the body; to the European traders it connotes the dangers of seduction.

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11 Pietz, ‘The Problem of the Fetish I’, op.cit., p. 14.

12 *ibid.*

13 *ibid.*

14 Pietz, ‘The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa’.

15 Atkins, J., *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies, in His Majesty’s Ships the Swallow and Weymouth*. Ward and Chandler: London, 1737, quoted in Pietz, *ibid.*

Fetish priests and merchants determined the value and meaning of the commodity and then sold it to the worshippers or consumers as powerful and precious objects. Consideration of the representations of objects in seventeenth-century still-life paintings provides an apposite historical backdrop for my analysis of advertising imagery in contemporary consumer culture, in that they both act as intermediaries to inscribe and disseminate the value of objects. I examine the relations between consumers, commodities, and images to determine how personal, social, and sexual values are inscribed in commodities. If the sign-value of objects can be changed at will, the dominant values of the body can also be transformed in a way that may not be recuperated by capitalist exchange.<sup>16</sup> I seek to identify instances of transformation and transgression of dominant values and employ the methods that underpin such transformations in my own visual work.

My thesis is structured around four phases of consumerism: production, consumption, exchange, and destruction. Two short interludes mark points of abrupt transition between different types of imagery or periods of time.

In the first section, ‘Production’, Dutch *banketjestukken* and *pronkstilleven* paintings are examined as visual records of the development of a proto-capitalist nation and an emerging consumer society.<sup>17</sup> I investigate how

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16 Jean Baudrillard writes that commodities are signifiers of sign-value. The real intention of my purchase is the signified message: prestige, desirableness, or success. The sign-value exchange system is discussed in chapter one. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin, Missouri: Telos Press, 1981 [*Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* Paris: Gallimard, 1972].

17 The Dutch Republic of the sixteenth and seventeenth century has been described as proto-industrial and proto-capitalist in a number of sources. For example, Bengtsson describes the predominant Dutch industries of bleaching, weaving and brewing as subject to proto-capitalist conditions in *Studies on the Rise of Realistic Painting in Holland 1610– 1625* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1952). The article cited above also refers to the collection of paintings as an outlet for an overabundance of capital. In *Calvinist Economy and 17th Century Dutch Art* Larsen claims that the accumulation of capital by a ‘large new stratum of

commodity culture influenced the aesthetic standards of the art market, transforming artistic modes of production. The interpretation of Dutch still-life paintings as descriptions or moral allegories is discussed and used to interpret the contradictory messages they produce. In my art work I explore methods of ‘mass-production’ and the contradictions expressed by contemporary food advertisements.

The first interlude bridges the gap between proto-capitalist consumerism in the seventeenth-century and twenty-first-century consumers. The advertisements discussed in this section mark a transition from paintings of objects that describe consumer types to the production of identity invested with the sign-values of commodities.

The second section, ‘Consumption’, addresses the commodification of the body through the prism of psychoanalytic accounts of aberrant consumption. The structure of perversions such as sexual fetishism and kleptomania is used to interpret the overvaluation of commodities in advertisements. Consumer identification with images of body ideals is analysed to theorise the increasing homogenisation of bodies and identities in advanced capitalist societies. I produce art works that attempt to represent the consumption of the consumer through the commodification of the body.

Part three, ‘Exchange’, continues the examination of contemporary consumer types, centring on the use of social networking sites as a commercial site in which body ideals are disseminated. Different forms of self-presentation, including selfies and thinspiration, are examined as indications of the recuperation of aberrant signs in the system of sign-value

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traders and/or minor capitalists’ shaped the subject matter and style of paintings popular at the time (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979, p. 59).

exchange. I examine the pathological relations of hysteria, obsessional neurosis, and sadism to explore the relation between an individual and consumer society. Jacques Lacan's model of the discourse of the capitalist, and its subsequent development by others, is used to examine the modes of address produced by advertisements and social networking sites. The art works examine the ideologies that commodities express, transforming the consumer into sign-values of those ideologies.

The second interlude brings dissimilar consumer types into a single frame, enabling a comparison between forms of self-presentation produced for different reasons and presented on dissimilar online platforms.

Part four, 'Destruction', considers the liberating potential of waste and destruction in relation to fat fetishism. It examines the sign-values expressed by fat bodies in relation to their invisibility in magazines, news articles, and television programmes. Still-life photographs refer to the use of scientific and medical discourses to recuperate the fat body into the system of sign-value exchange.

My conclusion uses the structures of discourse devised by Lacan to extrapolate the 'universe of the capitalist' in relation to social networking sites and the forms of self-portraiture exchanged there. The 'universe of the capitalist' contains four different modes of address – three support the position of the capitalist and one potentially challenges it. This structure will reveal a position in relation to the capitalist with the potential to disrupt the narrow body ideals championed by the system of sign-value exchange. The final section of the conclusion considers the limitations and omissions of my research and identifies areas for future exploration. My art work follows the trajectory of the in-built obsolescence of the commodity-body and the possibility of producing a representation of a body that does not reinforce or reproduce the sign-values of the Spectacle.

In my art work photography is both subject and medium: I produce photographs in response to photographs in popular visual culture, particularly advertising. My thesis does not refer to contemporary artists producing work in response to consumerism because art is not a subject of the research, but a medium to express its findings. However, it would be valuable to undertake this research in the future, examining works by Ryan Trecartin, Mika Rottenberg, LA Raeven, and Rachel Maclean among others. Analysis of contemporary still-life photographers blurring the boundary between fine art and advertising, such as Krista van der Niet and Mariele Neudecker, would also enrich future research but lies outside the scope of this research project.

## VANITAS

Still life images are portraits of a type that evokes unseen subjects who possess and consume the objects on display. Drawing on both definitions of the term 'consume' I use food still life photography to represent different characters and positions in relation to advanced capitalist society. What I eat and how I eat is a metonym of my wider consumer habits. Food is also employed as a metaphor for the subjection of my body under the capitalist system. The commodities I consume are integrated in my identity and my identity is shaped to a marketing demographic. I am what I consume. I am an advertisement for the commodities I consume.



*Vanitas Still Life*, 2012, 50cm x 50cm [c-type photograph]

## PART1: PRODUCTION

### LURE

Consumers living in the proto-capitalist society of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century had to reconcile the incompatible demands of surplus society and Calvinism. An allegorical interpretation of still life paintings produced during this time suggests a conflict between pleasure and piety.

In contemporary consumer culture I am required to delay gratification and demonstrate a strong work ethic in order to be productive. I am also simultaneously impelled to consume to excess under the hedonist incitement to 'treat myself' in order to fulfill the need for consumption and capitalist growth. *Lure* focuses on this contradiction in advanced capitalist society. Diet foods are commodities *par excellence*; they conform to the dictum of self-denial without contradicting the imperative to consume. They enable me to appear restrained and indulge myself in the same instance.

The objects in *Lure* suggest equivalence between duped prey, a consumer dazzled by an advertising image, and the 'absorbed credulity' of a fetish worshipper. The series contains thirty photographs (sixteen shown here). Each image is composed and lit in the same way but shows a unique object. Each image and object take their signifying value from its relation to the other images and objects in the series. The series is designed to impel the consumer to collect the complete series.





*Lure (01)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (04)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



Lure (06), 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (05)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (10)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (17)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (11)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (15)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]





Lure (13), 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (21)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



Lure (20), 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (22)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



Lure (25), 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (28)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



Lure (23), 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



*Lure (29)*, 2014, 30cm x 30cm [digital photograph]



## Proto-Capitalist Still-Life Painting

### *Commodity fetish paintings*

Still-life painting does not depict ‘the large-scale momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance’.<sup>1</sup> Despite their inferior status still-life paintings became an important element of a burgeoning art market in the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> Still-life paintings narrate the story of the dominance of Dutch trade routes around the globe and growth in the availability of a wide range of consumer objects. Some patrons commissioned painters to visually record their wealth and prosperity by depicting the expensive objects they owned, but most still-life paintings were made for the market. In either instance the demand for the paintings demonstrate an increasing interest in consumer goods. The paintings were portraits of a kind produced to reflect the relation between objects and their owners in this proto-capitalist nation. Bryson writes that one of the unique facets of still-life painting lay in the ability of the painter to change props rapidly to reflect the transformations in the culture around them. As consumer culture developed, the type of objects in the paintings also changed.<sup>3</sup> Hal Foster writes that Dutch still-life paintings from the 1620s and 1630s predominantly depicted useful objects in a straightforward manner.<sup>4</sup> Later still-life paintings began to portray expensive, collectable objects painted in a dazzling ‘mystificatory way’.<sup>5</sup> Not only did the type of objects change, but the variety also increased. Diverse

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1 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, op. cit., p. 14.

2 J. Michael Montias, ‘Socio-Economic Aspects of Netherlandish Art from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century: A Survey’, in *The Art Bulletin*, 72, 1990, 358–73. The art market is described as a system with dealers, workshop practice, guild regulations, competition, and speculation. It is claimed that commercialisation of Dutch artistic production began as early as the fifteenth century. Montias estimates that eight to nine million paintings were produced in the Dutch Republic between 1580 and 1800. Archives from craft guilds of the major cities provide further evidence for this, demonstrating the large number of painters supporting themselves through the sale of their art work. For further information see J. Michael Montias, ‘Cost and value in seventeenth-century Dutch art’, *Art History*, 10, 1987, 455–66; and Neil De Marchi and Hans J. Van Miegroet, ‘Art, Value, and Market Practices in the Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century.’ *The Art Bulletin*, 76, 1994, 451–64.

3 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* op. cit.

4 Hal Foster, ‘The Art of Fetishism’, op. cit.

5 *ibid.*, p. 257.

ranges of objects from across the empire were placed together on banquet tables but the consumption depicted in these paintings was economic rather than gastronomic. The objects were considered for their exchange-value rather than their usefulness; the surfaces glitter with fine detail and subtle plays of light, but the food objects are represented intact, destined to remain uneaten. Expense is the message communicated in the alluring *pronkstillevens*.<sup>6</sup> Although the tableware objects come from different geographical locations and embody different styles, they share the value of being a rare and therefore precious commodity. This is what Foster calls the ‘tabulation of difference within sameness’ under which a vast range of unique priceless objects are deemed to be equivalent due to their shared exchange-value in the marketplace.<sup>7</sup>



Figure [1] Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Drinking-Horn (of Saint Sebastian Archers' Guild, Lobster and Glasses)* [painting] London: National Gallery, Approx. 1653

In *Capital* Karl Marx describes the fetishistic nature of commodities. At first commodities appear to be simply utilitarian objects, created and purchased to fulfil a particular need of the consumer. But they are actually ‘abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ because their apparent usefulness conceals their real value that is exchange-value.<sup>8</sup> Marx writes:

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6 **Pronkstillevens denotes sumptuous or ostentatious still-lives.**

7 Hal Foster, ‘The Art of Fetishism’, op. cit., p. 259.

8 Karl Marx, *Capital*, New York: Random House, 1906 [*Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Hamburg: Verlag Otto Meissners 1867] p. 81.

Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our exchange-value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange-values.<sup>9</sup>

Like the Venetian glass, silver plate, or drinking horn in the painting, commodities become fetishes when they enter the marketplace, are stripped of the differences that derive from their use-values. These qualities are replaced by a quantity – the amount of money required for their exchange with other commodities. Foster says the tension between use- and exchange-value is visible in the *pronkstilleven*. The expensive objects exist as symbols of wealth and exchange, but the suggestion that they might actually be used during the meal produces an uncanny effect. He writes:

the objects, appear caught between worlds – not alive, not dead, not useful, not useless, as if lost between the tangibility of the common thing and the visibility of the distanced commodity. And the pictorial effect is often one of deathly suspension or [...] an eerie animation, with the objects at once chilled and charged by the speculative gaze fixed upon them.<sup>10</sup>

What Foster calls the ‘chill of the commodity’ renders the delectable meal inedible and taboo.<sup>11</sup> In the painting the alienating effect of use-value threatens to expose the commodity as a fetish, a value for exchange masquerading as something useful.

The *pronkstilleven* paintings produce another discrepancy: the plates and glasses are painted to appear to be in close proximity to the body of the viewer; however, in relation to cost they are beyond the reach of all but very

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9 *ibid.*, p. 95.

10 Foster, ‘The Art of Fetishism’, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

11 *ibid.*, p. 259.

rich members of society. Bryson describes 'nearness' as the 'principal spatial value' of still-life: 'what builds this proximal space is gesture: the gestures of eating, of laying the table...its units are of bodily actions, specifically those of the upper body, the torso and arms'.<sup>12</sup> The still-life connotes a haptic space of touch, taste, and gesture but the 'chill of the commodity' confounds the intimacy of the table, producing an alienating distance. They resemble Bryson's description of still-life paintings by Juan Sánchez Cotán and Francisco de Zurbarán:

Though situated at a creaturely or bodily level, vision will not participate in a creaturely relation to what it sees. It is divorced from tactile spaces and sensuality: food enters the eye, but must not pass through touch or taste; there is retention of the purity of the body's internal spaces, a refusal to yield and open the body to the rest of the material world.<sup>13</sup>

Bryson says the paintings disconnect the act of looking and tasting to produce an anorexic mode of looking that dissociates the still-life objects from their function as food.<sup>14</sup> Kalf's still-life paintings do not signify a rejection of carnal pleasure and denial of appetite; the denial of sensual pleasure is only applicable to those who are not equal to the wealth depicted.

Looking at *Still Life with Drinking-Horn (of Saint Sebastian Archers' Guild, Lobster and Glasses)* in the National Gallery in London I feel alienated by the ostentatiousness of the objects and the manner of the table setting. The quantity of food suggests a social affair but the table appears to be set for a single diner. Only one wine glass is laid on the table and the food appears to cascade towards a single place setting located directly in front of me. I do not feel like a welcome guest. Although I know it is a painting of a cooked lobster and therefore most inanimate, the lobster's beady gaze meets mine. The uneasy sensation this provokes is increased because the silver tray on

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<sup>12</sup> Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.

which the lobster sits is tilted towards me, threatening to cause the lobster to slip off the painting and land on me. The painting is hung at a height that causes me to look up at the objects, a viewing position and relation of scale suggesting that I am the size of a child. I am not equal to the objects on the table or the imaginary consumer of the food. Bryson speaks of a distancing effect caused by the overvaluation of the objects in the paintings. Analysing another painting by Kalf, he writes:

part of Kalf's dream of wealth is that of the absolute individual, unique in his possessions, as the possessions are themselves unique. Wealth is inseparable here from the ideas of competition and individuation, where wealth is greatest the individuation is at its extreme.<sup>15</sup>

The consumer of this meal will eat in solitude because its value would be depreciated if he shared it with people of unequal wealth. Even his family members are excluded from the festivities. The world of trade has contaminated the home, recoding the table in the language of competition and prestige rather than domesticity and conviviality.<sup>16</sup>

#### *The Art Market Sign-Value Exchange System*

The *Still Life with Drinking Horn* illustrates the form of consumerism described by Baudrillard in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. He writes that consumption does not take place through the satisfaction of objective needs but in the social act of exchanging signs and values. Use-value is fetishised in commodity consumption and serves as an alibi for exchange-value. Human needs have been naturalised as innate and objective, but in reality they are a productive function of the market. Needs guarantee the survival of the economic system precisely because they reproduce the system in all facets of private and public life. Capitalism 'invades new

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

territories' such as the body, beauty, and leisure in order to subordinate them to the system of sign-value.<sup>17</sup> As Baudrillard writes 'there are only needs because the system needs them [...] It is *all* capital. Hence, there is a compulsion to need and a compulsion to consume.'<sup>18</sup> Real need could be satisfied but consumer need cannot.<sup>19</sup> This is the commodity fetishism of sign-value that has been coded by the capitalist economic system to promote further consumption.

To explain the fetishisation of the commodity as a sign-value Baudrillard returns to the original meaning of the term fetish; 'a *fabrication*, an artefact, a labor of appearances and signs [...] a cultural sign labor'.<sup>20</sup> In the system of sign-value exchange I do not purchase objects for their use- or exchange-value but because of the social prestige they bestow upon me. The object is merely the signifier; the signified message of prestige, desirableness, or success is the real intention of my purchase. Baudrillard writes:

it is the *passion for the code* [...] not the sanctification of a certain object, or value (in which case one might hope to see it disappear in our age, when the liberalization of values and the abundance of objects would 'normally' tend to desanctify them). It is the sanctification of the system as such, of the commodity as system: it is thus contemporaneous with the generalization of exchange value and is propagated with it. The more the system is systematized, the more the fetishist fascination is reinforced.<sup>21</sup>

As I purchase and display sign-values, the code is produced and reproduced. Similarly, *pronkstilleven* paintings signify wealth, prestige, and taste. Rather

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17 Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, op. cit., pp. 92-3.

18 *ibid.*, p. 82.

19 Although Baudrillard does not refer to psychoanalysis there is resemblance between his ideas and the psychoanalytic distinction between need and desire, in which need is defined as a biological instinct working to preserve life and desire is driven by a lack in the subject which cannot be filled. Slavoj Žižek describes the function of desire as: 'not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire', *Plague of Fantasies*, London and New York: Verso Books, 1997, p. 39.

20 Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, op. cit., p. 91.

21 *ibid.*, pp. 92-3.

than compromising the singularity of the objects through their depiction, the paintings increase their value.<sup>22</sup> By representing valuable collector's items, the painter reinforces their value as signs of monetary worth and social distinction.

Sign-value not only determines the value of the commodity, but also defines it as a variant in relation to all other sign-values. Because the market provides an ever-increasing range of commodities that are related to each other as differential signs the ethos of the collection is reinforced and the desire to consume becomes insatiable.<sup>23</sup>

This aspect of consumerism is evident in the way still-life paintings were produced in the seventeenth-century Dutch republic. For example, the text panel accompanying *Still Life with Silver Wine-jar and Reflected Portrait of the Artist* by Abraham van Beyeren in the Ashmolean museum says:

The silver wine-jar reflecting the artist at work wearing a hat is seen in a number of still lifes [...] It has been noted that the pitcher appears in all these works in exactly the same position, suggesting that the artist did not own this expensive vessel but relied upon a drawing as a model for each of these works.<sup>24</sup>

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22 When I visited the *Still Life with Drinking Horn* painting at the National Gallery on 18 March 2016 there was a painted copy of it leaning against the wall underneath the original, and an easel in the centre of the gallery. As I looked at the painting two young people stood behind me discussing the second painting. "Is it a photo?" the female asks. "It could be" replies the male. "Yeh it is, look at the fabric" the female says "that one [by Kalf] is HD but the other one is..." "yeh" says the male, "it's, like, 80 dpi". It seems strange that someone painted a copy, when photographs are readily available and the gift shop sells reproductions of famous paintings on tea trays, aprons, umbrellas, jewellery, and a multitude of other commodities. The way the painted reproduction is displayed on the floor announces that it is inferior to the 'authentic' original but the fact it exists suggests the value of the original is reinforced by each copy made. The relation between original and copy could be considered in relation to the ideas expressed in *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by Walter Benjamin (discussed later in chapter) (trans. by J. A. Underwood, 2nd edn, London: Penguin Books, 2008 [*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*], in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Frankfurt: Institut für Sozialforschung, 1936]).

23 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. by Chris Turner, 2nd edn, London: Sage, 1998 [*La société de consommation*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970].

24 Wall Text, *Still Life With A Silver Wine-Jar and a Reflected Portrait of the Artist*, Oxford: The Ashmolean Museum, [4 January 2013].



Figure [2] Abraham van Beyeren, *Still Life With A Silver Wine-Jar and a Reflected Portrait of the Artist* [painting] Oxford: The Ashmolean Museum, 1650s

Because van Beyeren repeatedly painted the silver jar, it may be surmised that the art works were not commissioned by the owner of the object, but were produced as generic signs of wealth and prosperity for the art market. Through the act of painting a representation of an expensive object could be reproduced in multiple copies. By increasing the availability of the original precious object *pronkstilleven* painting could perform a similar function to mechanical forms of reproduction such as photography and film.<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin championed these forms of creative production because the images produced by them were endlessly reproducible, inexpensive, and therefore democratic. He writes that they could break the link between the

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<sup>25</sup> Artists such as Rembrandt made etchings of historical or religious paintings; and while The Montias Database of 17th Century Dutch Art Inventories suggest that landscapes were also reproduced as prints, however, there are no records of still-life prints. This could be because they were not listed with titles distinguishing them from other allegorical paintings. Still-life paintings were relatively inexpensive because they could be produced with a limited supply of props and didn't require expensive models. The price was also kept relatively low because the subject matter was deemed to be mundane, therefore it might have been unnecessary to create mechanically reproducible alternatives such as etchings. *The Montias Database of 17th Century Dutch Art Inventories* [WWW Document] <http://research.frick.org/montias> [accessed 31 March 2014].



work of art and its 'aura'.<sup>26</sup> Finding its origins in the magical objects used in ritual practices, the auratic art work wields power over its viewers. Its authority and authenticity as a work of art 'represents an important cultural substantiation of the claims to power of the dominant class'.<sup>27</sup> Because the bourgeoisie monopolise the modes of art production they also control the aspect of culture that determines meaning and value for society (in Baudrillard's terms the bourgeoisie control the sign-value system). This is used to justify and reinforce their position while simultaneously preventing dissent. According to Benjamin the cultic practices of art and the privilege of ownership could only be broken by reproduction of the work of art.

However, if the painter had intended to create affordable copies, it would have been more time- and cost-effective to make identical copies of the same image:

despite the repetition and creation of compositional formulas, van Beyeren refrained from making exact replicas or even close variants and tried to introduce as much variety as possible into the distribution and appearance of his objects.<sup>28</sup>

This suggests ideas of difference and sign-value production in commodities rather than in democratic reproduction, as if the artist purposefully incorporated variation in the painting compositions to justify the higher price of an original.<sup>29</sup>

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26 Walter Benjamin, *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. by J. A. Underwood, 2nd edn, London: Penguin Books, 2008 ['Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Frankfurt: Institut für Sozialforschung, 1936].

27 Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006 [*Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974-6] pp. 22-3.

28 John Loughman, *The Presence of Things: Four Centuries of European Still life Painting Volume 1*, Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, 2010, p. 13.

29 Merchants employed specialist 'copyists' to make cheap reproductions of popular paintings by master painters. The reproductions did not devalue the original but offered a less expensive alternative (usually one third of the price of an original) for the less wealthy 48

The style of the painting makes the democratic image hypothesis highly unlikely. It is doubtful that the painting was produced quickly and inexpensively because every inch of the surface is covered in painstakingly reproduced texture and detail. The surface expresses the length of time the artist spent on it, demonstrating its value in terms of labour. Bryson voices this idea in his discussion of the muted tones and careful technique of *banketjestukken* (banquet pieces) by Pieter Claesz: the absence of personal style suggests that the labour of the painter was not passionate but constant, making it easy to estimate the time taken and ascertain a fair price. For Bryson the images ‘represent a faithful record of the hours spent in their production’.<sup>30</sup> The labour of the painter is abstracted and objectified in the paintings.

#### *Artistic Production Lines and ‘Too-Early’ Advertisements*

The innovative flourish of an individual creator was rare and for that reason the painters are difficult to identify except by the repetitive use of particular objects. Groups of artists are often identified by their choice of subject matter, such as game bird still-life, or aesthetic choices, such as the use of a muted colour palette by the Haarlem monochromatic painters. The paint was applied to the canvas in a way that diminishes the individual style of the artist. This characterless mode of painting was achieved through the painstaking representation of the visible world. When discussing the pictorial characteristics of Dutch painting Svetlana Alpers suggests the painters ‘sidestep the issue of style or manner almost completely to put

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consumers. By introducing variation, despite the similarity of his compositions, van Beyeren seems to assert the status of originality in his work. This might have been intentional as there is evidence of numerous legal proceedings between artists and consumers regarding the status of paintings as original. This is partly due to the workshop system in which the master retouched the details of a painting predominantly produced by apprentices. However, there were also instances where original paintings by masters were fraudulently copied.

<sup>30</sup> Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, op. cit., p. 134.

*nature seen* before personal style'.<sup>31</sup> The paintings are highly finished, detailed, and believable representations of texture and surface. The smooth surface of the canvas makes the strokes of the paintbrush indiscernible and the hand of the artist appears to have been eliminated. This suggests that still-life painting became a form of art production in which perfect copies of a world are created without human intervention, as if made by machines. Dutch painting of this period offers a realistic viewpoint on the world as seen through the lens of the *camera obscura*.

In the nineteenth century, art and technological production processes developed rapidly. According to Benjamin, the working classes could have harnessed the new media for revolutionary purposes, but instead, the potential was used in the service of capitalism because the bourgeoisie controlled the methods of their production. This had a detrimental effect on both art and technology. Painters were encouraged to mimic the style of the commodity and repeat the imagery demanded by the market. Under the rule of the market, the emancipatory potential of photography produced a 'phantasmagoria' that accentuated the surface appeal of the commodity-on-display, perpetuating the myth that consumption would lead to happiness and success.<sup>32</sup>

The use of the *camera obscura* in Dutch still-life painting could have assisted in more progressive aims: The artists might have produced multiple copies of paintings that criticised consumer culture. But the change from restrained Lenten meals to enticing displays of wealth in the *pronkstilleven* suggests the painters had submitted to the demands of the market.

Depicting expensive objects in the paintings did not make the objects accessible to a wider audience, instead the character of commodity

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31 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 40.

32 Walter Benjamin, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991, p. 143.

production crept into the technique of Dutch still-life painters. The desire to repeatedly represent objects suggests the painters had intuitively foreseen the techniques of mass production characteristic of capitalism. Benjamin said that ‘every epoch dreams the one that follows it’,<sup>33</sup> because people used existing modes of production in order to develop revolutionary new ones, and so ‘there correspond in the societal superstructure wish images in which the new is intermingled with the old in fantastic ways’.<sup>34</sup> The still-life paintings of consumer culture in the seventeenth century could be considered to be ‘too-early images’ of photographic reproduction.<sup>35</sup>

This hypothesis is supported by discussions relating to the relationship between the craftsmen who made expensive tableware and the painters who reproduced them. In *pronkstilleven* paintings the value of the painting is in part derived from the value of the artefacts it depicts. This suggests the artefacts are superior to the painting, but the technical accomplishment of the painter redresses the balance. In his painting *Still Life with Drinking Horn* Kalf improved the decoration on the drinking horn of St Sebastian by rearranging the group of figures and refining their gestures.<sup>36</sup> Benjamin’s theory of commodity fetishism indicates that mass production inevitably leads to a reduction in the quality of the objects created. Producers try to conceal the lesser quality by developing the surface appeal of the objects, so they appear to be high quality goods but are only imitations of them. Mass production techniques were developed to create semblances.

There is evidence of ‘process innovations’ in seventeenth-century painting techniques that made production quicker and more cost effective. Michael Montias describes the widespread use of standardised patterns designed to

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33 *ibid.*, pp. 116–7.

34 *ibid.*, p. 115.

35 *ibid.*, p. 118.

36 Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, *Still Life paintings from the Netherlands 1550-1720* (Exhib. Cat. 48) Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1999–2000, pp. 212–14. The artefact is held in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam so it is possible to compare it with the painting.

make painting of elaborate brocade fabrics faster to execute: ‘a process innovation must either leave the product unchanged or provide an acceptable substitute without a very perceptible decline in quality’.<sup>37</sup> Like the mass production of commodities two centuries later, the decline in quality must be hidden by surface appeal.

The nature of the commodity is characterised by a seductive surface without substance and a reduction of use- and exchange-value in favour of display-value. As commodities-on-display they dazzle me, causing me to disavow the poor quality of the object: ‘a profane glimmer makes the commodity phosphorescent’.<sup>38</sup> The commodities-on-display are presented in shop windows and department stores to create a spectacle. They exude a message of equality through consumption and the promise of improving material circumstances for all. This is a phantasmagoric illusion and a dazzling distraction; there is an increasing disparity between the living conditions of the rich and poor. Instead of questioning inequality, I use my energy to earn money and buy commodities. Shopping is a counter-revolutionary force.

In *pronkstilleven* such as *Still Life with Drinking Horn* by Kalf, the painted versions of objects are visually improved, appearing finer and more luminous than the originals. In her discussion of the relations between painter and craft maker Alpers offers another potential function for the painted reproduction:

the evidence is that craft becomes reconfirmed in painting even as there is a weakening of respect or interest in the craft traditions...If we want to delight in finely crafted tiles, we look at them as they were represented in a painting by Vermeer. In taking on the responsibility for craft, the painters also increasingly become the purveyors of luxury goods.<sup>39</sup>

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37 Montias, ‘Cost and Value in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art’, p. 457.

38 Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, op. cit., p. 131.

39 Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, op. cit., pp. 114–5.

The paintings promote the craft objects and also enhance their image to make them more desirable. If the methods of still-life painting are considered to be ‘wish images’ of photographic production techniques, they are ‘too-early’ advertising images promoting the consumer goods of other producers.

Benjamin uses the term ‘too-early’ apprehensions to describe cultural productions that seem to anticipate the technological and cultural developments of later eras. When societies could not grasp the too-early images as premonitions of the future, the images remain in the collective unconscious as wish images. As the revolutionary potential of modes of production is commandeered by capitalist codes of signification, wish images congeal into commodity fetishes.<sup>40</sup>

The hollowing out of the priceless drinking horn signifies its transformation from a unique collector’s item into multiple copies of a fetishistic commodity-on-display. In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin draws parallels between the character of the commodity-on-display and the allegorical object of the baroque period: ‘the devaluation of the world of objects within allegory is outdone within the world of objects itself by the commodity’.<sup>41</sup> In the marketplace commodities are exchangeable for all other objects. Allegorical objects are also exchangeable for other objects that can symbolise the same idea. An extinguished candle, a dying flower, or bubbles connote the transience of life. However, Benjamin notes that the objects chosen as allegorical signifiers of death or the temptation of lust are inadequate to represent the full force of these experiences, and so the emotional impact is lost when they are replaced by symbols. Both commodity fetish and allegorical symbol demonstrate how trivial the objects are in comparison to what they mean, the value they communicate. Buck-Morss describes how

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<sup>40</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

Benjamin further stresses the structural similarity between allegory and commodity:

if the social value (hence the meaning) of commodities is their price, this does not prevent them from being appropriated by consumers as wish images within the emblem books of their private dreamworld. For this to occur, estrangement of the commodity from their initial meaning as use-values produced by human labor is in fact the prerequisite, it is, after all, the nature of the allegorical object that once the initial hollowing out of meaning has occurred and a new signification has been arbitrarily inserted into it, this meaning 'can at any time be removed in favor of any other'.<sup>42</sup>

Emptied of meaning given to them by their use-value, objects come to mean anything at all.<sup>43</sup> According to Benjamin, the advertisement is a 'wish image' and phantasmagoria of consumerism that attempts to reduce the commodity character of the objects it displays. Allegory reveals the contradictory faces of the commodity: the idealised commodity-on-display in advertisements and the 'hollowed out ruin' beneath. In doing so it exposes the value of the commodity-on-display as constructed and not innate. In Dutch still-life painting this construction seems to be evident. In *pronkstilleven* the juxtaposition of the edible and collectible objects 'humanises' the collector's items in order to 'deny their commodity character'.<sup>44</sup> But the 'chill of the commodity' is still apparent. The unease caused by the suggestion of use further demonstrates that the objects are meant to function as prestigious objects for exchange.

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 181-2.

<sup>43</sup> By suggesting that consumers value commodities as wish images rather than for their exchange-values Benjamin anticipates the sign-value fetishism described by Baudrillard.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

Art-historical writing on Dutch still-life painting is characterised by two conflicting modes of interpretation. In the 1960s Eddy de Jongh used symbolism derived from emblem books to decode the ‘original intentions of the artists’.<sup>45</sup> In this mode of interpretation the still-life paintings contain a moralising message about wealth, greed, and pleasures of the flesh. De Jongh says the paintings were supposed to be read allegorically because emblematic symbolism was widely understood in the seventeenth century. Emblem books were hugely popular and printed in several editions aimed at people with differing incomes.

In *The Art of Describing* Alpers argues for an alternative method of interpretation: the prevalence of empiricism and the publication of Johannes Kepler’s theory of refracting telescopes in 1611 marked the seventeenth century as a time of scientific looking.<sup>46</sup> The still-life paintings of the same period signify an art of observation and accurate reproduction. The paintings depict ‘a reality effect – not [...] hiding moral instruction but [...] offering a perceptual model of knowledge of the world’.<sup>47</sup> A half-peeled lemon hanging over the edge of a table presents a scientific dissection of the object to show internal and external textures, and not an allegory of the bitterness of life. The viewer’s attention is attracted by the commodity’s surfaces rather than how the objects are consumed, therefore the paintings should be interpreted using only what is literally shown.

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<sup>45</sup> Eddy de Jongh, ‘Realism and Seaming Realism in Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting’, in *Looking at Seventeenth Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, ed. by Wayne E. Franits, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, op. cit. p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> Svetlana Alpers, ‘Picturing Dutch Culture’, in *Looking at Seventeenth Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, ed. by Wayne E. Franits, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 59.





Figure [3] Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Jug, Herring and Smoking Requisites* [painting] London: The Guildhall Art Gallery, 1644

Using an allegorical mode of interpretation, the still-life objects symbolise the social position and material wealth of an unseen owner, who is also the intended recipient of the meal. Lenten still-life compositions often portray a few simple items of food, using a muted palette of orange, brown, and black. The tableware depicted is locally produced earthenware and the food objects, such as herring, bread, and beer, recreate a basic meal usually consumed by the working classes. The imagined eater is a pious man and a patriot: he consumes the fish that the nation's wealth was built upon and eats only what he needs in order to serve as a citizen. The cheap production value of the commodities is not concealed but carefully rendered. There is no conflict between allegorical and descriptive methods of interpretation, preventing an allegorical unmasking of the reduced quality of commodities-on-display.

Alternatively, a banquet table covered in rich food and expensive glassware suggests a person of great importance and success. The tableware items, such as the drinking horn in Kalf's painting, indicate the economic power of the consumer. The objects catalogue his possessions but also, when read allegorically, imply the moral dangers to which he is exposed. Objects such as peppercorns indicate that the consumer has global trade connections, connoting the temptations of exoticism and the dangers of being lured too

far from home. The allegorical meanings of the objects were tinged with sexual temptation: pepper was thought to enflame the senses and stimulate carnal appetites. When I look at the painting the fine rendering of light and details encourages me to linger over the surfaces of the objects, and let my imagination drift towards other sensory experiences. The expensive rug is so convincingly rendered that I think it will be warm and soft to touch. I begin to imagine the taste of wine and the aroma of cooked lobster. The ‘profane glimmer’ of the surface arouses my desire, which an allegorical interpretation would extinguish. Paintings by Cotán and Zurbarán produce an estranged ‘anorexic’ way of looking at food disconnected from sensual pleasure. Kalf’s still-lives produce a different type of alienating distance: the food is arousing and unreachable.

The symbolic value of the food in the Lenten still-life painting is reiterated in its aesthetic style: the restrained colours convey a message of modesty because the gleam of shiny metal, glass, and porcelain surfaces is missing. In *pronkstilleven* the painted surface is rich and sumptuous like the foods depicted, but the allegorical interpretation warns against the indulgences displayed. The visual style of the painting contradicts the allegorical message and the viewer must determine which message dominates. This mode of interpretation is structurally similar to ironic interpretation, when the obvious meaning is undermined by the manner of depiction, impelling the viewer to conclude that the opposite message is being communicated. Wayne Booth describes the difference between allegory and ironic allegory: in allegory the overt meaning and the concealed symbolic meaning express similar sentiments, so the viewer will still broadly understand the artist’s intention even if they overlook the symbolic dimension of the representation.<sup>48</sup> A still-life containing a skull is likely to lead a viewer to think of death even if the allegorical message of *vanitas* is overlooked. In ironic allegory the two layers of meaning oppose one another and the naïve

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48 Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 25. 57

viewer who fails to interpret the painting's allegorical message will misinterpret its meaning. When I look at a *pronkstilleven* painting the allegorical message is not discernible in the style or content of the painting, suggesting that it is ironic allegory. If I am unaware of the allegorical message of the painting, I will interpret it as a celebration rather than a warning against intemperate consumption.

In his analysis of irony in poetry Rolf Breuer writes that irony offers the author a compromise between art and society:

it is the result of the poet's feeling of a sense of duty both to his times (which he is critical of) and to his art (which he prefers to propaganda or theory), at a time when the principle of art is in opposition to the state of the world.<sup>49</sup>

If Breuer's theory is applied to Kalf's *pronkstilleven* paintings they would communicate a conflict between his desire to demonstrate his painterly skill in rendering gold, pewter, and glass surfaces, and a desire to comment upon the conspicuous levels of consumption taking place in society. Instead of creating overt warnings against excess, which might have alienated his audience, he concealed the message. The seductive surface of the paint and improvements made to the drinking horn give the commodity 'phosphorescence' but the allegorical message reveals it to be a fetish and a hollowed out ruin.<sup>50</sup>

If I consider this painting to be an advert, the aim to encourage people to purchase Roemer glass or imported lobster is hindered by the allegorical message. Yet, advertisements attempt to communicate with as many potential consumers as possible and a message of extreme wealth or extreme asceticism would exclude most of the viewing public. I would suggest that allegory is used in *pronkstilleven* because ironic contradiction offers a range

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49 Rolf Breuer, 'Irony, Literature, and Schizophrenia', *New Literacy History*, 12: 1, 1980, p. 118.

50 Paraphrasing Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, op. cit., p. 131.

of interpretations and therefore communicates to more consumers. Luxury and carnal pleasure are criticised but also brought to mind by the over-determined surface appeal of the painting. A *pronkstilleven* painting's interpretation ranges from: all consumer pleasure being a sin that will be punished harshly, to, moral danger lying in excess therefore consumption of luxuries should be enjoyed in moderation. Thus most viewpoints are catered for, so few consumers would be alienated by the message.



Figure [4] William Claesz Heda, *Still Life: Pewter and Silver Vessels and a Crab* [painting] London: National Gallery, Approx. 1633 7

Another form of visual irony can be found in Heda's painting *Still Life: Pewter and Silver Vessels and a Crab*. Heda was a member of the Haarlem school of painters who specialised in a style of painting that combined the sumptuous artefacts of *pronkstilleven* with the reserved, monochromatic palette of the *Lenten* still-life. Multiple contradictory messages can be deciphered: expensive and luxurious objects are given the visual appearance of a *Lenten* meal, while the allegorical message warns of the dangers of carnal pleasure and luxurious excess. The aesthetic style and allegorical message are contradicted by the value of the objects depicted. If this painting is ironic it is difficult to determine where the ironic deconstruction comes to rest. The painting seems to communicate that luxury and greed are sins, but the level of wealth depicted in the painting is neither luxurious nor greedy. It

indicates a nation that had become accustomed to its prosperity.

Yet, the painting contains another contradictory element: it is in a state of disarray. The goods may be depicted in a manner that appears to be less sumptuous than *pronkstilleven* but they are also at risk of destruction. The meal has not been consumed but the plates and glasses appear to have been violently discarded. A glass lies on its side, pepper spills out of its paper container, and a plate rests precariously close to the edge of the table. An allegorical interpretation suggests this composition is to remind the viewer of the fragility of human life and the transitory nature of wealth and success.

Because the expensive objects have been treated so carelessly their value as objects for display seems even more pronounced. The arbitrary nature of exchange- and display-value is demonstrated by the ease with which the objects could be destroyed. The imminent destruction of the objects reinforces the allegorical warning against the transient nature of consumer pleasure and the dangers of excess. However, according to Thorstein Veblen, wasteful expenditure indicates the prestige of the consumer.<sup>51</sup> Because all material needs have been met and enough wealth has been amassed to negate the necessity of capital accumulation through exchange, the use- and exchange-values of the objects become superfluous as these are transformed into pure symbols of wealth. Perhaps this is why the food has not been eaten and the pepper is discarded.

Baudrillard advances this idea, saying that consumer society requires the destruction of goods because sign-value is created through extravagant waste:

This is why destruction remains the fundamental alternative to production: consumption is merely an intermediate term between the two. There is a

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<sup>51</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, New York: Dover Publications, 1994, originally published as three articles: 'The Beginning of Ownership', 'The Barbarian Status of Women', and 'The Instinct of Workmanship and the Irksomeness of Labour' in *American Journal of Sociology* (1898-99). 60

profound tendency within consumption for it to surpass itself, to transfigure itself in destruction. It is in destruction that it acquires its meaning [...] Only in destruction are objects there *in excess* and only then, in their disappearance, do they attest to wealth.<sup>52</sup>

The destruction of wealth gives the commodity additional value as a sign-value. In this case the sign-value pertains to the purchaser's inimitable ability to sacrifice a quantity of economic wealth in order to possess and potentially destroy an expensive commodity. If this image is viewed as an advertisement, it successfully promotes repetitive consumption: purchase, destroy or waste, purchase, destroy or waste. Surprisingly, the makers of these artefacts may have benefited from the apparent lack of regard the painters show towards their products. By depicting them as disposable objects the painting presents the artefacts as signs of extreme wealth.

A *pronkstilleven* painting suggests a consumer who is unique in his wealth, and the table in a state of disarray testifies to repeated, wasteful consumption that could only be practised by a select few. However, the aim of the painting as an advertisement is to communicate with as many people as possible. Because the paintings can be read allegorically, they appeal to a full spectrum of moral positions on consumption: from harsh criticism to affirmation that most levels of luxury are permissible. The intention of the painter is lost in the multitude of meanings. When I view the painting and read it allegorically, I possess the tools to peel away different layers of meaning without ever arriving at a final statement of intent. I am left to circle around a variety of potential messages without conclusion.

In the eighteenth century this form of irony may have been viewed as 'corrective' because the author is detached and objective, offering multiple points of view without adopting a position. The viewer is left to make up her or his own mind. Richard Harvey Brown describes irony as dialectical

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<sup>52</sup> Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, op. cit., p. 47.

because it demands active participation from the viewer, stating that the author ‘simultaneously asserts two or more logically contradictory meanings such that, in the silence between the two, the deeper meaning of both may emerge’.<sup>53</sup> Hayden White writes: ‘they appear to signal the ascent of thought in a given area of inquiry to a level of self-consciousness on which a genuinely enlightened – that is to say, self-critical, conceptualization of the world and its processes has become possible’.<sup>54</sup>

For eighteenth-century Romantics this form of irony was educational. But for seventeenth-century painters enmeshed in the world of commerce it is difficult to conclude that the message was intended to cause their customers to reflect on their own level of consumption. Allegorical *pronkstilleven* promoted consumerism as a pleasure and a vice simultaneously: the negative aspects of wealth creation were not denied but stated as one of many points of view and the sign-values of wealth were widely disseminated in the process.

Transforming exchange-value into sign-value establishes domination in both economic and cultural realms. According to Baudrillard, mastery of accumulation through surplus-value is essential within the economic order, but in the order of signs the mastery of expenditure is fundamental. It is in this form of control that the dominant classes are able to monopolise and determine the cultural code. In capitalist society the bourgeois class aims to:

surpass, to transcend, and to consecrate their economic privilege in a semiotic privilege, because this later stage represents the ultimate stage of domination. This logic, which comes to relay class logic and which is no longer defined by ownership of the means of production but by the mastery of the process of signification<sup>55</sup>

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53 Richard Harvey Brown, ‘Dialectical Irony, Literary Form and Sociological Theory’, in *Poetics Today*, 4:3, 1983, p. 544.

54 White (1973) quoted in Harvey Brown, ‘Dialectical Irony’, op. cit., pp. 544–5.

55 Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, op. cit., pp. 115–6.

In determining the meaning of objects and the values that are prized by society the dominant class can maintain its position. By producing multiple representations of expensive objects that few could possess, the objects value as a sign of wealth is disseminated to the middle classes. Because middle class individuals own the reproductions rather than the objects, the wealth of the dominant class is demonstrated.

The profane glimmer of the commodity is brought to the viewer's attention through allegory, but not in a way that undermines it or reveals the hollowed out ruin of the commodity. Allegory is in the service of the fetishism of commodities-on-display. It disseminates the sign-values of wealth and the pleasures of consumption to all, including those most fervently opposed to them.



## CELEBRATE (NIGHT FEEDER)

*Night Feeder* refers to the case of Sarah Jacob, the nineteenth century 'Welsh Fasting Girl'. Sarah was heralded as a miraculous saint. She lived at the advent of medical empiricism. Doctors decided to test her miraculous devotion by observing her closely over the course of eight days during which she starved to death. She was later labelled a hysterical night feeder.



*Night Feeder (A)*, 2013, 50cm x 62cm [c-type photograph]



*Night Feeder (B)*, 2013, 50cm x 62cm [c-type photograph]



*Night Feeder (C)*, 2013, 50cm x 50cm [c-type photograph]

## TRANSITION 1:

### Incarnate commodities

#### *Flirtatious Commodities*

In *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* Wolfgang Fritz Haug suggests that commodities ‘borrow their aesthetic language from human courtship’ to maximise their attractiveness.<sup>1</sup> He describes how commodities are enhanced in a manner similar to the enhancement of the female body using jewellery, scent, and makeup to cast ‘flirtatious glances at the buyers’, enticing them to make purchases.<sup>2</sup> Émile Zola describes this seduction of the commodity in his novel *The Ladies’ Paradise*, a fictional account of the development and growth of the first department store in Paris. He describes a window display of garments:

the very pieces of cloth, thick and square, were breathing, exuding a whiff of temptation, while the overcoats were drawing themselves up even more on the lay figures, who themselves were acquiring souls, and the huge velvet coat was billowing out, supple and warm, as if on shoulders of flesh and blood, with heaving breast and quivering hips.<sup>3</sup>

The consumers, described by Zola as ‘a regular mob, made brutal by covetousness’,<sup>4</sup> are seduced by the life-like quality of the commodities-on-display. Their desires are projected onto the commodities, bringing the objects to life.

In contemporary consumer society advertisements imply that commodities have magical qualities that produce and will satisfy desire. Products such as

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1 Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society, Social and Political Theory*, Cambridge: Polity, 1986, p. 19.

2 *ibid.*, p. 19.

3 Émile Zola, *The Ladies’ Paradise*, trans. by April Fitzlyon, 4th edn., London: Alma Classics, 2012 [*Au Bonheur des Dames* Paris: Charpentier, 1883] p. 16.

4 *ibid.*, p. 16.

clothes and cosmetics are advertised as packaging that will improve the surface appeal of the body.<sup>5</sup> If I make the correct purchase the commodity will pass the secret of its allure to me, making my body more desirable. According to Benjamin this is the promise of the commodity-on-display. Sexual appeal and success attributed to the commodity will transfer to me in the form of sign-values. However, my body displays commodities but I am not enriched by them. Baudrillard argues this process annihilates people. He writes that the mirror image in which individuals are reflected back to themselves *as* individuals has been replaced by the shop window, where people appear to themselves and others as a collection of signifiers of status. The individual is absorbed into the capitalist system of the code.<sup>6</sup>

Benjamin warned of the unwanted gifts the consumer might receive when relations between people are transformed into relations between things and a unique existence is exchanged for homogenisation through mass production:

Warmth is ebbing from things. The objects of daily use gently but insistently repel us. [...] We must compensate for their coldness with our warmth if they are not to freeze us to death, and handle their spines with infinite dexterity, if we are not to perish from bleeding...And in the degeneration of things, with which, emulating human decay, they punish humanity, the country itself conspires. It gnaws at us like the things.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, 2nd edn, London and New York: Verso, 1997 [*Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974-6] p. 75.

Homogenisation through mass production and the loss of unique existence recalls *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in which the 'auratic' power of a work of art is diminished by photographic reproduction (Walter Benjamin, *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, op.cit.).

Commodities are imbued with human characteristics and consumers become increasingly commodified. The hierarchy between commodity and consumer is confused making it difficult to discern one from the other.

*Advertising Edible Body-parts*



Figure [5] *It'll Blow Your Mind Away* (*Burger King*) [Advertising Photograph] Singapore, 2009, (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,529576,00.html>) [accessed 27 March 2012]

In an advertisement for *Burger King*, an interaction between a consumer and a commodity suggests an interaction between two people. Oral sex metaphorically displaces the act of eating: the burger suggests a penis by reason of its shape and its position in relation to the woman's open mouth intimates oral sex. In slang terms the penis is sometimes referred to as 'meat' and an erection is described as a 'boner', creating further associations between the carnal content of the burger and the metaphorical meaning of the image. This association is further reinforced in the name given to the burger 'BK Super Seven Incher' which evokes a preoccupation with penis size frequently voiced in readers' letters on the 'problem pages' of magazines aimed at teenagers.

The burger/penis is also a synecdoche, a part-object that stands for the male figure. Similarly the female figure is represented by a fragment, reduced to a head, giving rise to another sexual connotation based on the slang term 'to give head' meaning 'to perform oral sex'. Her wide eyes and gaping mouth remind me of the facial expression of a blow-up doll, the mass-produced commodity version of a sexually available female body. She has assumed the characteristics of the commodity that originally borrowed its aesthetic language from a body similar to hers. The allusion to the blow-up doll is also repeated linguistically by the text, which claims the burger will 'blow your mind away'. The chain of association links back to the metaphorical substitution of eating for oral sex through the reference to the slang term 'blow job'.

Although the burger is the commodity on sale, it is unclear which element of the image is intended to act upon the viewer's desire. Rather than depicting an interaction between a woman and a commodity the image could be interpreted as depicting a sexual encounter between two commodities. The transmission of characteristics between the commodity and the woman is not limited to desirable attributes. Here the image puts in parallel two analogous exchanges: on the left flesh becomes inanimate in the evocation of a blow up doll, on the right the commodity becomes flesh as it stands in for the aroused sexual organ. An additional exchange takes place between woman and commodity, as if life is drained from the real woman to animate the commodity. In *pronkstilleven* paintings objects of prestige take on a 'deathly pallor' when depreciated to their sole use-value. Here object and woman oscillate between life and death because it is unclear which should be incarnate.

In this advert there are multiple meanings for each object: the commodity denotes food and connotes penis, and the female head, further reduced to a

graphic rendition of a profile with wide-open eyes and mouth invokes a devouring vagina as well as the reassuring docility of the blow-up doll. There is a suggestion that the burger contains the potential to satisfy hunger for food as well as for sex in a scenario in which sexual pleasure is provided, not by a sexual partner, but by a part-object. It also reinforces the idea that other people's bodies are sign-values and objects for consumption. The female figure as object for consumption is not supposed to be seen eating the burger; she is shown in a state of suspended fascination, of endless deferral; only the consumer will experience the sensory pleasure that is promised by the commodities in the advertisement. When I contemplate the objects in *pronkstilleven* paintings I imagine they are close enough to touch and smell, but the expense of the objects metaphorically places them beyond my reach. The 'deathly pallor' produced in the advertisement implies the woman has the use-value of a commodity. I imagine her as something that can be grasped and possessed.

In another example of contemporary advertising the body and commodity are condensed into a single form. The commodity has been given the physical shape of the body, which has in turn been given the texture and colour of the commodity. A binary opposition between light and dark is implied: the chocolate shell implies a black female body labelled by the word 'light'. This could be interpreted as a preference for lighter skin tones. Throughout the slave trade in America women slaves with light skin were particularly desired, and sexually exploited by their owners.<sup>8</sup> The implication in the *Magnum* advert objectifies the female body and reinforces the idea that it is a commodity that can be bought and consumed.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the slave women notable for their beauty were described as mulatto (half African and half American ancestry) or quadroon (one quarter African and three quarters American ancestry). Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly*, 8th edn, New York: Penguin Books, 1986 (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852).





Figure [6] *Magnum Ice cream*, [advertising photograph] Spain, 2006, (<http://www.advertolog.com/magnum/print-outdoor/cracking-8197655/>) [accessed 10 March 2012]

The term light also alludes to the weight of the body and a social preference for thinness, equated with lightness. The advert reminds me that eating can have an adverse effect on the sign-value of my body. However, the transformation of the commodity in this advert implies it will bestow on me an improved body shape.

By anthropomorphising the food object, the advert implies that the desire to consume will be instantly discernible on the body of the consumer. Similar to allegorical symbolism in Dutch still-life painting, food objects in adverts are frequently given characteristics of goodness and virtue or indulgence and sin. But rather than suggest that the food objects stand in for other sinful acts, such as lustfulness and avarice, it is the act of eating itself that becomes iniquitous because it puts the aesthetic appeal of the body at risk. The *Magnum* advertisement negates this risk. The commodity is shaped into an ideal and curvaceous body by the act of eating: the narrow waist is created by small nibbles rather than large bites so the idea of acceptable, moderate consumption is visually reinforced. Allegorical *pronkstilleven* paintings contain opposing messages that describe pleasures of

consumption and warn of the consequences of indulgence. In the *Magnum* advertisement ‘condensation’ achieves a similar aim.<sup>9</sup> The ice cream / body warns against the pleasures of eating while offering itself as the solution to the problem.

The *Burger King* advertisement does not contain such a warning about the consequences of consumption. However, substitution or metaphor allows a different kind of pleasure to be implied. It enables an objectifying image to evade censorship because the denigrating message is implied rather than overtly presented. Both advertisements confuse the hierarchy between commodity and consumer to produce flirtatious commodities and objectified bodies.

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<sup>9</sup> Freud used the term condensation to describe the how multiple elements are combined in one object or person in dreams. Condensation enables unconscious wishes to be concealed but also expressed. (Sigmund Freud, ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’, in *The Freud Reader*, 2nd. edn., ed. by Peter Gay, trans. by James Strachey, London: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 129–141 [*Die Traumdeutung*, Leipzig and Vienna: Deuticke, 1900]).

## PART 2: CONSUMPTION

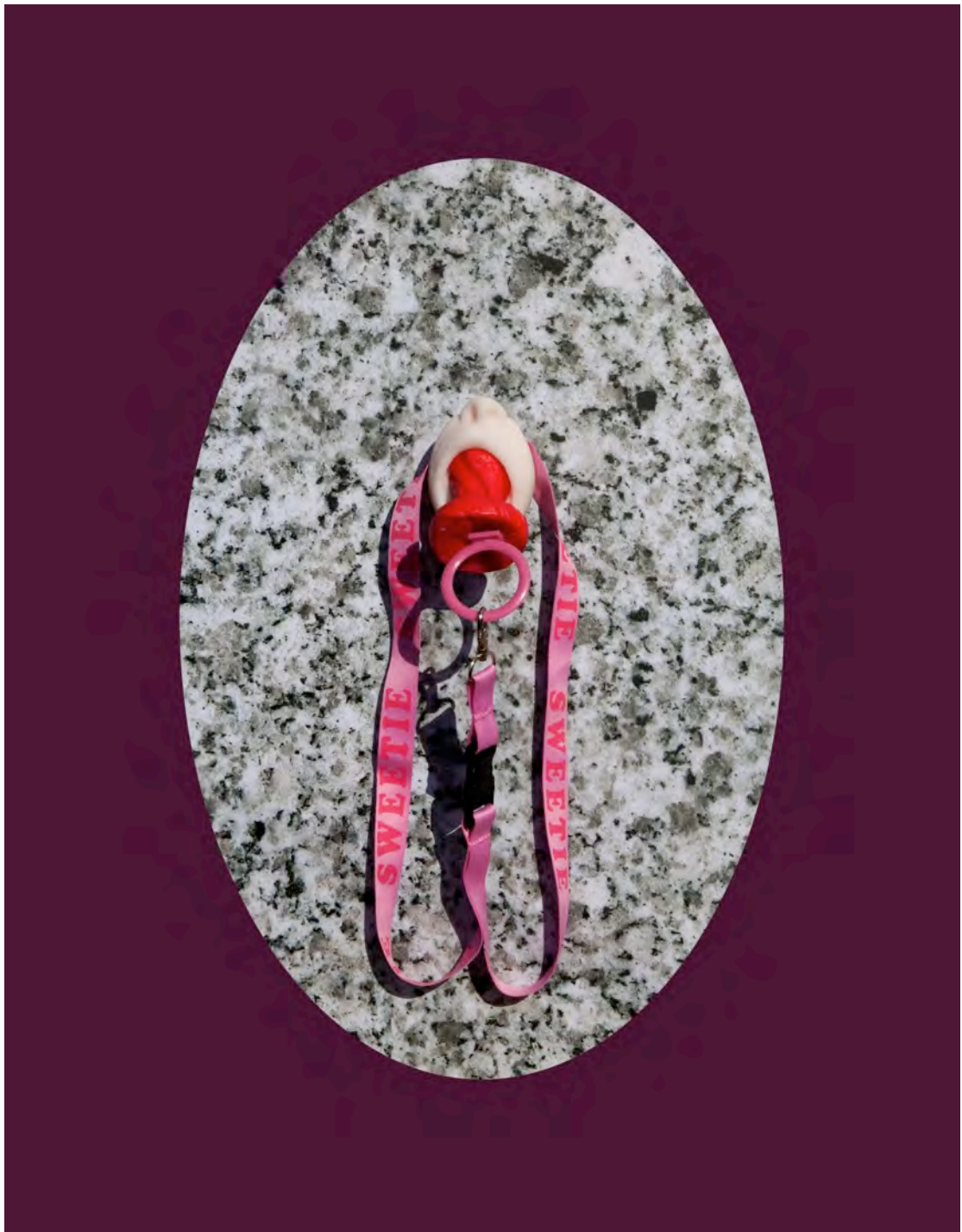
### PACIFIER

pacify (v.)

late 15c., "appease, allay the anger of (someone)," from Latin *pacificare* "to make peace; pacify,". Of countries or regions, "to bring to a condition of calm," c.1500, from the start with suggestions of submission and terrorization.

*Pacifier* considers consumption – particularly the body-labour required to achieve an ideal body – as a form of distraction from social inequality. Overt sexualisation and infantilisation is implied by the sweets, sex toys and nail art practice dummies representing pacified consumers.

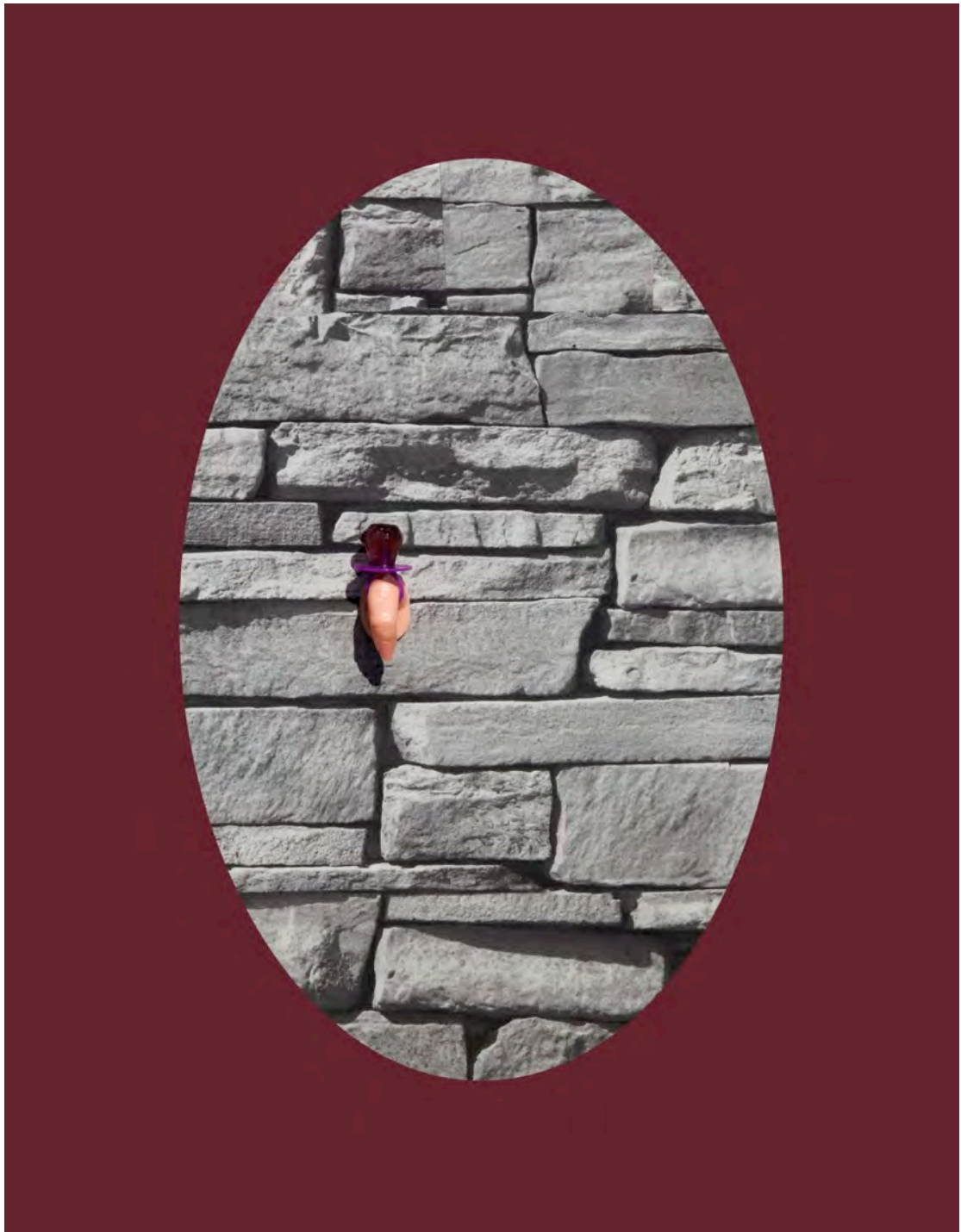
Each work contains multiple surfaces vying for attention; the textures of the faux surfaces in the ellipse directly compete with the objects they support and the coloured expanses surrounding them. The vignettes may be viewed as portraits or the trophy heads of a hunter.



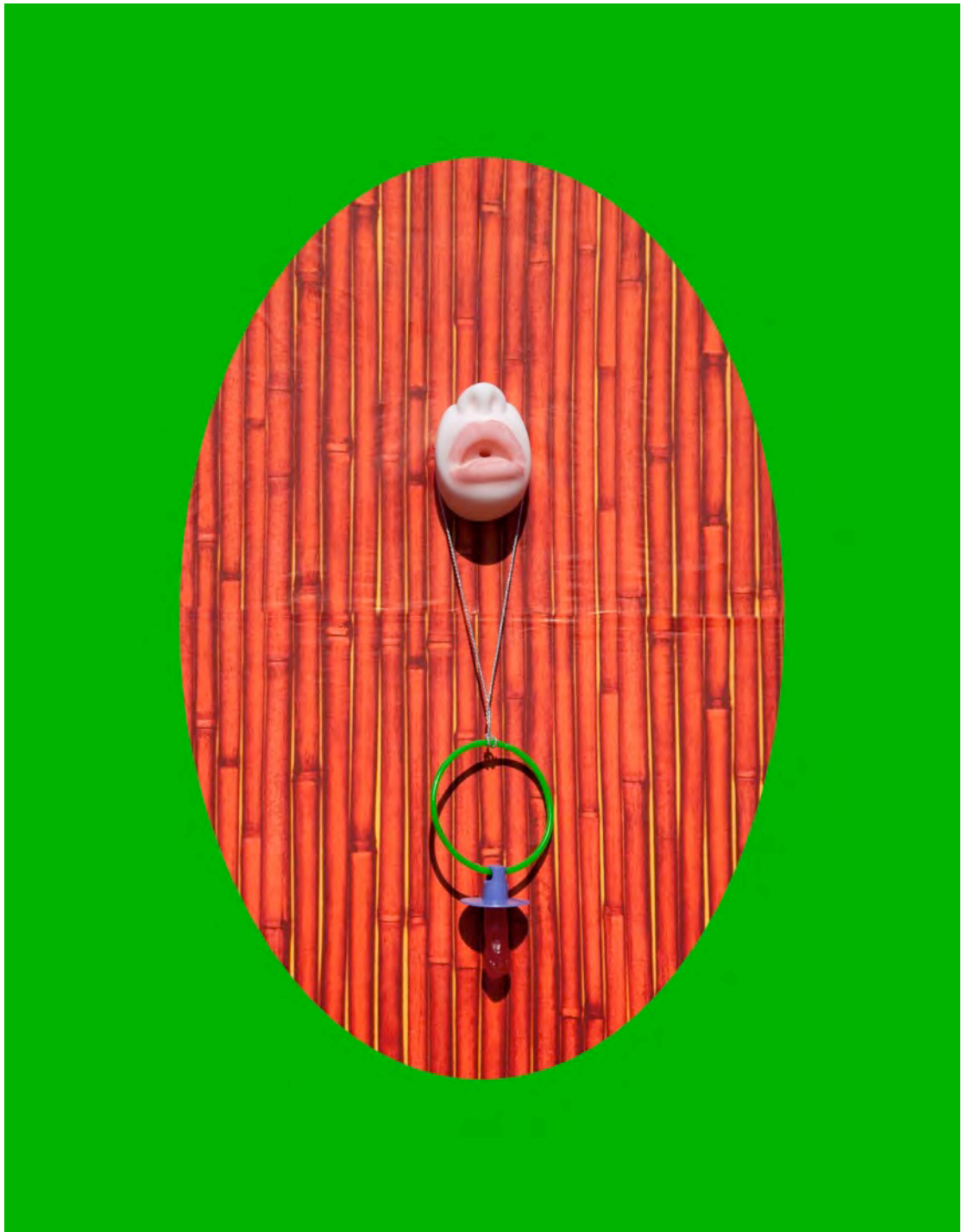
*Pacifier (01)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]



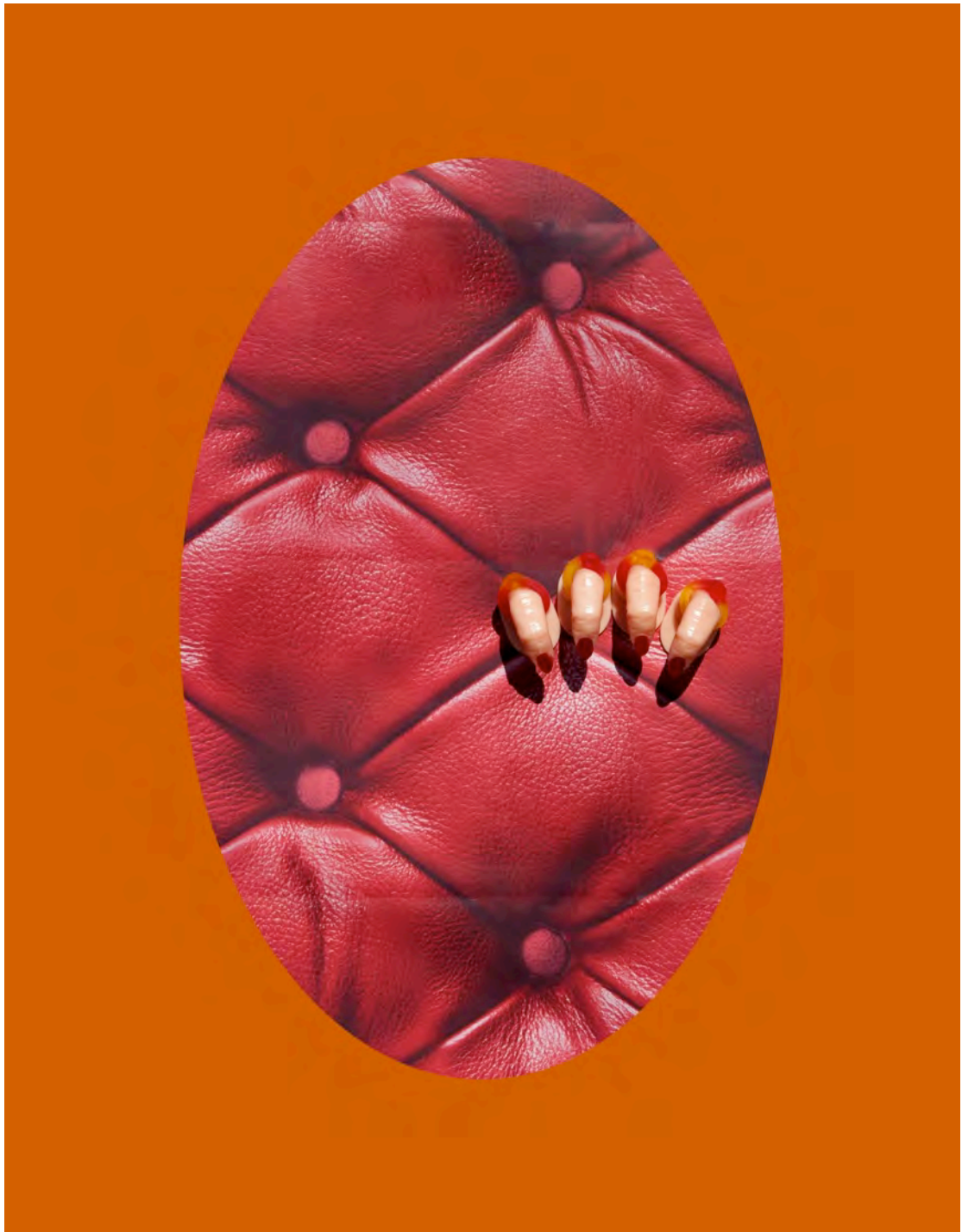
*Pacifier (03)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]



*Pacifier (02)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]



*Pacifier (05)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]



*Pacifier (06)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]





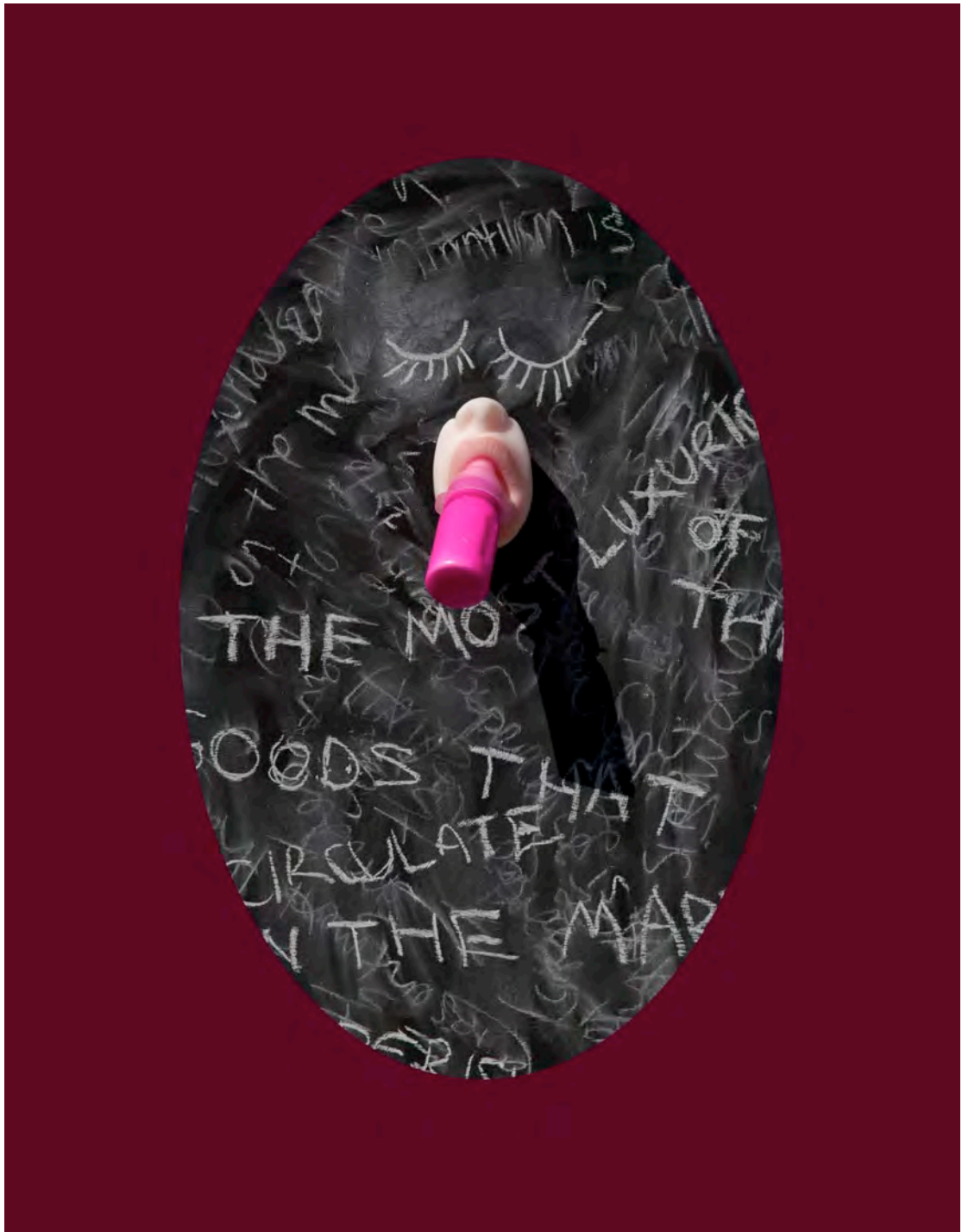
*Pacifier (09)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]



*Pacifier (10)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]



*Pacifier (14)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]



*Pacifier (16)*, 2014, 65cm x 50cm [digital photograph]

## Perverse Consumption

### *Perverse Shopping and Substitute Objects*

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries upper- and middle-class women had limited influence in social and political spheres, possessing power only as consumers. Because permissible middle- and upper-class female activities were frequently limited to household management, furnishing rooms and decorating their bodies, the women were:

trained from childhood to find the satisfactions of all their desires in material goods [...] Every troubling emotion or moral torment could be smoothed away by material objects. Every sentiment that might have encouraged women to rebel against their domestic imprisonment could be assuaged by a commodity.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is the basis for the seemingly therapeutic aspect of shopping that enables consumers to temporarily alleviate anxiety or depression through the acquisition of goods.<sup>2</sup> In *Female Perversions* Louise Kaplan says commodity culture influences the form that perversions take:

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1 Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Madame Bovary*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 513.

2 For example, in 'The Spending Of Money In Anxiety States' Karl Abraham suggests that patients who are unable to give love or sexual pleasure to others compulsively and excessively spend money as a compensatory gesture. By turning to the world of external objects during times of anxiety they also appear to show a desire for independence from overbearing parents or loved ones. Karl Abraham, 'The Spending Of Money In Anxiety States', in *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*, ed by Ernest Jones, trans. by Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey, 3rd edn., London: Maresfield Library, 1988 ['Das Geldausgeben im Angstzustand' in *Klinische Beiträge zur Psychoanalyse*, 1921]. In *Shopping with Freud* Rachel Bowlby describes the terminology shared by marketing professionals and psychoanalysts. Freudian psychoanalysis employs a framework based on the economic 'principles of value, cost and saving, of exchange, investments, compensation, promises of satisfaction, incentive bonuses and so on [...] There is a drama of attractions and interests, desires and choices, in which minds are forever seeking and forever failing to acquire the object that will satisfy their longings once and for all' (Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*. New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 115-6). In marketing discourse there is a 'Freudian' model that uses the threat of loss and promise of satisfaction to produce a desire to consume. Citing the definition of 'consumer' in the 1894 edition of Palgrave's *Dictionary of Political Economy* Bowlby notes the change of rhetoric from need to desire and the sexual connotation of 'consummation' (Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*. pp. 14-5).

What we have now is the law of consumerism, with its worship of things. From an early age, our children are learning that material goods are a substitute for security, self-esteem, and love and that sex is merely another of the commodities that can be purchased in the marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

She continues: ‘every perverse scenario is intimately related to the social and economic structures of our westernized industrial societies’.<sup>4</sup> Commodity culture produces pathologies characterised by aberrant relations to objects. For example, kleptomaniacs and fetishists seem to adhere to social conventions by preoccupying themselves with objects, but consumption is taken to a perverse level through theft and sexual excitation.

The stolen item and sexual fetish compensate symbolically for the absence of ‘love, of a sense of wholeness, belonging and well-being’.<sup>5</sup> Both objects act as memorials to absences and losses; they enable the denial of loss while presenting a signpost to it – it is both affirmed and disavowed. In an early twentieth-century account of kleptomania Wilhelm Stekel interpreted the act of theft as a displacement of the desire for forbidden sexual acts:

[Kleptomaniacs] fight against temptation. They are engaged in a constant struggle with their desires. They would like to do what is forbidden, but they lack the strength. Theft is to them a symbolic act. The essential point is that they do something that is forbidden, *touch* something that does not belong to them.<sup>6</sup>

Because kleptomania originates in repressed sexual desire, the object and act of stealing signify a variety of other frustrations caused by absences, restrictions, and humiliations experienced by the kleptomaniac. The

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<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, *Female Perversions*, op. cit., p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 523.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>6</sup> Dr Wilhelm Stekel, ‘The Sexual Root of Kleptomania’, *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 2 (1911) p. 240.

‘emotional energy’ produced by repression and frustration is transferred to the impulse to steal. Stekel continues:

When the transference has become firmly fixed, as regards the contents, from then on the impulse to steal remains definitely the ‘symbol of’ every desire for sexual gratification and absorbs the whole *emotional volume, all the impulsive energy of sexuality – becomes irresistible like sexual instinct*. And this displaced accentuation of passion causes the *pathological irresistible impulse*.<sup>7</sup>

Kleptomania is said to be the prototype female perversion and fetishism is its male counterpart, although neither perversion is exclusive to a single sex.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>8</sup> In Freudian psychoanalysis the fetish object is a substitute for the mother’s penis. As a young boy the fetishist sees that his mother does not have a penis and thinks she has been castrated. He is unable to accept the perception because it implies he might also be castrated. He disavows the memory and protects himself from castration threat by erecting a fetish. Freud says that women cannot become fetishists because they cannot fear castration. In Lacanian psychoanalysis the phallus is a phantasy object that no one possesses. The penis is mistaken for the phallus, creating the impression that men possess it. Women become phallic through decoration and display to be desired by someone who appears to possess the phallus. I think the fetish can be a substitute object for a variety of losses, humiliations and traumatic events regardless of sex. There are numerous psychoanalytic case studies of female fetishism to support this view. For examples of female fetishism case studies see; David Raphling, ‘Fetishism in a Woman’, in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 37 (1989); Arlene Richards, ‘Female Fetishes and Female Perversions: Hermine Hug-Hellmuth’s “A Case of Female Foot or More Properly Boot Fetishism” Reconsidered’, in *Psychoanalytic Review*, 77 (1990); George Zavitzianos, ‘Fetishism and Exhibitionism in the Female’, in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 52 (1971) and ‘The Perversion of Fetishism in Women’, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 51 (1982).

In other academic disciplines different forms of female fetishism have been theorised. Mary Kelly writes and produces art work in which a mother keeps objects such as baby clothes and blankets as fetishes that disavow the inevitable loss of her children when they grow up and leave her (Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996, and Emily Apter, ‘Fetishism and Visual Seduction in Mary Kelly’s “Interim”’, *October* 58 (1991)). Elizabeth Grosz theorises a form of lesbian fetishism in which a woman disavows her own castration and displaces the phallic value from her body/her mother’s body onto the body of another woman ‘but in contrast to the fetishist’s, her love object is not an inanimate or partial object but another subject’ (Grosz, ‘Lesbian Fetishism?’, in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. by Emily Apter and William Pletz, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 114). Also see Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 1994. In *Female Fetishism: A New Look*, Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen say that clothes fetishism, homeostism, and masquerade are forms of commodity fetishism or gendered consumer culture, female fetishism. Using object-relations theory they relate female fetishism to disavowal of individuation/separation from the mother. The fetish has a strong oral component and is a mother/breast substitute rather than phallic substitute. Gamman and Makinen say bulimia is a type of fetishism distinct from sexual, commodity, and

Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault, a psychiatrist practising in the early twentieth century, recounts four cases of female silk fetishists who were also kleptomaniacs. He did not diagnose fetishism in these cases because unlike male fetishism that is an ‘homage to the opposite sex’<sup>9</sup> putting ‘into play an entire fantasy of love, of union with the opposite sex, the perverse female passion for cloth is rooted in the very refusal of this fantasy’.<sup>10</sup> Clérambault described the female silk fetishists enjoying the cloth ‘with no more reverie than a solitary gourmet savoring a delicate wine’.<sup>11</sup> Her pleasure does not derive from the symbolism of a fetish or imagined sexual union with another, it is an immediate tactile pleasure. ‘Case F’ presents a forty-nine-year old woman who, arrested twenty two times in twenty years, said she was unable to wear silk because the sexual excitation it caused was too great.<sup>12</sup>

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anthropological fetishism. This form of new fetishism is similar to sexual fetishism because it is a pleasurable, partially satisfying redirection of a drive; bulimia is a partial satisfaction of the drive for nourishment not the sexual drive. It is characterised by an act of undoing because the food is purged and the binge does not affect the bulimic’s body (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1994). Gammen and Makinen say the object choice in bulimia is similar to the rigid specificity of sexual fetishism, because particular ‘indulgent’ foods such as a type of cake or cheese are eaten during a binge. However, this contradicts clinical accounts of bulimic food choices: Caitlin O’Hara and Savani Bartholdy, neuropsychologists at the eating disorder research group at King’s College London, told me that carbohydrates such as bread and pasta are frequently used as binge foods, indicating the influence of dominant social diet trends, not a highly personal object choice (oral discussion, London, October 2013).

9 Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault quoted in Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994, p. 108.

10 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994, p. 108.

11 *ibid.*, p. 108.

12 Petra Allen Shera, ‘Selfish Passions and Artificial Desire: Rereading Clérambault’s Study of “Silk Erotomania”’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 18:1 (2009).

Clérambault also had a professional interest in silk. While convalescing in Morocco he began to study and photograph traditional Arabic dress. He became an authority on the subject, teaching drapery courses at the École des Beaux-Arts and developed his own classification system of twistings, fastenings, and folds. Joan Copjec argues Clérambault did not share his silk fetishist patients’ pleasure in the soft sensual feel of the fabric, preferring stiffness and solidity. She argues his photographs (he produced over 40,000) also express this admiration because they do not show ‘cloth that flows from or hugs the outline of the body, not a cloth elaborately embellished, symbolically erotic, but a material whose plainest, best photographed feature is its stiff construction’ (Copjec, *Read My Desire*, op. cit., p. 111). Whether soft or stiff, silk was prized because of its tactile character.



Petra Allen Shera says that the advent of the department store led to this form of erotomania as for the first time the objects for sale were displayed in full view and within reach of the customers, who could touch them. Handling the silk made the women sexually aroused and the excitement produced the urge to steal. Shera argues ‘their condition was at once an extreme haptic intelligence and a deviant sexualized consumerism’, because they exaggerated the ‘natural tactile sensitivity’ women were deemed to possess.<sup>13</sup> Zola writes of the tempting sensuality of department store in *The Ladies’ Paradise*:

It seemed as if all the seductions of the shop had been leading up to this supreme temptation, that it was there that the hidden alcove of downfall was situated, the place of perdition where even the strongest succumbed. Hands were being plunged into the overflowing pieces of lace, quivering with intoxication from touching them.<sup>14</sup>

Zola distinguishes three types of female thieves: professional thieves, pregnant women who steal only one type of commodity such as ‘two hundred and forty-eight pairs of pink gloves stolen from every counter in Paris’, and ‘women with a mania for stealing, with a perverted desire, a new kind of neurosis which had been scientifically classified by a mental specialist who had observed the acute temptation exercised on them by big shops’.<sup>15</sup> The department stores changed the way the desire to consume was produced, resulting in new forms of perversion.

Shera also emphasises the relation between the new method of browsing goods and the development of perversion specific to them. She writes silk fetishism is:

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13 Shera, ‘Selfish Passions and Artificial Desire’, op. cit., p. 179.

14 Émile Zola, *The Ladies’ Paradise*, op. cit., pp. 75–6, p. 258.

15 *ibid.*, p. 249.

Like kleptomania in general and yet more disturbing at the same time, it was a licentious mirror to virtuous consumerism, played out in the relatively new world of amassed displays of seduction and often frivolous commodities. The condition's existence coincided with a newly emergent form of consumerism performed in the public spaces of the department stores. These shopping spaces encouraged intimacy with a commodity through visual and tactile immersion, creating hitherto unrealized possibilities for browsing the goods in person.<sup>16</sup>

The department store brought desirable commodities into close proximity, allowing the consumer to touch them and be seduced by overwhelming displays, encouraging them to 'become passionate about items for sale'.<sup>17</sup>

In contemporary consumer culture advertisements invest the commodities I buy with the significance of a fetish or kleptomania object that will reduce my anxiety by standing in for something I lack. Judith Williamson writes that 'all consumer products offer magic, and all advertisements are spells'<sup>18</sup> because the advertisements endow commodities with the magical ability to create 'beauty, love, [and] safety' for the consumer:<sup>19</sup>

Ideals, feelings, time past [...] and time future [...], worlds and people can all be miraculously contained in objects. This makes objects seem very important: society over-emphasizes and clings to them as the material representations of otherwise ungraspable things. Life and meaning are attached to objects that might seem worthless in themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Advertisements fill trivial things with sign-values that speak to my insecurities and desires, making them seem vital to my wellbeing. Advertising messages tell me to purchase commodities to feel content, complete, and valued ('because

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16 Shera, 'Selfish Passions and Artificial Desire', op. cit., p. 179.

17 *ibid.*, p. 179.

18 Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, 15th edn., London: Marion Boyars, 2010, p. 141.

19 *ibid.*, p. 142.

20 *ibid.*, p. 150.

I'm worth it'), implying that the commodities will compensate for absence and loss. Colgate sell MaxWhite Shine toothpaste with 'white micro-crystals' to strengthen enamel, resulting in a 'sparkling smile'. Healthy teeth may be the benefit offered but the 'seductive mint' flavour suggests the real value lies elsewhere: it will facilitate sexual encounters. Advertisements use the 'emotional volume' and 'impulsive energy' of anxiety and desire to compel me to purchase.<sup>21</sup> The product becomes a symbol for sexual gratification and the urge to buy is 'irresistible like sexual instinct'. Advertisers turn shopping into a '*pathological irresistible impulse*'.<sup>22</sup>

However, each commodity I buy is already marked by lack; as a commodity-on-display the superficial appeal of the commodity's surface conceals a deficit of quality, and as a sign-value the object is a signifier that points to but does not possess the quality signified. My compulsion to consume is provoked by anxiety and a belief that commodities can fill lack. The commodity fails to satisfy me causing my anxiety to return and maintaining the momentum of repetitious acquisition. This produces a continuous loop of demand, acquisition, and dissatisfaction.

### *Fashion and Death*

Benjamin writes that fashion is where 'the phantasmagoria of commodities presses closest to the skin'.<sup>23</sup> Here the coldness of the commodity creeps into my body. He writes:

Fashion prescribed the ritual by which the fetish commodity wished to be worshipped [...] It prostitutes the living body to the inorganic world. In relation to the living it represents the rights of the corpse.<sup>24</sup>

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21 Stekel, 'The Sexual Root of Kleptomania', p. 241.

22 *ibid.*, p. 241.

23 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

The beauty standards perpetuated by consumer culture require the continuous effort that Benjamin says is ‘reminiscent of the repetitive punishment of Hell’.<sup>25</sup> In order to remain ‘up-to-date’ and fashionable I engage in a continuous cycle of makeovers and body alterations.

My body, subjected to the ever-changing demands of fashion, becomes alienated from its own inexorable transformation. The mutability of ageing is treated as a problem that can be overcome with commodities. As the surface of the body becomes increasingly commodified, nature’s transiency is displaced onto the commodity along with the body’s beauty and sexuality. Benjamin writes: ‘for what is it that is desired? No longer the human being: Sex appeal emanates from the clothes that one wears.’<sup>26</sup> My ageing and transforming body gives up those propensities in exchange for constantly updated significations of ‘the biological rigor mortis of eternal youth’.<sup>27</sup> The surface of my body is emphasised, giving it a profane glimmer that conceals a hollowed-out shell, a semblance of life and youth. Benjamin writes that if I follow fashion in an attempt to defy ageing, my body ‘mimics the mannequin, and enters history as a dead object, a gaily decked-out corpse’.<sup>28</sup>

Psychoanalysts might also consider devotion to constantly changing fashion to be an unconscious denial of ageing and death. The psychoanalyst Arlene Richards identifies a variety of meanings attributed to the overvaluation of shopping for clothes, including the denial of any experience of loss, particularly the death of a parent. In ‘Ladies of Fashion: Pleasure, Perversion or Paraphilia’, she describes how a patient called Elinor spent most of her

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24 Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, *Perspecta*, 12 (1969 (1935)), trans. by *The New Left Review* [‘Paris, Hauptstadt des XIX Jahrhunderts’, in *Illuminationen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955] p. 168.

25 Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., pp. 99–100.

26 *ibid.*, p. 100.

27 *ibid.*, p. 99.

28 *ibid.*, p. 101.

weekends buying clothes and jewellery but usually returned them the following week. She had acquired this habit during her childhood when on shopping trips with her mother. Both Elinor and her mother displayed an unconscious need to do something and then undo it. Richards says the mother's cycle of buying and returning is a symptom of her desire to undo the early death of her own father. Richard hypothesises that Elinor was terrified that her mother would also die, so she bought and returned clothing to prove that 'anything could be undone, nothing was final, nothing was irreversible, not even death'.<sup>29</sup> Elinor and her mother unconsciously acknowledged their fear of death and simultaneously denied it. Because items of clothes could be bought, exchanged, worn, and discarded, all acts could be undone, all damage repaired, and nothing truly lost.

Another patient, Mary, a successful career woman, devoted a great deal of time to organising her wardrobe, removing the previous season's clothes, making adjustments to the garments, cleaning the drawers, and planning what to buy for the coming season. She followed fashion closely and felt compelled to buy clothes featured in fashion magazines. According to Richards, Mary's preoccupation with the ever-changing seasons of fashion enabled her to deny the real passage of time. She was able to repudiate her own ageing body and the advancing years of her parents by constantly updating her wardrobe. When Mary's doctor informed her that she had menopausal symptoms she felt a strong impulse to spend thousands of dollars on clothes. When the maturation of her body had become medically evident and her denial of ageing was jeopardised, the fantasised shopping spree may have represented more than a distraction from reality, a hopeless compensatory act to cover up all the losses that could no longer be denied.

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<sup>29</sup> Arlene Richards, 'Ladies of Fashion: Pleasure, Perversion or Paraphilia', in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 77 (1996), p. 344.

Mary's urge to spend 'thousands of dollars' on clothes recalls Foster's description of the alienation of extreme wealth in *pronkstilleven* paintings creating an effect of 'deathly suspension or [...] an eerie animation, with the objects at once chilled and charged by the speculative gaze fixed upon them'.<sup>30</sup> The expensive clothes covering her body produce a distance because they signify wealth that is unattainable for many and therefore beyond grasp. Perhaps the distancing effect of the expensive commodities and the 'speculative gaze' with which they are viewed protects the ageing body from scrutiny.

In Benjamin's conception of the relation between fashion and time, the endless cycle of renewal of styles and trends enables the consumer to believe the surface of the body is unaffected by the entropic effects of time because characteristics of transience and variation are transferred from the body onto the commodities. Mary constantly buys new clothes to disavow any change occurring in the body underneath. The clothes act as a veil, covering over the transformation she wishes to deny. In Benjamin's theory of commodity fetishism the commodity appropriates positive attributes of the body, reducing it to an inanimate thing. In Mary's case the 'rigor mortis of eternal youth' is a compromise solution that is preferable to ageing and death.

Mary and Elinor use shopping to assuage anxiety caused by 'real' experiences, but the form of their symptoms reiterates the dominant messages of advertisements, magazines, and television programmes, which demand that signs of ageing should be prevented. Age-defying moisturisers and makeover programmes using cosmetic surgery, make-up, and clothing to make the participants look *Ten Years Younger*<sup>31</sup> imply that consumption will 'turn back time', suggesting that old age and death can be prevented. Consumer practices reinforce pathological symptoms and pathologise the relation between the

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<sup>30</sup> Foster, 'The Art of Fetishism', op. cit., p. 257.

<sup>31</sup> *Ten Years Younger*, director unknown, Maverick Productions: Channel 4 Broadcast, 2008.

consumer and her/his body. As Wolfgang Fritz Haug writes: ‘When capital chooses to profit from body care, there is no way that the existing relationship of the individual to their body can withstand this avaricious power.’<sup>32</sup>

*Profane Glimmer and Fetishistic Looking*

Like the commodity, the appeal of the surface of the body is enhanced and individuality subsumed to appearances. According to the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, reducing a person’s individuality is a form of fetishistic dehumanisation:

Even the pornographer’s seemingly trivial airbrush removes the truth, the little blemishes that are unbearable, unaesthetic. This is dehumanization. With it, because we cannot stand the revelations of intimacy, we deprive others of their fullness. We see them only as members of classes or as possessors of selected parts or qualities only. We anatomize them.<sup>33</sup>

Stoller describes perversion as an erotic form of hatred and an unconscious act of revenge for humiliations experienced in the past. Because of these violent unconscious wishes the individual suspects that any form of intimacy will allow the other person to retaliate by merging with and taking possession of their body, resulting in loss of control and loss of self. Fetishistic dehumanisation protects the fetishist because all contact with the body of the sexual partner is premeditated and controlled. The body must be deadened and turned into an object. By removing signs of ageing and death through commodification of the body, the consumer’s body is fetishistically dehumanised and ‘lured into the realm of dead things’.<sup>34</sup>

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32 Wolfgang F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, op. cit., p. 76.

33 Robert Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985 p. 32.

34 Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., p. 101.

One of Stoller's case-studies describes Olympia, a stripper and pornography centre-fold who displays a fetishistic dissociation of her own body, turning her body into an object for the pleasure of others. Stoller argues that Olympia dehumanises her body to the point that she experiences it as a separate entity. It was not *her* but simply a tool used to sexually excite men and a commodity used to earn money. Using commodified tropes of sexuality she crafts her body through pose, props, and gesture, constructing her surface to maximise its appeal. Her body exists only through its value in exchange: she offers sexual excitation and receives money in return.<sup>35</sup>

Similar to Haug's description of the flirtatious advertising messages designed to appeal to the desire of all consumers, Olympia also creates herself in the image of generic desire; she becomes 'a person that appeals to the sexuality in everyone'.<sup>36</sup> She describes her marketing strategy:

You don't decide what an audience wants: rather, you fill a void that's there. I try to keep myself receptive to what they want to see [...] to say a little about myself in each thing I do so that each person in the audience will see what they want to see.<sup>37</sup>

She is a sign-value for sexual satisfaction, an indistinct message that hints at the fulfilment of an equally vague desire in the consumer: a void that needs to be filled. Olympia appears to be a commodity that has come to life. Her profane

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35 In *The Clinical Lacan* Joël Dor says defiance and transgression are the two possible outcomes for perverse desire. The pervert repeatedly provokes the law in order to prove that it is there, but the law is not transgressed. The fetish object disavows and avows knowledge of a law (castration, loss of power) simultaneously enabling the fetishist to function within the confines of the law without transgressing or disrupting it. Olympia's use of her body as a sexual commodity could be viewed as a transgression of social norms because she experiences a form of social mobility and power from her job. However the privileges she experiences are heavily circumscribed and fix her in the position of sexual commodity (*The Clinical Lacan*, ed. by Judith Feher-Gurewich in collaboration with Susan Fairfield, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 2001).

36 Interview with Olympia quoted in Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*, op. cit., p. 77.

37 Interview with Olympia, *ibid.*, p. 73.



glimmer and the constant variation of her performances<sup>38</sup> add novelty and keep the consumer consuming. Her chosen name places her in the canon of art history and the history of bodies for sale. But she also resembles another Olympia, the beautiful automaton seemingly brought to life in Hoffmann's tale *The Sandman*.

Olympia is a perfect commodity, her beautiful surface distracts attention from the mechanics within. In 'The Sandman' Nathanael catches a glimpse of Olympia but is kept at a distance. He is only able to regard her closely when he buys a magnifying lens. He is dazzled by her beauty but perceived 'a singular look of fixity and lifelessness' in her eyes. This only concentrates his determination to look more carefully, and eventually 'he fancied a light like humid moonbeams came into them. It seemed as if their power of vision was now being enkindled; their glances share with ever-increasing vivacity.'<sup>39</sup> He was deceived into thinking that his desiring look was reciprocated. In the distance between them his expectations heightened his delusion. The centre-fold photograph of Olympia acts in this way, creating a deceptive closeness and the illusion of the collusion of desire.

Kaplan describes the visual character of the fetish as 'a glaring lie and fetishistic tropes as blunt metaphors, vividly bright, iconic images that blind us'.<sup>40</sup> She continues: 'The hyper pigmented image is a sham, the false gold that distracts the viewer by glittering up the perceptual field'.<sup>41</sup> Emily Apter also comments on the frequent occurrence of fetish objects with shiny surfaces.

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<sup>38</sup> I use the term performances to refer to live strip shows on stage and transcribed interviews that accompany photographs of Olympia in pornographic magazines. In both instances her actions / comments are produced with the desire of the audience in mind. She is careful to give enough detail to stimulate imagination while leaving space for the audience to project their fantasies into.

<sup>39</sup> Ernst T.A. Hoffmann, 'The Sandman' *The Best Tales of Hoffman*, trans. by J. T. Bealby, ed. by E. F. Bleier, New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1967 ['Der Sandmann' in *Die Nachtstücke*, Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1817] p. 203.

<sup>40</sup> Louise J. Kaplan, 'Fits and Misfits: The Body of a Woman', *American Imago*, 50 (1993a), p. 462.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 469.

Apter refers to a case study in *Fetishism* in which Freud writes that the fetish is not an object but a shine on the nose (*'Glanz auf der Nase'*)<sup>42</sup>. Freud argues *Glanz* derives from 'glance' something seen but not fully comprehended.<sup>43</sup> Apter argues that the *Glanz* / glance is a 'disguise of shininess (as in the German *Schein*, or false appearance), used by the fetishist to divert attention from the essentially anal-erotic nature of his perversion'.<sup>44</sup> The glittering of the fetish is a lure and a distraction, its enticing surface enables disavowal.

The beauty of Olympia is also a sham; Nathanael's gaze is fetishistically intensified because the lens 'hyperfocalises' and fragments her body. Apter writes that 'the fetishist does indeed refuse to look, but in refusing to look, he stares. It is a "not looking" sustained paradoxically through visual fixation on the substitute phallus'.<sup>45</sup> Staring into her eyes he is led to believe that his desire will be fulfilled. Olympia seems to be a perfect fetish that 'allows its believer to maintain a fantasy of *presence* even when all signs point to absence. The fetish magically procures illusions that nothing is amiss even when no power remains for belief'.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Erotic Sign-Value Exchange and Fetishistic Compromise*

The viewer of pornography might be misled into reading reciprocated sexual pleasure in the pose of the body of Olympia the centre-fold. S/he might forget

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42 Freud, 'Fetishism', in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey, London: Penguin Books, 1991

[*'Fetischismus'*, *Almanach 1929*, 17-24] p. 351.

43 *ibid.*, p. 351.

44 Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 181-2.

Apter also lists other fetishism case studies noted for the shininess of the fetish dating from Richard von Kraft-Ebbing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) to Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel in *Éthique et esthétique de la perversion* (1984), who noted the popularity of 'waxed surfaces, satin undergarments, and gleaming boots' (p. 182). Chasseguet-Smirgel notes fetish objects frequently were debased by unpleasant smells and idealised by the 'pristine' shiny surface.

45 *ibid.*, p. xiii.

46 Jann Matlock, 'Masquerading Women, Pathologized Men: Cross-Dressing, Fetishism, and the Theory of Perversion, 1882-1935', in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 58.

that a transaction has taken place. The indistinct lure of the commodified body conceals the fact that the desired object is a commodity, and the viewer is lured into a fetishistic form of sexuality. In turn, the partial satisfaction afforded by concealed sexual fetishism creates the illusion of a satisfying commodity, a thing that produces pleasure, in and of itself. The viewer of pornographic photographs mistakes the erotic for desire. Jean Baudrillard outlines the difference between them:

We have to distinguish the erotic body – substrate of the exchanged signs of desire – from the body as a site of fantasy and abode of desire. In the drive/body, the fantasy/body, the individual structure of desire predominates. In the ‘eroticized’ body, it is the social function of exchange which predominates.<sup>47</sup>

Olympia describes herself as ‘a female impersonator’ because she wore her female body like an outfit or a disguise.<sup>48</sup> To conceal the dissociation from her drive or fantasy body she covers herself in erotic signs. Her ambition is to create an archetypal sexual female body. By accepting objectification she negates some of its inherent passivity – she achieves a limited form of subjectivity by reducing her body to a fetish. She says: ‘so now, I have much more credibility with people. I say things and people listen now, even though I’m the exact same person I was five years ago. The main centrefold is saying that. So it must be important’.<sup>49</sup>

When Olympia speaks it is the voice of the commodity fetish that is heard. Olympia creates a diversion; she seems to offer her audiences a short cut to the satisfaction of their desire. She says that ‘though I plan to play a part, the reader doesn’t know that. They think that’s me and that’s my name’.<sup>50</sup> She resembles a drive or fantasy body in order to lure the viewers into accepting an

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<sup>47</sup> Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Olympia quoted in Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Olympia, *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Olympia, *ibid.*, p. 77.

erotic sign-value, a commodity. Her position is fundamentally reductive but the consumer is also reduced in this process, becoming a passive, pre-determined form of desiring being that can be packaged and reproduced. The body as a commodity fetish moulds the viewer's aesthetic tastes around its shape. As the aesthetic of desire is transformed all other bodies must turn themselves into commodity fetishes in order to excite desire. The image is seamless: a commodity fetish results in sexual fetishism that in turn conceals the commodification of desire.

The lure of Olympia's body may evoke the hyperpigmentation of a fetish, but it is the profane glimmer of the commodity that dazzles her audience. Freud says fetishists do not seek a cure for their fetishism, because they rarely view it as a 'symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life'.<sup>51</sup> He continues: 'what other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all'.<sup>52</sup> Sexual fetishism is a compromise in which partial satisfaction is achieved when overall expectations are severely reduced:

Where desire endlessly explores reality for a satisfaction that is never forthcoming, the fetish steps in to close the circuit of desire by providing a partially satisfying solution, and does so in the attempt to protect the subject from the world's non-conformity to desire's high expectations.<sup>53</sup>

A fetish object offers partial satisfaction but it is predictable and easily attainable. For consumption to provide a similar form of satisfaction it would be compulsive. For Elinor there was no need to use the commodity, she returned the item in order not to be disappointed and her desire was sustained

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<sup>51</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', op. cit., p. 351.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>53</sup> Christopher M. Gemerchak, 'Preface', in *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan (Figures of the Unconscious)*, ed. by Christopher M. Gemerchak, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004, p. 9.

by repeated acquisition. Commodity and sexual fetish share a common structure of overvaluation and disavowal as well as certain aesthetic codes making consumption '*irresistible like sexual instinct*'.<sup>54</sup> But unlike the sexual fetish, the commodity reneges when it comes to the climax.

Olympia is not a partially satisfying object of desire; she is subject to the ever-changing demands of novelty that constitute a 'repetitive punishment of Hell'.<sup>55</sup> The pathological nature of compulsive consumption is not fetishistic, but bears structural resemblance to hysterical questioning.

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<sup>54</sup> Stekel, 'The Sexual Root of Kleptomania', op. cit., p. 241.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

## CELEBRATE (BLANCMANGE DENTATA)

The *Blancmange Dentata* photographs were made in response to written entries on 'thinspiration' and 'pro-anorexia' websites, in which anorexics describe the temptation of food and their attempts to suppress the desire to eat. The photographs suggest that consumption is both threatening and appealing – although the food is a biting mouth, it is also soft and unable to cause injury.



*Blancmange Dentata (A)*, 2012, 50cm x 62cm [c-type photograph]



*Blancmange Dentata (B)*, 2012, 50cm x 62cm [c-type photograph]

## Hysterical Consumers, Performing Symptoms

### *Alienating Images and Fragmented Bodies*

In Lacanian psychoanalysis the mirror phase marks the advent of the child's delusional apprehension of itself as a separate being. At first an infant lacks the motor skills needed to fend for itself and experiences its body as sensory fragments indistinguishable from its environment. During the first year of life the infant comes to view another infant (often older, with more developed motor skills) as a reflection of its own body or is held in front of a mirror and told "there you are". At first the infant perceives the mirror image as another real infant. During this part of the mirror phase the infant experiences confusion between self and other. Lacan writes 'during the whole of this period, we note the emotional reactions and the spoken accounts of a normal transitivity. The child who strikes another says he has been struck; the child who sees another fall, cries'.<sup>1</sup> During the second part of the mirror phase the infant comes to recognise the mirror image as an image and is able to distinguish it from the reality of the other. In the final part of the process of identification with the mirror image the infant comes to view it as her/his own image.

By apprehending itself in an image of a complete and separate body, the infant is able to define the boundaries of its own body whose movements it begins to master. Joël Dor writes, 'in *re-cognising* himself through the image, he is able to reassemble the scattered, fragmented body into a unified totality, the representation of his own body'.<sup>2</sup> For Lacan the fragmented

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1 Jacques Lacan [*Écrits*, 1948, p. 19] translation modified by Joël Dor, *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan*, ed. by Judith Feher-Gurewich, trans. by Susan Fairfield, 2nd edn, New York: Other Press, 1989 [*Introduction à la lecture de Lacan, 1: L'inconscient structuré comme un langage*, Paris: Denöel, 1985] p. 96.

2 Joël Dor, *ibid.*, p. 96. The term *rassembler* is translated as 'reassemble' although it has been suggested that 'gather' would be a more appropriate translation because 'reassemble' implies the body was once whole, then broken and put back together (Francette Pacteau, annotation, May 2016). In Lacanian psychoanalysis the body is not experienced as whole



body is a retroactive and fearful fantasy formed with the realisation of the body as a totality that can be mastered. Because the infant still lacks motor coordination the unified body is anticipated rather than experienced, resulting in a split between the real experience of physical immaturity and the ideal image of the body. The infant is therefore simultaneously captivated by and alienated in the ideal image.

Lacan argues the mental images produced during the mirror phase have a formative effect on the individual's subjectivity. The ideal images of the mirror phase produce the infant's first experiences of rivalry. They are alienating images producing an 'inner conflictual tension, which leads to the awakening of his desire for the object of the other's desire'. Her/his ego develops through aggressive competition and a triangular relation between ego, other, and object of desire.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the mental images produced during the mirror phase are idealised and form the basis of the ego-ideal. Others, grouped together as 'imagos of the fragmented body', including 'images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, and bursting open of the body' result in aggressive tendencies.<sup>4</sup> Experiences of inferiority can revoke the 'imagos of the fragmented body', giving rise to self-hatred that characterises our relation to ourselves.

Lacan writes that the split produced by the mirror image initiates the formation of the ego: 'it is here that the image of the body gives the subject the first form which allows him to locate what pertains to the ego and what

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and complete. It is always fragmented and characterised by lack. It is experienced as 'broken' as a result of the *'rassembler'*.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 2nd edn, trans. by Bruce Fink, London and New York: W.W. Norton, 2002 [*Écrits*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966] p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 85.

does not'.<sup>5</sup> The individual is able to differentiate the self from the rest of the world, and begins to reject some elements of the external world while others are internalised and projected as future ideals. Introjection is a normal phase of development and a defence mechanism that assuages separation anxiety by replacing an absent external object with a permanently present internal object. Internal objects, in the form of either positive or negative attributes, are also externalised when they are projected onto external others. Projection is a process in which aspects of the self and internal objects are imaginarily perceived as belonging to someone else. The internal object can be a positive characteristic or feeling that is projected onto another, enabling narcissistic identification to occur. I may project an aspect of my personality, such as creativity, onto another because I would like to form a relationship with them. It allows me to identify with them through a shared attribute that I value. It can also be a negative characteristic or feeling that is denied in the self when attributed to someone else. If I love someone but I do not believe my feelings are returned, I may deny my feeling by claiming s/he loves me but I hate her/him.

The illusion of unity and promise of completeness of the mirror image initiates the creation of an ideal ego, a projection of an omnipotent 'future self'. Attempting to reduce the gap between the ego and its ideal, the child tries to regain the jubilant sense of mastery experienced with the first encounter with the mirror image. This primary identification affects all future identifications with others. Initially the individual identifies with others as prototype egos for the self, but as the ego strengthens and develops, the other is viewed as an object. The self-love of the initial encounter with the mirror is transformed into love for another.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1. Freud's Papers on Technique*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by John Forrester, 2 edn, London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1998 [*Le Séminaire. Livre 1. Les écrits techniques de Freud*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1975] p. 79.

The ego-ideal is not modelled on the primary identification with the mirror image but on secondary identifications with external others. It is formed by introjection, as the external models are integrated into the ego. Lacan describes introjection as a reversal or ‘see-saw’ movement between identification with the ideal ego of the mirror image and projection of a secondary identification towards an ego-ideal:

The perpetual reversion of desire to form and of form to desire, in other words of consciousness and body, of desire in so far as it is a part of the loved object, in which the subject literally loses himself, and with which he is identified, is the fundamental mechanism around which everything relating to the *ego* turns.<sup>6</sup>

The child ‘see-saws’ between two different forms of identification that either direct desire inwards towards a jubilant omnipotence of the ideal ego that is unachievable, or outwards towards an ego-ideal and a sublimation of the wish to regress to the imagined jubilant omnipotence of the mirror image.

### *Performing Symptoms*

Confusion relating to the nature of one’s desire causes a conflict that captivates the hysteric. S/he cannot identify with the mirror image and is unable to position her/his self as a woman or man.<sup>7</sup> Descriptions of hysteria were first recorded in the Kahun Papyrus in 1900 BC as ‘disorders in

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> In Lacanian psychoanalysis sexuation relates to a position rather than a sign of gender. Alexandre Stevens explains sexuation as the logical choice between two positions. The male position is placed under the threat of castration and offers phallic pleasure in relation to the self. In the female position the subject has access to supplementary enjoyment in relation to the other that is polymorphous and is not bound by the limits of the phallus. The two positions male and female are structured in relation to limited and unlimited enjoyment. Alexandre Stevens, ‘Unlimited Enjoyments’ (unpublished conference paper, *The Speaking Body is Today’s Unconscious: Psychoanalysis in the 21st Century*, Kingston University and St Martins School of Art (UAL), 2016).

spontaneous uterus movement within the female body'.<sup>8</sup> The condition was treated by strategic placement of malodorous substances to repel the uterus and pleasantly scented ones to lure it back into place.

In the sixteenth century Thomas Sydenham, an English physician, was the first to recognise that hysterical symptoms were mimetic and could simulate other organic illnesses. He opposed the view that hysteria was related to the uterus and believed men could suffer from it. By the eighteenth century hysteria began to be viewed as a neurological illness, an idea developed by Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Despite the advances in knowledge produced by Charcot, along with evidence of male hysteria, the theory of the 'wandering womb' was still commonly accepted in the late nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer advanced the diagnosis of the illness in *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, linking hysterical symptoms to childhood fantasies and repressed wishes. The symptomology of hysteria assisted in Freud's development of the discipline of psychoanalytic technique. Freud's most famous case study of hysteria is *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ("Dora")*. At eighteen years of age Ida Bauer, denoted by Freud using the pseudonym Dora, entered treatment with Freud after her parents found a letter written by Dora that appeared to be a suicide note. Dora also suffered from attacks of nervous coughing and loss of voice. Freud interpreted the strangulating pressure she felt on her throat to be a displacement of a sensation relating to a repressed memory. When she was fourteen years old, Herr K., a family friend, contrived to be alone with Dora

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8 Cecilia Tasca *et al*, 'Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health', in *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health*, 8 (2012).

The Egyptian document did not call the illness hysteria, the term first came into use approximately two thousand years ago. It is commonly accepted that Hippocrates was the first to diagnose symptoms of hysteria as emanation from uterus movement.

9 Treatment of hysteria at the Salpêtrière hospital is discussed in the following chapter.

10 Cecilia Tasca *et al*, 'Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health', *op. cit.*

and kissed her. Freud writes that Dora felt the pressure of Herr K.'s erect penis against her groin and with a strong feeling of disgust, repressed the memory and displaced the sensation from the groin to her throat. The upward movement of the symptom suggests denial of the sexual nature of the experience. Freud told Dora that she was in love with Herr K. because her episodes of loss of voice matched in length, and coincided with, periods of time when Herr K. was away. Freud writes 'when the man she loved was away she gave up speaking; speech has lost its value since she couldn't speak to *him*'.<sup>11</sup>

At the time of her treatment with Freud Dora was tormented by her father's affair with Frau K., but earlier in the affair had facilitated their clandestine meetings. Freud interprets this contradiction as the result of two simultaneous identifications: with Frau K. in the position of her father's lover, and with her mother, the displaced former lover. Her desire to be the object of her father's desire is a displacement of her desire to be the object of Herr K.'s desire. Unconsciously she wants to be his lover and regrets that she had rejected his advances.

In his rereading of Freud's case study, Lacan argues that Dora's hysteria resulted from her inability to determine if she desired Frau K. or as an ideal ego or an object of desire. Freud writes 'when Dora talked about Frau K., she used to praise her "adorable white body" in accents more appropriate to a lover than to a defeated rival'.<sup>12</sup> He continues 'she had been given a present of some jewellery [by her father] which was exactly like some that she had seen in Frau K.'s possession and had wished for aloud at that

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11 Sigmund Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ("Dora")', in *The Freud Reader*, 2nd. edn, ed. by Peter Gay, trans. by James Strachey, London: Vintage Books, 1995 [*Bruchstücke einer Hysterie-Analyse*], Parts 1 and 2, in *Monatsschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie*, pp. 285-309 and pp. 408-467, Berlin: S Karger, 1905] p. 192.

12 *ibid.*, p. 205.

time'.<sup>13</sup> To make his generosity toward Frau K. less conspicuous Dora's father gives her the same jewellery. Dora seemed to desire Frau K. but her father's gifts and Herr K.'s desire also made Dora Frau K.'s equivalent. She 'see-saws' between primary and secondary identifications unable to escape the question of her own desire. Freud fails to recognise and name Dora's desire for Frau K., so it was forbidden and repressed. Because Dora is unable to recognise her own desire she was unable to symbolise her body as an object of desire. She did not know who she was.<sup>14</sup>

For the hysteric the split between subject and object that takes place during the mirror phase is intolerable. The hysteric cannot identify with the mirror image and is unable to construct an image of the self. Through hysterical symptoms s/he expresses her/his lack of identity and repeatedly poses the questions 'who am I?', 'am I a man or a woman?'. The answer she/he receives is never adequate because it confirms she/he is both subject and object. Gérard Wajeman, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, writes:

By answering the subject's question: "Who am I?" the Other lets the subject come into being; but any given answer, necessarily specific, reduces the subject's quest to a finite object: "Who you are? A saint, a fool, a hospital case..." Calling the subject into being, the hysteric's "Who?" in response receives a what that objectifies her. Tell me who I am? --> You are what I say.<sup>15</sup>

Because the hysterics demand always receives an objectifying response the question is repeatedly posed through the hysterical symptoms of the body.

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> In *A Case of Hysteria* Sharon Kivland describes each event in the case study from the viewpoints of each participant. The different viewpoints allow multiple causes and motivations to be hypothesised. Kivland includes the voices of psychoanalysts and theorists who have analysed and written about Dora in subsequent years, providing a full investigation of the fragment of analysis provided by Freud (Sharon Kivland, *A Case of Hysteria*, London: Book Works, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Wajeman, Gérard, 'The Hysteric's Discourse', *The Symptom*, 4 (2003)  
<<http://www.lacan.com/hystericdiscf.htm>> [accessed 5 February 2016].

The questioning subject is also the object of the answer, so the split within the self becomes unavoidable. Because of the failure to integrate the image of the self as an object, secondary identifications and the processes of introjection and projection are inhibited. In *Freudian Passions* Jan Campbell compares hysterical identification to dressing up in other people's clothes:

Unable to choose, the hysteric is always trying everyone's clothes, selves, and desires on for size [...] the ability to impersonate another person's ego and their desires defines hysteria. And yet this mobility of identification, this mobility to select what, or who she can become is another refusal on the part of the hysteric, to acknowledge the benefits of reality over fantasy.<sup>16</sup>

The hysteric tries on other people's egos and desires but these do not help her/him to recognise her/his own reality; the process of identification is mimetic but not creative because the external objects are not introjected and do not enrich her/his ego.<sup>17</sup> The hysteric oscillates between different states without coming any closer to an understanding of who s/he is and what s/he wants. In a description that evokes aggression and injury Joël Dor argues the hysteric is 'vampirizing the other woman who, she assumes, has brought

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16 Jan Campbell, *Freudian Passions: Psychoanalysis, Form and Literature*. London: Karnac Books, 2013, p. 17.

17 Although identification in hysteria is mimetic, the intelligence and creativity of hysterics is frequently commented upon. Freud says Dora was gifted, intellectually precocious, and 'developed into a mature young woman of very independent judgment, who had grown accustomed to laugh at the efforts of doctors, and in the end to renounce their help entirely' (Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ("Dora")', p. 180). Juliet Mitchell has also commented on the creativity of hysteria: 'There has always been a creative potential in hysteria; the emptying-out of the subject allows for creativity as well as for traumatic response. The issue then becomes how conscious or unconscious, how driven to create is the hysteric (as was Dostoevsky, whose hysterical epileptic fits took place as a prelude to a burst of writing) or, on the contrary, compelled to repetition until death (as with Don Juan)?' (Mitchell, Juliet, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria*, New York: Basic Books, 2000, p. 39). She argues contemporary hysteria in both men and women resembles the actions of Don Juan whose creative performance is seduction and deceit. She writes: 'as an artist he has also found his creative programme in some of the performative preoccupations of post-modernism which consciously put into effect much of what hysteria is unconscious of' (ibid., p. 38).

her feminine identity to the state of perfection'.<sup>18</sup> The hysteric is not simply 'trying on' an identity; s/he consumes the other in the process of mimesis.

### *Hysterical Rivalry and Advertisements*

Juliet Mitchell proposes that hysteria can be caused by unconscious rivalry between siblings and peers. A sibling rival threatens the hysteric's position as a unique child. Without this identity the hysteric is unable to conceptualise the self; the anxiety caused by this absence of self is temporarily relieved by powerful identification with and jealousy towards the rival. The fear of a loss of uniqueness pushes the hysteric to assume a position of mimetic sameness. The hysteric does not introject aspects of the rival's identity but unconsciously tries to inhabit its place.<sup>19</sup>

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* Freud describes two instances of identification in which an individual mimetically introjects a single trait of another. In the first example, a little girl expresses her unconscious rivalry toward her mother by developing a cough similar to the cough afflicting her mother. The cough as a symptom is an expression of her desire to take the mother's place in the father's affection while at the same time taking on her mother's affliction as a penance for her jealous rivalry. In the second example, Dora develops a cough to unconsciously identify with her father. Freud interprets Dora's identification with her father as a sign of her desire for him, but Lacan writes that she is identifying with a rival in her desire for Frau K.<sup>20</sup> In both cases the hysteric mimics an aspect of the rival in a form

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18 Joël Dor, *The Clinical Lacan*, ed. by Judith Feher-Gurewich in collaboration with Susan Fairfield, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 2001, p. 88.

Our relation to others is structured by mimicry. In the earliest stage of the mirror phase I identified with others but experienced it as a confusion in which I could not distinguish self from other. The mimetic identification of the hysteric is also characterised by this confusion accompanied by the aggressive competitiveness of the later stages of the mirror phase.

19 Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria*, New York: Basic Books, 2000.

20 Sigmund Freud, 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol XVII (1920-1922): Beyond the*



of identification that is ‘a partial and extremely limited one, and only borrows a single trait from the person who is its object’.<sup>21</sup>

Lacan develops the idea of the single trait, which he terms the ‘unary trait’: ‘the Other is joined not to the similar, but to the same, and the question of the reality of the Other [...] should be pushed to the level of this repetition of the one which establishes it in its essential heterogeneity’.<sup>22</sup> The unary trait stands for the reduction of difference to sameness, but it is a reduction that reinforces the qualitative differences that are negated. Lacan uses the metaphor of a hunter recording each kill by making a notch on a piece of wood. The mark is the same but the animal and the process of killing are always unique.<sup>23</sup> By focusing on a single trait the hysteric is able to mimic the rival, but sameness of a single trait exaggerates the difference of all others and the attempt to take the place of the rival fails.

In capitalist societies the commodification of the body supports and encourages hysterical identification. Advertisements address me in a way that appeals to my hysterical tendency and enables it to grow. I feel jealousy and rivalry because I believe the figures in possession of the commodity have a perfection I lack. Advertisements encourage me to perceive my body as fragments corresponding to areas of imperfection: I ‘hyperfocalise’ on an area of my body, a single trait, to be improved by the commodity. The difference between my body and the idealised, edited body in the advertisement is emphasised by my inadequate mimicry, and I am driven to

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*Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, London: The Hogarth Press, 1975  
[*Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, Frankfurt-am-Main: Fischer Verlag, 1921].

21 *ibid.*, p. 106.

22 Jacques Lacan, ‘Seminar 10’ (1965) quoted in ‘Unary Trait’, in *Concept and Form: The Cahiers pour l’Analyse and Contemporary French Thought* [accessed 20 April 2016] <<http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/concepts/unary-trait.html>>.

23 Jacques Lacan, ‘Seminar 9’ unpublished trans. by Cormac Gallagher, quoted in Tom Eyers ‘The ‘Signifier-in-Relation’, the ‘Signifier-in-Isolation’, and the Concept of the ‘Real’ in Lacan’, *Parrhesia*, 14 (2012).

search for another commodity that promises conformity to the ideal.

I might temporarily meet the demands of the ego by purchasing a commodity momentarily negating the need to repress or sublimate anything. When I transform my appearance to match the ideal aesthetic standards of society, I find it increasingly difficult to differentiate my body from others, reinforcing hysterical identification. I feel that I may lose my singularity.



Figure [7] *Revlon PhotoReady Insta-Fix Makeup* [advertising photograph] USA, 2015 (<http://www.celebrityendorsementads.com/celebrity-endorsements/celebrities/emma-stone/>) [accessed 12 August 2016]

The ‘Photoready Insta-Fix Makeup’ advertisement claims it will give the skin an ‘instantly perfected, retouched look’. The model in the advertisement possesses the unary trait of flawless skin. Knowledge that the woman was beautiful prior to application of the product and her flawless skin was produced by digital editing techniques is disavowed so I can believe that I will resemble her if I purchase and apply the product. The advertisement says ‘flirtation is on’, but it is unclear whether the product is flirtatious or applying it will cause me to be flirtatious. Below this text and an image of products the advertisement states ‘love is on’. It implies that applying the makeup is applying love and those who use the products will receive that

love. An unknown person is quoted: “I love it when I catch you looking at me, then you smile and look away.”. The position of the text suggests the female figure is speaking and not the commodities. Because the quote is anonymous I am able to easily imagine myself in the position of the speaker. I do not identify with the ‘you’ the speaker addresses but with the individual who attracts attention as an object of desire. S/he does not feel self-conscious under the gaze of the other because her skin is perfect and flawless. The triangular relation of the hysteric is produced because I identify with her, and wish to take her place as the object of desire of another. Purchasing the commodity will endow me with the ability to produce desire in the other, causing them to ‘look, smile, and look away’. I identify with the woman as an object of desire and exemplar of femininity.

*The Hysterical Sign-Value of the Young Girl*

The hystericisation and commodification of bodies develop in tandem. I feel impelled to resemble the ideal body in the advert or use it as an aesthetic template for my sexual preferences. There is a reduction implicit in the commodity-body, transforming me from a living, breathing, sexual body into an erotic sign, a surface appeal. Through hysterical identification and mimicry I disseminate the sign-values of society, reproducing the system using my body as an ‘erotic sign’.<sup>24</sup> Tiqqun’s *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl* describes a type of ideal consumer who is defined by her or his surface and seems to be without interiority.

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<sup>24</sup> ‘We have to distinguish the erotic body – substrate of the exchanged signs of desire from the body as a site of fantasy and abode of desire. In the drive/body, the fantasy/body, the individual structure of desire predominates. In the ‘eroticized’ body, it is the social function of exchange which predominates.’ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, op. cit.

The Young-Girl is a position in relation to capitalist society rather than an actual young girl.<sup>25</sup> She (who may also be he) relates to self and others only as sign-values, signs of the Spectacle. Tiqqun writes:

value is determined by ‘the sum of *labor* furnished by each individual in order to render himself *recognizable* in the vitreous eyes of the Spectacle, that is, in order to produce himself as the *sign* of the qualities recognized by alienated Advertising, and which are never, finally, but synonyms for submission.’<sup>26</sup>

To be recognisable to the Spectacle I must mimic the image idealised by it. I relinquish individuality and transform myself into a commodity:

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<sup>25</sup> *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl* received criticism due to the gender choice of their ideal figure of capitalism. In the text Tiqqun argue that consumers are turned into Young-Girls through their purchasing habits and the alienation that results from neoliberalisation of social relations. Although they designate this ideal consumer and propagator of neoliberal values a Young-Girl’ Tiqqun argue that, anyone, including mature males, can become Young-Girls. Tiqqun are an anonymous collective or writers and cultural theorists. In the *New Inquiry* Moira Weigel and Mal Ahern argue the anonymity of the collective allows Tiqqun to claim to have female members and justify ideas that are misogynistic (<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/further-materials-toward-a-theory-of-the-man-child/> [accessed 12 May 2016]). Nina Power also questions the validity of claiming the Young-girl could be male saying ‘And yet the book is precisely not called ‘Theory of the Wizen-Pope’.

(<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/rp177-shes-just-not-that-into-you> [accessed 12 May 2016]).

Although I understand the controversy produced by designating the ‘infantry for the Spectacle’ a Young-Girl, I do not think it is intended as an attack on women. In *The Consumer Society*, published forty-two years before Tiqqun’s text, Baudrillard made similar statements. He described how ‘woman’, ‘youth’, and ‘sex’ were potential forces of disruption and would be rigorously controlled by consumer society. Tiqqun quotes Baudrillard: ‘Women are given Woman to consume, the young are given the Young and, in this formal and narcissistic emancipation, their real liberation is successfully averted’ (Baudrillard (*The Consumer Society*, op. cit., pp. 46 7). Both texts question why some members of society are subjugated by consumer society to a greater extent than others. Baudrillard predicted the ‘feminisation’ of modes of consumption because all members of society, regardless of sex, are impelled to consume indulgently due to desire rather than productively in response to need. *Preliminary Materials* demonstrates the accuracy of this prediction. Had Tiqqun chosen a gender-neutral term some of the richness of its connotation would be lost. The Young-Girl captures the idolatry of young, beautiful, and highly sexualised women that is predominant in consumer culture. She is an ideal image that produces a strong compulsion to consume.

<sup>26</sup> Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials*, op. cit., p. 79.

The Young-Girl covets commodities with an eye filled with envy, because she sees the model of herself in them, which is to say, the same thing that she is, only more perfect. What remains of her humanity is not only what keeps her in default of commodity perfection, it is also the cause of all her suffering. It is this remaining humanity, therefore, that she must eradicate.<sup>27</sup>

In order to fully assimilate to the system of sign-value exchange, I must eradicate human imperfections, including emotional responses such as loneliness and love. The effects of time and ageing are also viewed as negative signs that must be removed, so the body resembles the body idealised by the Spectacle and circulated in advertisements. The Young-Girl's pursuit of perfection is a strategy of the hysteric; the hysteric's 'despotic desire' is driven by cultural and ideological stereotypes in which femininity connotes beauty.<sup>28</sup> To become the perfect woman [or man] the hysteric must exactly correspond to society's beauty ideal. Her/his body is never beautiful enough so s/he must find methods of concealment to mask imperfection. Dor continues:

We can therefore understand why the hysteric is on such easy terms with the aspect of make-believe, through which she attempts to mask the imperfections that she experiences as psychically overpowering. Anything

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>28</sup> Dor, *The Clinical Lacan*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

Contemporary feminist academic writing also examines the concept of perfection as a form of capture and subjugation of young women in neoliberal capitalist societies. Angela McRobbie argues this results in 'a replacement for feminism through stressing not collectivity or the concerns of women per se, but rather competition, ambition, the meritocracy, self-help, and the rise of the Alpha Girl (much loved by the Daily Mail)'. (Angela McRobbie, *Post-Feminism and Beyond*, <https://en.mocak.pl/post-feminism-and-beyond-angela-mcrobbe>[accessed 13 August 2016]). In 'Notes on the Perfect' McRobbie says the message that girls can achieve great success through personal choice produces inter- and intra-relations characterised by 'an inner-directed self competitiveness which is in effect self-beratement about not being good enough or perfect enough, and outer-directed competition or antagonism towards other women'. ('Notes on the Perfect', in *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30: 83 (2015) p. 15). This dual mechanism normalises and idealises of the 'despotic' pursuit of perfection and rivalry characteristic of hysteria.

and everything can serve as a mask: clothing, jewelry, role playing, ostentatious identifications.<sup>29</sup>

As a Young-Girl I am an ideal consumer; I have a propensity to see my body as flawed and I am easily compelled to purchase commodities to eradicate or conceal the imperfections.<sup>30</sup>

In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* Jean Baudrillard suggests that use-, exchange-, and sign-value define:

a full, positive world, relentlessly completed by the plus sign: the logic of surplus value (inseparable from value). It is a world in which man is incapable of selling himself short [...] Value is totalitarian. It excludes ambivalence, as

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<sup>29</sup> Dor, *The Clinical Lacan*, op. cit., p. 86.

In *Womanliness as Masquerade* Joan Riviere describes how a successful academic woman seemed to undermine her intellectual abilities when lecturing in front of her male colleagues. She wore her femininity as a disguise that concealed her intellectual brilliance to reassure the men in the audience that she was still only a woman. Juliet Mitchell attributes the academic woman's masquerade to hysteria. Her excessive feminine display is an example of hysteria's presentification (to use Monique David-Ménard's term) and the use of role play to mask imperfection. Mitchell argues that because Lacan used Riviere's theory of masquerade to theorise all femininity as masquerade 'La femme n'existe pas...' femininity itself became hysterical and the diagnosis of hysteria was banished to medical history. See: Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929); Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX Encore 1972–1973*. 2nd edn, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Bruce Fink, London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1998 [*Le Séminaire, Livre XX, Encore, 1972–1973*, Éditions du Seuil: Paris, 1975] p. 68.

<sup>30</sup> Indecision characterises hysteria and is produced by the pursuit of perfection. Nothing is good enough so the hysteric hesitates over every choice: 'although the process of choosing eventually comes to an end because of sheer exhaustion, what is chosen remains the object of uncertainty, doubt, and regrets. The ceaseless negotiations back and forth that result from this only increase the initial hesitation, since no object that has been chosen is capable of reassuring or of serving its function more adequately than one that was rejected' (Dor, *The Clinical Lacan*, op. cit., p. 85) .

The indecision and dissatisfaction felt by the hysteric complement commodity consumption in which objects produce a desire to consume but do not satisfy desire. As Lewis Hyde writes, 'the desire to consume is a kind of lust [...] But consumer goods merely bait this lust, they do not satisfy it. The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption that leads to neither satiation nor fire' (*The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, 3rd edn, London: Vintage, 1999, p. 10).

well as any relation in which man would cease to complete himself in value, or index himself according to the law of equivalence and surplus value.<sup>31</sup>

As a Young-Girl I embody a maniacal positivity in which all negative signs are denied. In order to erase negative signs I am emptied out and filled with sign-values of commodities. In order to overcome this ‘nothingness’ at my core I demand attention – I incessantly present myself as an erotic spectacle. Tiqqun’s description of the Young-Girl is a portrait of a fragmentary hysterical character. As a Young-Girl I sexualise all my actions and interactions in which ‘even the most insipid moralisms have the air of prostitution’.<sup>32</sup> However, I am neither virgin nor prostitute because I only experience desire as something received from outside, from the sign-value exchange system. Sexuality and desire are reduced to erotic signs and my intimacy with people is turned into a relation between commodities.

As a Young Girl I attempt to seduce because the Young Girl ‘exists only in proportion to the desire THEY have for her, and knows herself only by what THEY say she is’.<sup>33</sup> The Young Girl hysteric is ignorant of her own desire and hopes to understand it by identifying with the desire of the other. To attract attention and become the object of desire the hysteric puts on a spectacular performance to ‘appear as a brilliant object that will fascinate the other’.<sup>34</sup> Dor says symptoms of hysteria in men frequently take the form of a theatrical exhibition of the body; bodybuilding allows the hysteric to show that his muscular body is phallic.

Presenting the body as phallic endows it with signification of power and prestige. In Lacanian psychoanalysis the phallus is a symbol that cannot be possessed by anyone, however patriarchal society mis-recognises the penis

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31 Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. op. cit., p. 206.

32 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials*, op. cit., p. 42.

33 *ibid.*, p. 34.

34 Dor, *The Clinical Lacan*, op. cit., p. 81.

as the phallus. The male position is equated with possession of the phallus and individuals in the female position can only access phallic power by producing the body as phallic. Dor says that ‘all the seductive enterprises that the hysteric undertakes are based on this phallic brilliance’.<sup>35</sup>



Figure [8] Gym selfies, [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), [accessed 13.08.2016]

In a newspaper article Jamie Hakim argues the financial crisis in 2008 and subsequent austerity measures have reduced access to prestigious jobs for young men. He writes:

Belonging to a social group whose value is defined through the body is generally a sign of your subordination, which explains why so many young British men have recently begun to pay attention to their bodies in such spectacular ways. In an economic climate in which the opportunity for young men to become high-paid decision makers has become more out of reach, many have turned to working on their bodies in order to feel valuable. A secure job, a house, the ability to provide for your family and buy flashy consumer goods: all this used to signify successful masculinity. For some men, their worked out bodies and Instagram likes now stand in their stead.<sup>36</sup>

Hakim claims that gym membership and subscriptions to *Men's Health* magazine have increased dramatically since 2008. The loss of power caused by reduced financial circumstances has produced an identity crisis in young

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> Jamie Hakim, ‘Austerity has Caused Young Men to Turn into ‘spornosexuals’, *The Independent*, 11 August 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/spornosexuals-spornosexuality-austerity-young-men-working-out-bodies-power-society-a7184876.html> [accessed 13 August 2016].



men. The emptiness evoked by loss of anticipated social power cause the men to present their bodies as images that will dazzle others.

Building on Didier Anzieu's description of the hysteric's skin ego as a 'double envelope [...] (which) is brilliant, ideal',<sup>37</sup> Naomi Segal describes the hysteric's body as a 'gleaming skin surface'.<sup>38</sup> It is a signifying surface for symptoms and the theatricality of the symptoms attracts attention.

In *Freud's Papers on Technique* Lacan writes that people do not act upon sexual instincts in relation to other individuals, but in relation to a 'type' of body, an image. He argues the subject is 'prone to the lure'<sup>39</sup> and gives the parallel of the female stickleback, drawn into a mating ritual by the alluring markings on the male stickleback's body. It is the visible surface that causes the female's desire, and she will respond with the same enthusiasm to a crude cutout with alluring markings. As a hysterical Young-Girl I try to turn myself into a cutout image, an alluring surface, following the design determined by the Spectacle.

In order to learn of her/his own desire through the desire of another, the hysteric searches for an individual who is desired by others. The hysteric's object of desire and identification is also frequently described as a gleaming, spectacular object. Dora described Frau K.'s body as 'adorable' and 'white', emphasising the visual quality of her skin over other physical attributes.<sup>40</sup> The hysteric presents her/his body as an alluring image and identifies with others that also share these gleaming surface characteristics. Through hysterical identification a body characterised by brilliant, shining surface appeal becomes the norm.

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37 Didier Anzieu quoted in Naomi Segal, 'Witnessing through the skin: the hysteric's body', in *Journal of Romance Studies*, 9:3, 2009, p. 82.

38 *ibid.*, p. 82.

39 Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

40 Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ("Dora")', *op. cit.*, p. 205.

Evidence of the hysterical identification with and enchantment by an image may be discerned in the phenomenon of the selfie. The proliferation of mobile phones with cameras has enabled large swathes of the population to take and share photographs of themselves taken by themselves. The subject is no longer the absent object of a photographic memento.<sup>41</sup> However, a web-search reveals that the most common form of selfie is not a souvenir of a place or event but a record of the individual in seemingly private spaces. Some form of confessional practice might be suggested when an individual presents her or his body in the virtual realm for the scrutiny of unknown observers. Why else would multiple social media websites offer so many quantifiable ways to demonstrate that a photograph has been viewed and a value judgement made? People gauge the ‘success’ of their selfies on how many likes, favourites, retweets, and shares they receive.

When I view selfies I often feel an uncomfortable sense of intimacy with the lone figure located in a private space such as a bathroom or bedroom. The camera or mobile device is visible, reflected alongside the body, making all aspects of the look manifest; I see the subject’s body and the image the subject also sees: we both view the individual as a reflection. Object and viewer are flattened into one viewing position: all are equal. Because I can see the camera-phone in the photograph I am denied the position of active recording device and powerful unseen observer. Instead I am pushed into

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<sup>41</sup> Because fetishism is characterised by the substitution of one object for another, photographs can be described as fetishes. When we view photographs we often disavow that are small rectangular pieces of paper and believe that we actually view the landscape, event, or person depicted. Victor Burgin says the glossy surface of fashion photographs can have the same appeal of the *Glanz* on the nose described by Freud in *Fetishism* (op. cit.). Burgin says ‘The photograph, like the fetish, is the result of a look which has, instantaneously and forever, isolated, “frozen”, a fragment of the spatio-temporal continuum’ (Victor Burgin, ‘Photography, Phantasy, Function’, in *Thinking Photography*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1982, p. 190). It freezes a moment, but also acts as a memorial to a time that has passed. The photograph stands in for the absent event / person / place. Roland Barthes discussed this aspect of the photograph in *Camera Lucida* (trans. by Richard Howard, 3rd edn, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, originally published [*La Chambre Claire*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980])

the place of a mirror image and my identification with the body in the photograph is increased. I inhabit a dual position in relation to the individual: I simultaneously inhabit the position of her body and view her from an external place. The sensation of voyeuristic looking produced when viewing an image of a naked body taken in a private location is reduced by my identificatory position and the distinction between active voyeur and passive object of the gaze is problematised.



Figure [9] Selfies, [www.tumblr.com/search/selfie](http://www.tumblr.com/search/selfie), [accessed 16.07.2014]

In some selfies a person poses between two or more mirrors that multiply the body. The body is presented as a series of fragments, recalling the fragmented body imagos of the mirror phase. However, the attempt to view the body from multiple angles at once could be an attempt to put the body back together. This type of photograph could suggest a hysterical form of self-presentation in which the subject rejects the idea that the body is incomplete or lacking and ‘dreams of a perfect erotic body that could display itself as a whole’.<sup>42</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysts such as Monique David-Ménard

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<sup>42</sup> Monique David-Ménard, *Hysteria From Freud to Lacan: Body and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Catherine Porter, 2nd edn, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989 [*L'hystérique entre Freud et Lacan*, Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1983] p. 130. The use of the term erotic should not be confused with Baudrillard’s distinction between the erotic and the phantasy/sexual body discussed in Part 2. In psychoanalytic terms the erotic body is the fantasy/sexual body.

and Joël Dor write that the hysteric is only able to acknowledge her or his desire through the desire of the other. By attempting to become the object of the other's desire, the hysteric often searches for a form of body modification that 'would adjust their image to their ideal'.<sup>43</sup> Paradoxically, the need for a fantasy body modification proves the lack that is denied.

There is an aspect of one-upmanship in the identification process because the hysteric is desperate to gain superiority over a rival who is deemed to be better and better loved. This leads to an escalation of provocative, attention-seeking behaviour. Mitchell describes the hysteric's seductive behaviour as an excessive presence. The hysteric 'neither remembers nor expects to be remembered if he [*sic*] is not always present – so he always over insistently presents himself'.<sup>44</sup> When threatened by displacement by a rival the hysteric unconsciously retaliates by splintering her/his identity into fragments. This fractured personality fends off the threat of absence and annihilation by forcefully presenting multiple aspects of the self in a way that is difficult for others to ignore. These selfies fragment the body in a way that could be interpreted as an illusion of completeness and the excessive 'presentification' of a splintered subject.<sup>45</sup>

In *Structures and Perversions* Dor recounts the case of a woman who fantasises that a male friend unexpectedly visits her. In the fantasy she goes into the bathroom to make herself presentable and 'would enjoy imagining, with a delight she could not explain, what her friend might think she was doing in there'.<sup>46</sup> The fantasy always ended abruptly at this point – of not

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43 Catherine Millot, *Horsexe. Essai sur le Transsexualisme*, Paris: Point Hors Ligne, 1983, p. 114, quoted in Joël Dor, *Structures and Perversions*, trans. by Susan Fairfield, 2nd edn, New York: Other Press, 2001 [*Structures et Perversions*, Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2001] p. 193.

44 Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, op. cit., p. 212.

45 David-Ménard uses the term presentification rather than presentation to describe the effect of a hysteric's symptom calling attention to the body as a source of sexual pleasure. She describes it as a 'prosthetic' rending of the body over which control has been lost: the tail wagging the dog. David-Ménard, *Hysteria From Freud to Lacan*, op. cit., p. 115.

46 Dor, *Structures and Perversions*, op. cit., pp. 24–5.

knowing. Dor says this scene signifies an essential characteristic of hysteria, the donning of a mask in order to place ‘herself at a distance from herself and thus from her desire, so that she may remain in ignorance of this desire’.<sup>47</sup> In seeing herself in the mirror, she is able to view herself as an external object, an object of desire for the other, without acknowledging that she has desire of her own. Wajcman writes that the hysteric ‘tries to seduce the desiring man to learn about the object that causes his desire. This object [...] is the hysteric herself.’<sup>48</sup> Her/his role in the desire of the other demonstrates the split she/he embodies:

As subject she incites desire; but when this desire moves towards the object that causes it, the hysteric cannot condescend to be this object. She incites man to know what causes his desire, inciting him to acknowledge her as the inaccessible object of his desire.<sup>49</sup>

Hysterical desire is marked by dispossession: it desires a desire that is never satisfied. In Dor’s account of the hysterical woman multiple screens impose distance: mirror surfaces and closed doors ensure that desire is only ever imagined and remains unsatisfied. This connotes what Dor describes as the ‘hysterical pretence’, in which ‘the subject’s desire is always there, but only provided it gets itself represented where it is not by finding a proxy in the desire of the other’.<sup>50</sup> The hysteric’s desire is designed to bring the other

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 26.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud refers to the dream of a hysterical patient known as the butcher’s wife. In the dream she wants to throw a dinner party but only has a few slices of smoked salmon to offer the guests. The shops are shut because it is Sunday and her telephone is broken so she cannot contact the caterers. She is forced to give up her desire to have a party. The butcher’s wife later comments on her love of caviar: she says she would like to eat it every day and her husband would give it to her if she asked for it, but she does not ask. Her husband could satisfy her desire but she prevents it. According to Lacan, the butcher’s wife’s desire to buy smoked salmon and give it to her thin friend is a metaphor for an unconscious desire to also give her husband to her friend. But this desire is also thwarted in the dream. However her desire for unsatisfied desire is satisfied through the denial of caviar and smoked salmon (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, op. cit).

<sup>48</sup> Wajcman, ‘The Hysteric’s Discourse’, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Dor, *Structures and Perversions*, op. cit., pp. 25–6.

person's desire into existence; it is an illusion that disappears as soon as the desire of the other is shown. Dor gives the example of a woman who spends time in an area populated by prostitutes. When a potential customer approaches her she replies "You're making a mistake, I'm not that kind of woman" .<sup>51</sup> She may seem to want to act upon desire but what she wants is to be desired rather than participate in a desiring relation. Lacan describes the hysteric as eluding herself as the object. In slipping away she entices the other while denying herself a satisfaction that would leave her without desire.

In the production of mirror selfies, a lone figure photographs her or his body as a reflection and disseminates it to an unknown audience *via* social networking sites. The photograph has not been taken because the individual wants to know how she or he looks at that particular moment; rather, its purpose is to capture the mirror image she or he has already apprehended in order to make it visible for someone else. By putting her or his self in the picture she/he seems to be trying to meet the gaze, to see her/his own body from the place where the other looks at it. The question 'is this what you want me to be?' is answered in the form of likes, favourites, retweets, and shares. This response does not provide the knowledge she/he demands neither does it objectify the body in a manner that would be intolerable.

Hysterical pretence seems to have found its visual form in selfies. Unlike the woman hysterically identifying with a prostitute, the selfie producer is only required to *appear* desiring, the distancing effect of virtual interaction and the barriers formed by computer and mobile device screens means the hysterical pretence is not exposed. The object of desire is able to offer itself, safe in the knowledge that it will not be called upon to satisfy desire.

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137.

Selfies enable an individual to repeatedly and insistently present the self to a mass audience. Exaggerated gestures and actions suggest the spectacular dimension of hysterical identification performed and passed on through mimicry. As Mitchell writes, symptoms today would be ‘mass experiences in an era of mass communication’,<sup>52</sup> simultaneously global and virtual, erotic but devoid of sexuality:

Today the social situation which favors a conscious, public enactment in place of private driven symptoms is best summed up in the philosophy of post-modernity which eschews metanarratives, truth, representation in favor of fragmentation, the proliferation of desires, the ascendancy of the will and the act and language that gets one what one wants. This is the valorization of performance and performativity.<sup>53</sup>

Post-modern, capitalist societies encourage and reward expressions of hyper-sexualised narcissism. Selfies enable individuals to make hysterical demands for attention to a mass audience of unknown individuals. Multiplicity has replaced specificity in relation to the other. Hysterical demand is met with hysterical identification. As Mitchell posits, hysteria is becoming the norm.

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<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, op. cit., p. 121.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 133.

## HUNGER OF THE OX

*Hunger of the Ox* references the etymology of the term bulimia which involves a process of purging food from the body. The image sequence references a technique used by bulimics in which brightly coloured food is used to commence the binge, becoming a visual marker during the purge to ensure all the food has been evacuated. Photographs of real food become photographs of photographs of real food, establishing a connection between consumption practices and advertisements, surface appeal, pretence, and lack of substance. Like the bulimic binge, consumption does not provide pleasure.



*Hunger of the Ox*, 2014, 30cm x 180cm [concertina book]











## PART 3: EXCHANGE

### WISHBOOKS, SIRENS, AND HYSTERICAL SELFIES

Each *Hysterical Selfie* photograph represents a consumer demographic based on the ideological messages of commodities. In advertisements marketing demographics appear specific and yet appeal to a large audience. This is achieved by shaping consumers to the demographic. The discourse of immaterial labour recuperates differences and homogenises identities. To emphasise the ideological messages of the commodities in the photographs each product appears in *Wishbook* as a wish image. The title *Wishbook* derives from nineteenth century commodity catalogues such as *The Great Wish Book* and *American Dream Book*, selling the American way of life. The title also alludes to Benjamin's idea that consumers can appropriate commodities as emancipatory wish images.


To intervene in a commercial space in which advertising tactics are far more insidious than in traditional advertising media, I disseminated this work on social networking sites using hashtags that reveal the commodities' signifying message. The wish images look like poor quality adverts or the content of a bin and the hashtags read like bad poetry. They appear among advertisements on social networking sites and behave abnormally.

One of the most invasive developments of online advertising is autoplay videos. As I browse a page the soundtrack of an advertisement plays in the background and I am forced to look for the ad in order to stop it. I can choose not to look but it is difficult not to hear. I wanted my wish images to share this aggressive insistence, so I created *Sirens*. Like the social interactions of the microcelebrity

masking commercial exchange, in *Sirens* the commodity speaks with an almost human voice, softly whispering its ideological messages.



*Hysterical Selfie (Bite Me)*, 2015, 94cm x 70cm [digital photograph]



**dawncwoolley**

luxurylifestylemaguk, philippabywater, skinfoodofficial, aevibox, zachslobin, arash\_khann, thirtyc, j\_sweeting, Instajovsky and arabwatchguide like this

30w

dawncwoolley #hystericalselfie #Selfie #WishBook #skinfood #goldcaviargiftset #goldcaviartoner #goldcaviaremulSION #gold #caviar #luxury #luxurylife #luxurylifestyle #conspicuousconsumption #leisureclass #materialism #wealth #celebrationofwealth #surfaceonly #externaluseonly #DoNotConsume j\_sweeting I like that

Add a comment...



**dawncwoolley**

davinwatne, thaisribbon, clarachuff, camillia1996, freyawatkins, alterreny, leighloftus and baygrey like this

32w

dawncwoolley #hystericalselfie #wishbook #selfie #biteme #pyjamas #eatme #consumeme #tobeconsumed #primark #passive #object #surfaceappeal #tobelookedatness #fastfood #American #indoorwear #leisure #home #domestic

Add a comment...

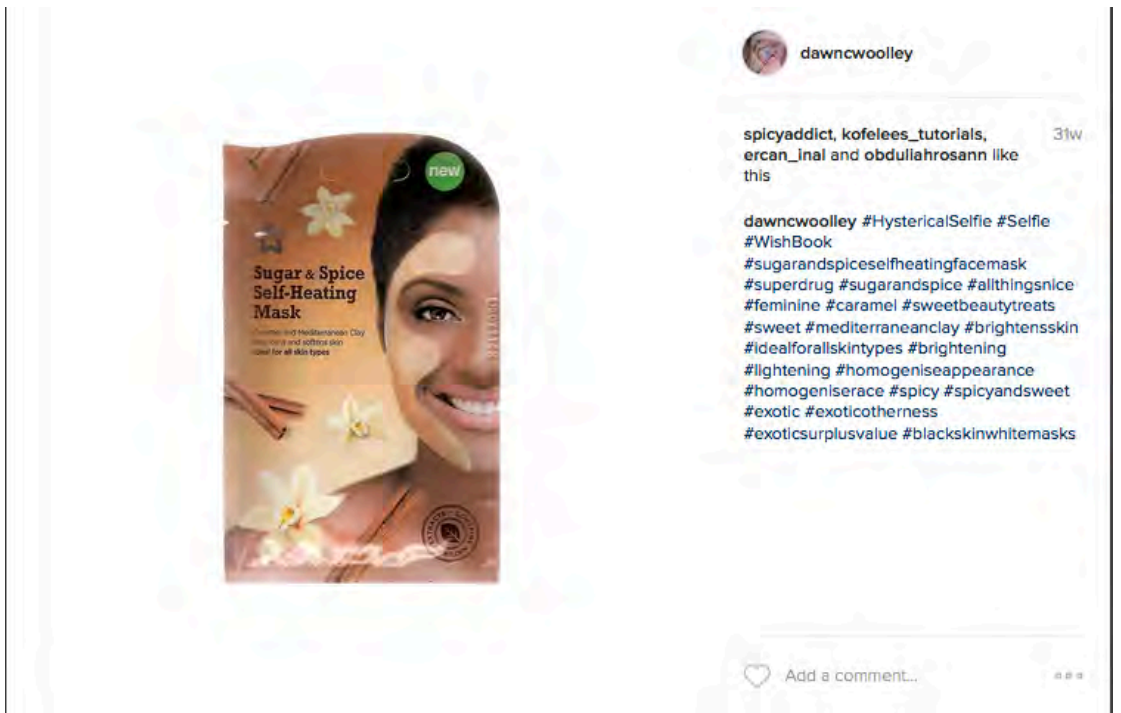


 dawncwoolley

thegroskid, ellensampson, teamskincancer and amanda23\_ill\_make\_you\_rich like this

dawncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #Selfie #WishBook #skinfood #skinfoodhoneyeyelidglue #honey #sweetbeautytreats #sweet #feminine #eyelidglue #glueeyelids #makeeyelidcrease #eyelidcrease #westernise #westernisedface #westernbeautyideal #homogenise #homogeniseappearance #homogeniserace #erasedifference #eraseracialdifference #difference #variety #individuality #otherness #eraseotherness #race #surplusvaluewesternbeautyideal

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 dawncwoolley

spicyaddict, kofelees\_tutorials, ercan\_inal and obdulahrosann like this

dawncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #Selfie #WishBook #sugarandspiceselfheatingfacemask #superdrug #sugarandspice #allthingsnice #feminine #caramel #sweetbeautytreats #sweet #mediterraneanclay #brightensskin #idealforallskintypes #brightening #llghtening #homogeniseappearance #homogeniserace #spicy #spicyandsweet #exotic #exoticotherness #exoticsurplusvalue #blackskinwhitemasks

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saarahmurphy and psychobebe like this 32w

dawncwoolley #HystericalSelfie  
 #WishBook #Selfie #MaxFactor  
 #2000CalorieMascara  
 #RecommendedDailyIntake #Consumed  
 #DoNotConsume #calories  
 #externaluseonly  
 #fatlashes #thinbody #consumeme

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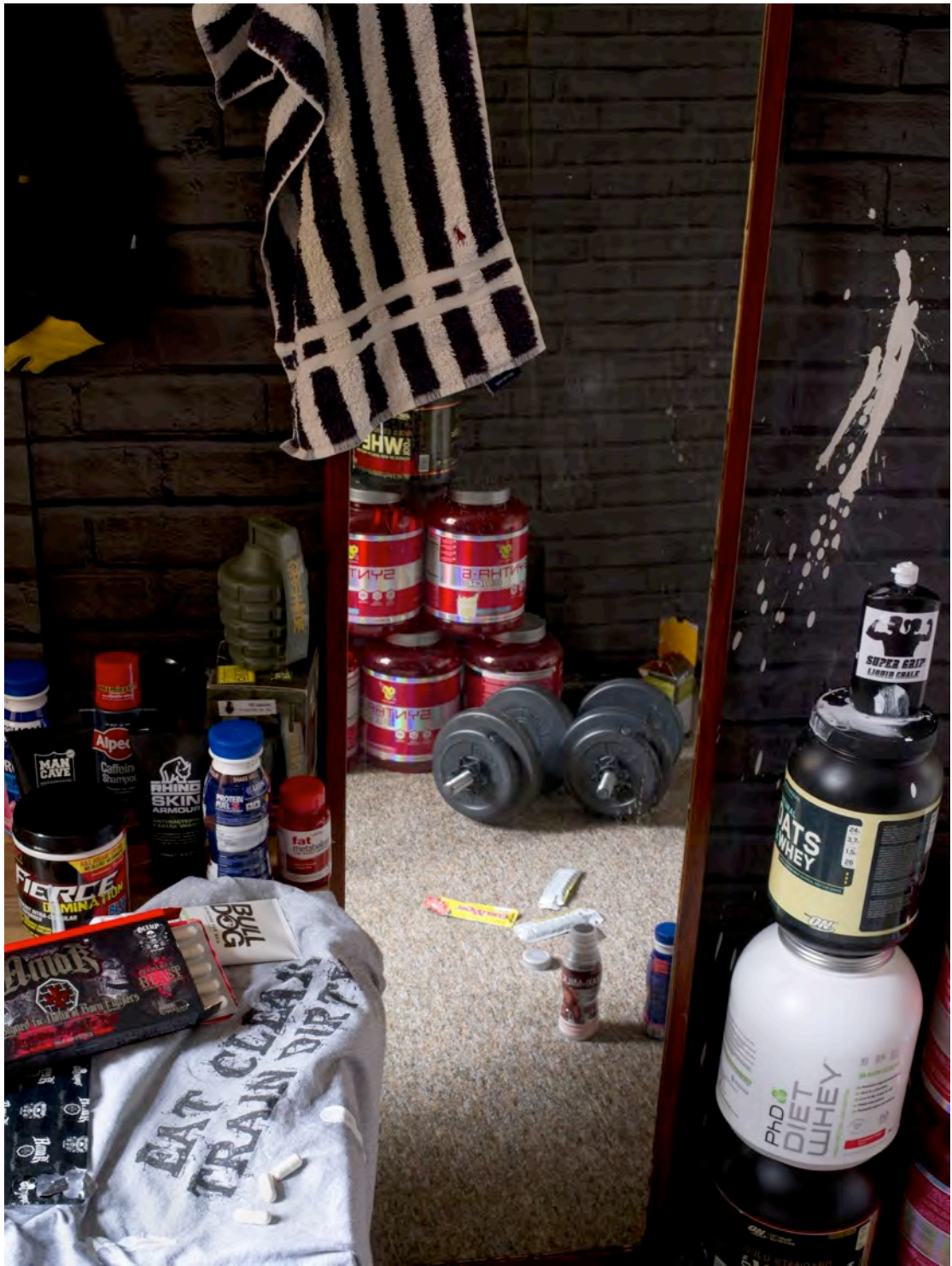
 dawncwoolley

amg\_lifestyle\_, corradomattarelli, philppabywater, darkhorsepros and covafoto like this 31w

dawncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #Selfie  
 #WishBook  
 #premiumtomatowhiteningessence  
 #premiumtomatowhitening  
 #30%tomatoextract  
 #thirtypercenttomatoextract #skinfood  
 #consumebutdonteat #notforconsumption  
 #externaluseonly #DoNotConsume  
 #donoteat #skinwhitening #homogenise  
 #homogeniseappearance  
 #homogeniserace  
 #homogeniseracialdifference  
 #homogenisefacialdifference #race  
 #otherness #erasedifference  
 #eraseracialdifference  
 #westernbeautyideal #westernbeautyideal  
 #westernisedbody #westernisedface  
 #surfaceappearance #surfaceappeal  
 #surplusvaluwesternbeautyideal  
 #surplusvaluwesternisation

 Add a comment...

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*Hysterical Selfie (Super Grip), 2015, 94cm x 70cm [digital photograph]*



 dawncwoolley

12 likes


31w

dawncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #Selfie #WishBook #eatcleantraindirty #eatclean #eatcleandlean #clean #cleanliness #purity #cleanontheinsidedirtyontheoutside #cleanlinessandpurity #dirty #contaminated #contamination #playdirty #breakrules #rulebreaker #noresponsibility #irresponsible #masculinity #Masculine #stereotype

 Add a comment...

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 dawncwoolley

dozernutrition, gencfotografcilarkulubu, jesshennn, impact.nutrition\_uk, lancehartfetish, brokenpiecesproject, johnfallon, jgnomes17 and topfitnessbodies like this

31w

dawncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #selfie #WishBook #fiercedomination #fiercedominationpwo #fiercedominatedestroy #preworkout #plasmaexpander #fierce #domination #Masculine #stereotype #aggression #aggressivemasculinity #power #powerful #surplusvaluedomination #surplusvaluepower #surplusvaluecontrol

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 dawnncwoolley

13 likes


31w

dawnncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #Selfie #WishBook #grenade #grenadethermodetonator #trainingsupplement #caffiene #declarewaronfat #war #fat #military #army #battle #explosives #fighting #aggression #conflict #diet #dietsupplement #Masculine #stereotype #power #force #destruction #surplusvaluewar #surplusvaluefighting #surplusvaluestrength

 Add a comment...

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 dawnncwoolley

lorenmax, johnfallon and nilamramsoedjas like this

32w

dawnncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #WishBook #Selfie #Amok #NaturalBornFighter #Masculine #Warrior #ForceMultiplier #Violence #death #caffiene #trainingsupplement #power #destructive #force #forceful #aggressive #maleness

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*Hysterical Selfie (Liberté)*, 2015, 94cm x 70cm [digital photograph]



jokesbymail, alice\_kardashian, \_westonspivey\_, leoblakecarter, fuckyeahamerica, madinraylopez and retiredlifefnow like this

dawncwoolley #hystericalselfie #selfie #WishBook #liberty #yoghurt #yoghurtreinvented #fatfree #highprotein #liberateyourtastebuds #liberatedbydiet #freetobethin #realyoghurtsatisfaction #satisfaction #fatfreesatisfaction #dietingissatisfying #thinnessissatisfying #french #revolution #equality #fraternity #dietisrevolution #dietisfreedom #revolutionaryacceptanceofslenderideal #revolutionaryacceptanceofrestrictiveeating #revolutionaryacceptanceofcontroloverappetite #liberatedbyselfdenial #liberatedbyselfcontrol \_westonspivey\_ Pretty cool!

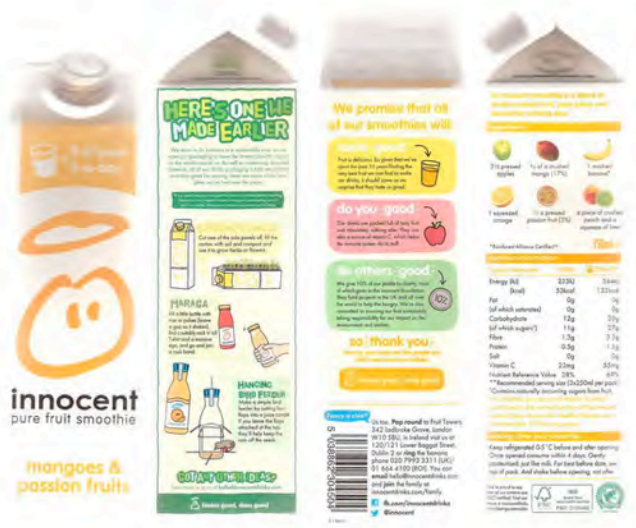
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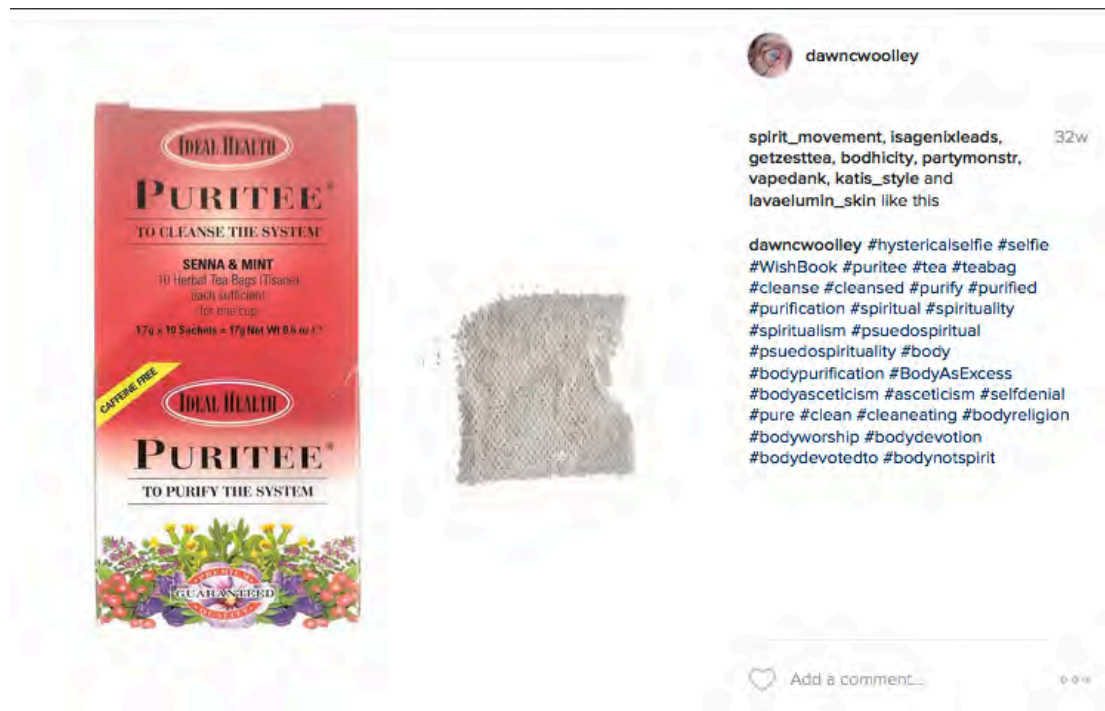
dawnncwoolley #HystericalSelfie #selfie #WishBook #monsterassaultenergydrink #monsterassault #monster #assault #subhuman #Inhuman #withoutresponsibility #irresponsible #dontgethunguponpolitics #notforthewar #notagainstthewar #war #Warrior #campatternlookscool #cool #declarewarontheordinary #extraordinary #aggressive #violent #physicalattack #Masculine #stereotype

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*Hysterical Selfie (Puritee)*, 2015, 94cm x 70cm [digital photograph]





Wishbook (extract), 2015, 139 posts [online project; high-resolution scans and hashtags]  
< <https://www.instagram.com/dawncwoolley/>>

## Hysterical Selfie Exchange

### *Prototype for Passion: Hysteria in the Nineteenth Century*

Hysteria is characterised by heterogeneous somatic symptoms with no underlying organic cause that doctors and psychoanalysts have attempted to classify into a set of diagnosable features. Neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot is known for having created a ‘legend’ of physical symptoms at the Salpêtrière hospital. The impossibility of this task may be the reason the term hysteria is no longer commonly used in medical parlance. Hysteria could not be adequately categorised in diagnostic medical handbooks; to each of its diverse symptoms was attributed an illness such as conversion disorder (functional neurological symptom disorder) and illness anxiety disorder.<sup>1</sup> In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 2013 edition (DSM-5) illnesses characterised by ‘the prominence of somatic symptoms associated with significant distress and impairment’ were grouped together in the category of ‘somatic symptoms and related disorders’.<sup>2</sup>

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1 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn., Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.

Conversion disorder is characterised by symptoms that recall the hysterical symptoms described in Freud’s case studies, including weakness and paralysis, abnormal movement, swallowing, and speech disorders, attacks or seizures, anaesthesia or sensory loss, and sensory disturbances. Factitious disorder is characterised by deceptive behaviour and the presentation of physical or physiological symptoms and injuries associated with deception. While illness anxiety disorder patients display high levels of health anxiety without somatic symptoms. Other hysterical symptoms resemble personality disorders. Personality disorders are defined as ‘an enduring pattern of inner experience and behaviour that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment’ (p. 645). Histrionic personality disorder sufferers frequently present the following symptoms: uneasiness when not the centre of attention, use of appearance to gain attention, emotional shallowness and capriciousness, inappropriately provocative sexualised behaviour, excessive theatricality and exaggerated emotions, and easily influenced and manipulated by others (p. 667). Dependent personality disorder also contains some characteristics of hysteria: indecision and ‘difficulty expressing disagreement with others because of fear of loss of support or approval’ (p. 675).

2 *ibid.*, p. 309.

The DSM-5 defines the diagnosis of somatic symptom disorder as ‘distressing somatic symptoms plus abnormal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in response to these symptoms’ (p. 309-10). Symptoms are subject to cultural influence and vary as a ‘result of the interaction of multiple factors within cultural contexts that affect how individuals identify

In the Salpêtrière hospital in the late nineteenth century, gestures and poses, ranging from sexual provocative to religious devotion, were enacted for an audience. Asti Hustvedt describes how ‘the best performers attracted large audiences and their shows even went on the road, travelling to other hospitals and amphitheatres’.<sup>3</sup> The hysteric’s knowledge of this popularity is described anecdotally in instances of prima donna-like behaviour among the patients. In a memoir Alphonse Daudet describes a scenario in which ‘Balmann’, the pseudonym he used for Blanche Wittman (‘the Queen of Hysterics’), refused to take to the ‘stage’ during one of Charcot’s lectures because a less beautiful and less talented hysteric had been displayed before her.<sup>4</sup>

This spectacular illness captured the public imagination: representations of hysterics were not only found on the walls and in the cabinets of the Salpêtrière, but also filled the pages of newspapers and novels, and populated performances on stage and screen. Charcot’s lectures were equally popular, attracting tourists, journalists, writers, and actresses as well as doctors and students. Even the famous actress, Sarah Bernhardt, spent time in a cell in the Salpêtrière while preparing for a stage performance.<sup>5</sup> The hysterics achieved celebrity status and their passionate gestures were transmitted to the public through popular culture. Socially acceptable feminine behaviours took on an aspect of the aberrant body: ‘hysteria

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and classify bodily sensations, perceive illness and seek medical attention for them. Thus, somatic presentations can be viewed as expressions of personal suffering inserted in a cultural and social context’ (p. 310).

<sup>3</sup> Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, London: Bloomsbury, 2011, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> Hustvedt writes: ‘Actors, artists, architects, musicians, visiting royalty, politicians, the prefect of police, and other members of high society also came to witness the phenomenon. Before rapt audiences, Charcot’s patients were ordered to enact degrading and fascinating scenarios’. *ibid.*, p. 90.

became every woman's expression of intense passion'.<sup>6</sup> The influence between pathology and popular culture was cyclical: the theatrical nature of hysteria also mirrored aspects of nineteenth-century French society. As Appignanesi writes:

the theatricality of convulsive fits, at once erotic and religious, may have been a particular displacement of the gestures which were part of the Republic's love affair with boulevard spectacle. Hysteria would be enacted differently elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

In the previous chapter I analysed the contemporary phenomenon of the selfie as a symptom of widespread hysteria. Selfies became a global phenomenon between 2004 and 2012, when celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Kylie Jenner, and Kim Kardashian began sharing photographs of their private lives with online followers.<sup>8</sup> In 'On the Inexplicable Persistence of Strangers' Juliet Flower MacCannell describes contemporary celebrity culture as a denial of difference, an insistence that each individual is equal regardless of wealth, talent, or vast differences in numbers of followers.<sup>9</sup> Celebrities are no longer unreachable and godlike because I am able to access intimate details of their lives online. This exposure also produces a feeling of sameness because the activities and environments captured in the selfies bear similarity to my own daily activities and domestic environment.

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6 Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present*, London: Virago, 2009, p. 378.

7 *ibid.*, p. 140.

8 The invention of social networking sites such as Myspace and Flickr, and developments in mobile technology led to the rise in popularity of the selfie. For further information see: (Shilpi Agarwal, 'The Selfie Phenomenon [Infographic]', *Social Media Today* <<http://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/selfie-phenomenon-infographic>> [accessed 13 August 2016]), (Jessi Hempel, 'CONTAGION How the "selfie" became a social epidemic', *Fortune*, 22 August 2014 <<http://fortune.com/2014/08/22/contagion-selfie-narcissism-to-visual-language/>> [accessed 13 August 2016]).

9 Juliet Flower MacCannell, 'On the Inexplicable Persistence of Strangers' in Michael Corris, Jaspar Joseph-Lester, and Sharon Kivland (eds), *Transmission Annual*. London: Artwords Press, 2010.

By levelling social differences onto a single lateral plain of ‘consumers’, selfies encourage me to identify with the celebrities in a hysterical manner.

MacCannell recounts Freud’s analysis of the formation of artificial groups as ‘created solely by mirroring a singular ego as a multiple: a community of like egos, modeled on a single image, projected by a leader who in turn reflects them’.<sup>10</sup> The celebrity in a selfie is presented as ‘like me’, an ego ideal with whom I identify as potentially attainable. Freud describes the function of the ego ideal as, ‘the sum of all the limitations in which the ego has to acquiesce’.<sup>11</sup> It prohibits the ego’s wishes and enables critical thinking, and reality testing. Such demands from the ego ideal when met in fantasy results in the maniac’s ‘mood of triumph and self-satisfaction, disturbed by no self-criticism, [who] can enjoy the abolition of his inhibitions, his feelings of consideration for others, and his self-reproaches’.<sup>12</sup> If my ego coincides with my ego ideal my ego seems omnipotent and unrestrained. I lose my critical faculty and become easily suggestible. Gustave Le Bon, in his account of the ‘group mind’, describes this mechanism:

the disappearance of the conscious personality, the predominance of the unconscious personality, the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts; these, we see, are the principal characteristics of the individual forming part of a group. He is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will.<sup>13</sup>

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10 *ibid.*, p. 109.

11 Sigmund Freud, ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

12 *ibid.*, p. 132.

This is Freud’s description of the manic state caused by the merging of ego and ego ideal. In the melancholic state the ego and ego ideal are in sharp conflict and results in the fact that ‘the ideal, in an excess of sensitiveness, relentlessly exhibits its condemnation of the ego in delusions of inferiority and in self-depreciation’ (*ibid.*, p. 132).

13 Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (1895), quoted in Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.



Figure [10] Kim Kardashian selfie, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2720320/Undisputed-Queen-Selfie-Kim-Kardashian-release-352-page-hardcover-photo-book-aptly-titled-Selfish.html> accessed on 16.07.2015

My loss of critical faculties and ability to judge truthfulness turns me into a willing and compliant consumer. I see an advertisement that incites me to act immediately because I want to emulate the image. Celebrity selfies often have a commercial imperative beyond the production of bodily capital because celebrities photograph themselves with own-brand commodities or products they have been paid to endorse.<sup>14</sup> Media outlets, such as *The Daily Mail online*, frequently feature celebrity selfies alongside a ‘fashion finder’ section that directs viewers to online shops where they can purchase the outfits worn by celebrities. The message is clear: through commodification I can turn myself into the image.

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In Freud’s account of group psychology the child gives up his narcissistic desires for the good of the group. The ‘herd instinct’ develops during childhood, when envy towards a younger sibling is relinquished because the child realises the parents love the sibling as much as the individual is loved and it would be impossible to maintain the hostile attitude. The child is forced to identify with the sibling and in doing so begins to form a group. However, in Juliet Mitchell’s interpretation of cases of hysteria the identification process does not reduce rivalry and envy. The other person continues to be seen as a threat to the individual’s unique position.

<sup>14</sup> The term bodily capital denotes the social value produced by a body that conforms to social ideals. This idea is further extrapolated in the discussion of attention value later in this chapter and subsequent chapters.

*Attention Economy Workers and the Social Media Marketplace*

I have come to view social networking sites as the contemporary commercial space *qua excellence* where commodity culture pervades all aspects of social existence. They are sign-value exchange networks. In my online social interactions the fetishism of commodities is fully articulated; what appear to be interactions between people are actually interactions between commodities. Celebrity selfies promote products and disseminate sign-value in return for attention; body ideals are perpetuated in the exchange of images on social media networks.

In *The Attention Economy* Thomas Davenport and John Beck cite research suggesting that people are particularly proficient at averting their eyes from advertisements because of a ‘built-in attention-protection feature’ that preserves ‘attention’ for more important or interesting things.<sup>15</sup> In a world characterised by an excess of information advertisers look for ways to capture attention and prevent viewers from pre-consciously screening out

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001, p. 51.

Davenport and Beck foresaw the economic value of attention in *The Attention Economy* published in 2001. They argue that because scientific and social advancements produce increasing amounts of knowledge, and new technology disseminates a vast amount of information quickly and widely we become increasingly overloaded with information. They cite the economist Herbert Simon: ‘what information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention’ (‘Designing Organisations for an Information-Rich World’, in *The Economics of Communication and Information*, ed. by Donald N. Lamberton, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1997, quoted in Davenport and Beck, *The Attention Economy*, p. 11).

Davenport and Beck write that our attention choices are still fundamentally controlled by primitive needs relating to preservation of self and species, and the need for social interaction. Because I can absorb a vast quantity of signals and signs from my environment I have to prioritise information. I pre-consciously select information in relation to a hierarchy of needs, responding first to signals of danger (violence), then information relating to the perpetuation of the species (sex), and social needs (prestige / hierarchy). This is why advertisements frequently include aversive-attention signals relating to danger, illness, or ostracism, and attractive-attention signals about sex, popularity, and intimacy. I use the term ‘pre-consciously’ because it is used by Davenport and Beck to signify thoughts, ideas, and memories that are not held in conscious mind but can be brought to mind. In Freudian psychoanalysis pre-conscious thoughts are unconscious at the moment an individual tries to recall them, but unlike unconscious thoughts, they are not repressed and can therefore be recovered to conscious thought.

the advertisements. The authors identify a number of techniques to circumvent this mechanism, increasing and sustaining the attention of consumers. The content should be expressed as a lifelike, realistic story that the consumer can identify. The method of delivery should be interactive rather than passive because consumers invest more attention if they contribute to or co-create the content in some way. Advertisers should also use cross promotion; they promote commodities using things or people that already get a lot of attention because, once held, consumer attention can easily be carried from one product to another. They should incorporate allusion to survival and social needs to bypass customers' pre-conscious attention filter.

Social networking sites capitalise on the need for inclusion and desire for prestige that can be gained from association with prominent social members, making them prime sites for commercial exploitation. Statements of self-disclosure accompany product-endorsing celebrity selfies; they narrate the personal life of the celebrity in a way that is realistic and can be identified with because the activities depicted are familiar. Because followers can 'like', share, and comment upon the selfies they might feel they are co-creating content and invest their attention to a greater degree. The more adverts resemble selfies the more believable they appear and the greater their currency is. The social becomes commercial.

Although *The Attention Economy* predates the creation of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter the authors foresaw that many of our social interactions would be mediated through technology. Their analyses of the structures that lead to successful attention economy advertisements seem to predict the rise of the social media microcelebrity. Social media microcelebrities are produced when an individual's popularity increases exponentially and they are given lucrative sponsorship deals. Large numbers



of loyal followers are also large numbers of potential consumers to be presented with product endorsements and advertisements thinly veiled by personal announcements. In Singapore, lifestyle bloggers

carefully curate their selfies, creating an intimacy with their followers, which enables them to effectively market products to them. There are even advertising firms that specialize in representing popular bloggers and social media users. Once represented, a manager works to broker collaborations and endorsements between brands and social media users in exchange for a commission.<sup>16</sup>

Commodities are promoted in the narrative of the blogger's lifestyle choices, under the guise of intimate revelations. This conceals the commercial intention, preventing followers from pre-consciously screening them from attention. An economic interaction is veiled by a social exchange because the posts appear to be spontaneous and intimate.

Davenport and Beck also predicted that advertisers would try to create 'industrialised intimacy', creating an illusion that products and services are personalised and marketed specifically for the individual. However, *The Attention Economy* forewarned that consumers would not be fooled by the 'automated individualism' of personalised communications.<sup>17</sup> When I read an email I am able to discern whether it is automated or personally written, so human intimacy has to complement the 'industrialised intimacy' of advertising.<sup>18</sup> This explains the rise of the social media microcelebrity, the

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16 Crystal Abidin, 'The rise of the selfie and the monetization of social media', The List-Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio National, 12 November 2014.

(<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/thelist/the-rise-of-the-selfie-and-the-monetisation-of-social-media/5885926>) [accessed 11 October 2015]

17 Davenport and Beck, *The Attention Economy*, op. cit., p. 69.

18 *ibid.*, p. 215.

In 2015 an app was developed called Crystal that is able to create a profile of anyone with a LinkedIn account. (<https://www.crystalknows.com>). The app uses data from the individual's social networking site posts and other online correspondence to advise the user how to

human face of commodity exchange. Unlike film stars or musicians, the social media microcelebrity is unknown outside the social media sphere, so the commercial imperative of their endorsements is less obvious.

This recalls Tiqqun's description of the Young-Girl as the frontline infantry of capitalism. Her/his role is to recruit new members to the commodity army and make sure they obey the rules of Spectacle. The microcelebrity is the Young-Girl *par excellence*.

*Hysterical Advertising and the Integrated Spectacle.*

I become a Young-Girl when I buy the products advertised on social networking sites because I incorporate commodity sign-values and shape myself to the identity type created by advertisers to sell commodities. Advertisements create consumer types as they address them, and their followers increasingly conform to the type.

The microcelebrities with whom I identify, whom I envy, view with jealousy, a sense of inferiority, and sometimes with desire, are not individuals but complex identity demographics promoting products. I am disappointed because the image of the ideal is a marketing construction without substance so I introject nothing. The sensation of emptiness is reactivated with each purchase. When faced with inexhaustible ego ideals on social

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communicate with that individual. The marketing information says 'Communicate with anyone based on their unique personality. Crystal analyzes public data to detect the personality of anyone with an online presence. With this powerful data, Crystal can tell you what to write and what not to write in an email, just as if you had the recipient's friend looking over your shoulder. Visit the recipient's full personality profile on [crystalknows.com](http://crystalknows.com) to learn the best way to speak, work with, and engage the person in a face-to-face meeting.' (<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/crystal-for-gmail-linked-in/nmaonghoefpmlfgaknnboiekjhfpmajh?hl=en>). A gmail extension of Crystal can be installed on a personal computer that makes suggestions of words and phrase as the user types an email. The software produces industrialised intimacy and enables communication with others in a manner that allows individuals to mimetically reflect the wishes of another.

networking sites, my hysteria becomes exacerbated. Guy Debord identified this mechanism in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*:

For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien.<sup>19</sup>

The world and the integrated Spectacle are one; the Spectacle produces the world while referring to it as a separate element.<sup>20</sup> Because the integrated Spectacle is both a creation and a reconstruction, it is familiar; it is a reflection of me and the originator of the image, which I identify with and model myself on.

In my body the Spectacle and the world are integrated.



Figure [11] Domenico Dolce [photographer], *Dolce and Gabbana*, Spring/Summer Collection (2016)

Dolce and Gabbana advertisements featuring models taking selfies demonstrate the integrated Spectacle at work. Because the models are engaged in an exaggerated, comical form of selfie-taking they are belittled.

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19 Guy Debord quoted in Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, pp. 108–9.

20 This idea is also reminiscent of Baudrillard's discussion of the hyperreal 'mapping' onto the world to such an extent that the world we experience *is* the hyperreal.

Their debasement has a levelling effect, suggesting the beautiful and successful models are ego-ideals that are attainable. The advertisements do not simply ask me to identify with the models and aspire to become like them with the purchase of commodities, they encourage me to imagine the photographs the models are taking as my own image. If I wear the dress and own the handbag I will be the image the model views in the mobile phone. The unseen image is positioned as a role model, it is the image which all group members identify with and aspire towards. When I project my own image into the unseen screens of the mobile phones, complete with Dolce and Gabbana accessories, I assume the position of ‘group leader’ and the difference between my ego and the ego ideal is eradicated. I identify with the models in the advertisements and see them as a reflection of me.<sup>21</sup>



Figure [12] Domenico Dolce [photographer], *Dolce and Gabbana*, Autumn/Winter Collection (2015)

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21 In the Spring/Summer (2016) collection advertising campaign, many of the images contain a figure that is not engaged in the selfie-taking activities but looks out of the scene towards the viewer. These figures provide eye contact and a sense of inclusion for the viewer. The self-regarding gaze of the selfie-takers, and the interaction of couples and groups of friends taking selfies risk excluding and alienating the viewer as an outside observer. The figure that engages with the viewer can be more easily identified with. Most of these figures are friendly and smiling, but the man in the white suit in the left-hand image has a haughty expression. He seems to command a position of superiority and I interpret this as an expression of disapproval of the activities that surround him. If this interpretation is dominant, the figure in white provides an ironic rhetorical function similar to allegorical irony in paintings, discussed in chapter 1. He disapproves of those taking selfies, offering a point of identification for viewers who may also deem it to be frivolous or narcissistic. I can identify with the image whether I enjoy taking selfies or do not.

The selfie is a symptom of the hysteric's rejection of the formative split between subject and object. The hysteric presents multiple, objectified selves as fragmented, insistent presentifications of the question, 'is this what you desire?' The image of a model taking a selfie complicates this position. The invisible selfies in the *Dolce and Gabbana* advertisements offer an adequate answer to the hysteric's question because they are blank spaces, neither subject nor object, so the answer to the question is left in suspense.

The advertisements also function as revelations: they hint at the secretive world of social media microcelebrities and commercial invasion of the social sphere. The use of selfies as advertisements on social networking sites is reconstructed in the Dolce and Gabbana advertisements. The figures in the advertisements appear to engage in everyday activities that are familiar, even clichéd. The poses are like the idealised and exaggerated gestures of hysterical patients in the Salpêtrière hospital. Hysterical identification has passed from commodity culture to the crowd *via* celebrity selfies and returns to commodity culture in an exaggerated and condensed form.

#### *The Pseudo-Hysterical Discourse of Capitalism*

The revelation and 'presentification' on show in the Dolce and Gabbana advertisements are signs of 'pseudo-hysteria' characteristic of the discourse of the capitalist. The discourse of the capitalist supplements four other discourses theorised by Jacques Lacan: the discourse of the university, the hysteric, the analyst, and the master. Each discourse contains four elements, the master signifier, knowledge, surplus enjoyment, and the subject. It also encompasses four functions, the agent, the other, production, and truth. Each discourse corresponds to one of the four elements as they come to occupy in turn the position of the agent and describes a specific power structure between subjects; an agent addresses someone and their discourse

produces something. The truth is veiled from both parties because it is driven by the agent's unconscious.<sup>22</sup> In the discourse of the master, the master signifier is in the position of the agent, functioning:

to organize the social field according to its (ideological) 'master signifier' [...] the master's discourse can only operate by way of asserting itself ruthlessly in the social field to the extent that the master signifier repressed all knowledge or acknowledgement of its own finitude.<sup>23</sup>

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22 The four discourses were developed in the later period of Lacan's writing. Lacan's work is commonly divided into three periods, each approximately ten years in length. In the earliest period Lacan elaborated the idea of the imaginary through the theories of ego formation: the mirror stage, narcissism and identification. The second period centres on the symbolic order and the position of the Other. During the later stage Lacan developed the four discourses to articulate social bonds and the role of speech in the production of pleasure and anxiety (*jouissance*). In *The Later Lacan: An Introduction* Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf say 'Not only does *jouissance* deregulate and upset the pleasure principle of symbolic balance and proportion, it also becomes specific and integral to speech, now conceived as a carrier of *jouissance*. The symbolic function of speech does not reduce *jouissance* but produces it. Speech no longer thwarts the external threat of the real or pacifies its influx but deploys it by revolving around the object, by enveloping it symbolically into the symptom. Gradually, it becomes clear that this is where Lacan is taking us toward the opacity of *jouissance* ciphered by the signifier in the symptom' (p. ix-x). Rather than viewing the unconscious as a reservoir of repressed wishes the unconscious is considered a structure that can be accessed via discourse. In the later period *jouissance* is identified in what the patient says and language is also a cause of enjoyment. The unconscious is an 'enjoying apparatus whose main purpose is to preserve the subject's elective mode of *jouissance*' (p. x). Because we are socialised to repress our instinctive sexual behaviours we need to construct a symptom to be able to reside in the social bond and experience enjoyment. Lacanian psychoanalysis in the later period does not seek to interpret symptoms in order to find an unconscious truth that would eradicate them. Rather, the symptom is reduced when the subject is separated from the enjoyment procured by the unconscious via fantasy. Analysis does not produce more signifiers by interpreting the symptom and giving it meaning, it seeks to sever the symptom from its *jouissance*, cutting the subjects' master signifier from the signifying chain of discourse and erecting limits that restrict the symptom and reduce anxiety. The symptom is not removed but the limit imposed by analysis turns it into *sinthome*, a symptom that does not impinge on the subject's work and social relations (Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf (eds), 'Preface' in *The Later Lacan: An Introduction*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007). The *sinthome* is the symptom trimmed down 'by virtue of enumerating or leading the subject to enumerate the set of master signifiers, the swarm [*essaim*] from which signification arises' (Jacques-Alain Miller, 'The Sinthome, a Mixture of Symptom and Fantasy', in *The Later Lacan*, *ibid.*, p. 69). Lacan devised the four discourses to enable the subject to question the master (the unconscious), to identify their master signifiers and 'trim them down'.

23 Bert Olivier, 'Lacan on the discourse of capitalism; Critical prospects', in *Phronimon*, 10 (2009).

The truth of this discourse is the limit to the master's power and her/his lack. This unconscious lack drives the discourse because the master commands the other to produce objects for her/his enjoyment. The objects always fail to satisfy because they cannot fill the lack that is concealed. The master uses knowledge to conceal lack and secure her/his position of power.<sup>24</sup> Knowledge in the discourse of the master includes the employee's knowledge used to produce commodities and profit, bureaucratic systems that reinforce social structures, and academic research that strengthens the position of the master.

In the discourse of the master, the hysteric (also called the divided subject) inhabits the position of truth. According to Bert Olivier the hysteric represents a division between self-confidence and self-doubt. Because the hysteric continuously questions the master s/he threatens to reveal the limit of the master's power and knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

In the discourse of the hysteric, the divided subject addresses her/his demands to the master. The repeated questions produce knowledge, but they never reveal the truth – the cause of desire – and so are inadequate. Mark Bracher writes that the hysteric's discourse is one of 'resistance, protest, and complaint', because it is dominated by the symptom of the hysteric, which demonstrates the subject's failure 'to coincide with or be

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28.

According to Lionel Bailly the subject of the discourse of the university is not really interested in true knowledge, only the social position afforded to the one who knows (Lionel Bailly, *Lacan*, 2nd edn, London: One World Publications, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> The discourse of the analyst places the object of desire as the agent. The analyst subverts the master's discourse so the cause of the analysand's desire can emerge during analysis. Bert Olivier says the cause of desire is 'that which can never be accounted for in systems of knowledge, and can therefore never be colonized by the imperatives of the master' (p. 29). In the capitalist discourse of the master, surplus pleasure afforded by the cause of the desire is useless, because it has no use 'for material reward or even well-being; it contributes nothing to the subject's inclination towards survival. This less-than-useless surplus pleasure cannot, therefore, enter the calculus of capitalism except to undermine it' (Joan Copjec quoted in Olivier, *ibid.*, p. 29).

satisfied by the master signifiers offered by society and embraced as the subject's ideals'.<sup>26</sup> The hysteric proves that commodity culture is unsatisfying because s/he continuously inhabits the identities offered by advertisements, but each one is discarded when it fails to satisfy.

In seminars in 1976 and 1978 Lacan said there is a fifth discourse, the capitalist's discourse.<sup>27</sup> In the discourse of the capitalist the divided subject inhabits the position of agent, but rather than addressing the master to produce knowledge, the subject addresses knowledge to produce objects of

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26 Mark Bracher, 'On the psychological and social functions of language: Lacan's theory of the four discourses', in *Lacanian theory of discourse. Subject, structure and society*, ed. by M. Bracher, M. W. Alcorn Jr., et al, New York: New York University Press, 1994.

27 The discourse of the master is characterised by the relation of the four elements:

S1 → S2

S // a

In the 'universe of the master' the discourse of the hysteric is produced when the elements rotate one place in a clockwise direction:

S → S1

a // S2

Rotating all the elements clockwise again produces the discourse of the analyst and the final rotation produces the discourse of the university. In the discourse of the capitalist (and the 'universe of the capitalist' designated by the rotations of the elements that produce three further discourses) the elements relate to one another in a way that differs to the relations in the 'universe of the master':

S → S2

S1 // a

In Seminar XVII Lacan says the discourse of the capitalist is aligned to the discourse of the university, in which knowledge resides in the position of the agent addressing the object of desire. The production of surplus pleasure produces a divided subject who does not know what she/he desires. This is the truth that is concealed by knowledge (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XVII The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 1969-1970*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg, London and New York: W.W. Norton, 2007 [*Le Seminaire, Livre XVII, L'Envers de la Psychanalyse, 1969-1970*, Éditions du Seuil: Paris, 1991]). In the 'Milan Lecture' in 1978 Lacan aligns the discourse of the capitalist with the discourse of the hysteric and describes it as a substitute of the master discourse. Lacan did not develop the idea of the discourse of the capitalist further. However, a number of theorists have attempted to flesh out the theory by conceptualising the 'universe of the capitalist' in reference to Žižek's analysis of social relations in capitalist societies or by theorising the cause of the 'blowout' of the capitalist discourse alluded to by Lacan.

(Levi R. Bryant, 'Žižek's New Universe of Discourse: Politics and the Discourse of the Capitalist', in *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, 2:4 (2008)

<<http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/141/141>> [accessed 25 April 2016])



desire. In consumer culture knowledge derives from advertisements, television programmes, and social networking sites. These signifying chains state that commodities are objects of desire that will fill lack and provide a desirable identity.

According to Levi Bryant, the master signifier in the position of truth is ‘the ferocious *super-ego*’.<sup>28</sup> In the discourse of the capitalist the super-ego does not prohibit enjoyment but repeatedly and insistently commands it. To illustrate this demand Bryant cites Žižek’s distinction between the Oedipal father’s command “you must go...” and the postmodern father who says “whether you go or not you must enjoy”. Bryant says:

this structure is far more insidious in that it is no longer clear how resistance is possible [...] Everywhere we look, commodity consumer society seems to command enjoyment, such that if we are not enjoying we are somehow falling short or failing.<sup>29</sup>

This makes the discourse of the capitalist ‘a perpetual motion machine’ because my desire is insatiable and commodities always fail to satisfy me.<sup>30</sup> The more I try to ‘enjoy’, the greater my sense of disappointment and the more insistent the command to enjoy becomes.

The psychoanalyst Dimitri Weyl describes contemporary commodity culture as ‘a world where it must be possible for the things we desire to be obtained and made to appear instantly. No more waiting, no more frustration, only the constant supply of “unlimited” consumer goods.’<sup>31</sup> He continues: ‘this discourse promises the satisfaction of all desires, on the sole condition of

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28 Bryant, ‘Žižek’s New Universe of Discourse’, op. cit., p. 14.

29 *ibid.*, p. 15–6.

30 *ibid.*, p. 16.

31 Dimitri Weyl, ‘Perversions of the Dream: Excited, Exciting and Captivating Images’, unpublished conference paper, *Je suis le Reve / I am the dream, Dreams and Creativity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, Freud Museum, London, 2016, p. 1.

attaching a price to them and thus effacing the difference between the object of desire and the object of consumption'.<sup>32</sup>

In the discourse of the hysteric, the hysteric shows the discrepancy between the commodity and the object of desire, but in the discourse of the capitalist the commodity and the object of desire appear to be the same. The truth that is concealed is not the cause of desire but the imperative to consume.

In the discourse of the capitalist, the 'other' produces knowledge to reinforce the imperative to consume. Commodity producers and advertisers produce knowledge and seem to function like the master signifier in the discourse of the hysteric. The master signifier answers questions that threaten to reveal the limit of the master's power, but in the discourse of the capitalist the master signifier is the hidden truth concealed by knowledge. Olivier writes:

by inverting these two signifiers it is suggested that the new master's position is one where he is only too aware of his own shortcomings, is plagued by self-doubt, indulges in regular self-criticism, and so on. However, what is hidden in this case is the truth – which the capitalist hysterical master would rather keep out of sight – that, no matter how convincingly the capitalist may show solidarity with workers, ecologists, social activists and so on, claiming that he is equally committed to finding solutions to ostensibly intractable problems, deep down there is no doubt in his own mind about this project: it is still the master's.<sup>33</sup>

Olivier says that companies often appear to meet the demands of others to disarm the subversive power of the hysterical demand for knowledge. By agreeing with their detractors corporations defuse criticism and sometimes

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>33</sup> Olivier, 'Lacan on the discourse of capitalism; Critical prospects', *op. cit.*, p. 32.

appear ‘in the guise of being more radical than their critics!’<sup>34</sup> This is a form of hysterical displacement, trying on a rival’s ego when faced with a threat of annihilation. The hysteric’s identification is mimetic so the actual qualities of the opponent are not introjected and the ‘pseudo-hysteric’ is not really under threat.<sup>35</sup> The show of vulnerability suppresses knowledge and forecloses the hysterical question.<sup>36</sup> Olivier describes this as

capitalism’s fiendish (‘wildly clever’) capacity to re-invent itself whenever it faces a crisis of legitimacy. By displaying such flair in adapting to what might otherwise be adverse conditions, the capitalist takes the wind out of his worst critics’ sails, and even succeeds in making allies of them.<sup>37</sup>

Dolce and Gabbana’s advertisements seem to challenge the use of social media microcelebrities to covertly sell products but it is a pseudo-hysterical pretence. The imperative to consume remains the master signifier of the images. The models, proudly posing with commodities, give the impression that desire has been satisfied and lack filled. They look into screens I cannot see. The commodity, a body that supports and is concealed within the commodities, and the object of desire coalesce in the two-dimensional plane of a selfie.

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34 *ibid.*, p. 33.

35 *ibid.*

36 In economic terms foreclosure is a legal process in which assets are forcibly sold to recover money from a debtor. In psychoanalysis foreclosure is a Lacanian term for a signifier that is not repressed and unconscious but expelled from the subject’s symbolic realm. The repressed wishes of the hysteric return in the form of her/his symptoms whereas foreclosed signifiers return as persecutory hallucinations that trigger psychotic episodes. In psychosis, language functions differently because signifiers are cut off from the signifying chain that gives them meaning; they are withdrawn from speech. Because language provides entry into the symbolic realm, psychotics are cut off from symbolic meaning and produce hallucinations to account for a world that is unfamiliar and senseless.

If the hysterical question is foreclosed the possibility of producing knowledge or gaining insight into the limit of the capitalist’s power is expelled; the necessary signifiers are missing and return in a form that is indecipherable.

<sup>37</sup> Olivier, ‘Lacan on the discourse of capitalism; Critical prospects’, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

## CONSUMER

*Consumer* examines the influence of consumer culture on the visual landscape. Throughout the project I bought advertising space around Cardiff city centre and filled it with posters in which images and text are combined using tropes from advertising, to encourage people to think about the contradictions of capitalist consumption rather than impel them to buy something.



*Consumer (Lure)*, October 2014, Cardiff City Centre: Various locations [advertising posters]



Consumer (Pacifier), December 2014, Churchill Way Cardiff [advertising poster]  
 Text: The decanted infant howls; at once a nurse appears with a bottle of external secretion. Feeling lurks in that interval of time between desire and its consummation. Shorten that interval...  
 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*.





*Consumer (Weight)*, January/February 2015, Cardiff City Centre: Various locations [advertising posters]





Consumer (Wonderland), April 2015, Bute Terrace Cardiff [advertising poster]



## Stilled Lives

### *Still Lives and the Paradox of Progress*

For a short time I created selfies and shared them online. I tagged my photographs with the word 'selfie' and looked at the collection of bodies and faces given equivalence through this shared categorisation. I discovered a large number of followers on Twitter are individuals who conceal that they are acting on behalf of commercial enterprises. They search under the selfie hashtag to target individuals with fashion, fitness programmes, and cosmetic treatments, claiming to help them achieve an ideal look. I was surprised to find photographs representing a wide variety of commodities, from make-up to balls of wool, also marked with this hashtag.

The term selfie is used to advertise self-improvement products, suggesting there is no distinction between the commodity and the body that uses it: they are one object. The advertisers address me in a way I have not experienced before, implying the commodities are already assimilated to my identity before I make a purchase. The mode of identification is direct and forceful – the commodity is you and you are it; there is no escape from this consumer relation. The browser window that displays my body also displays commodities I can use to increase my value as a commodity, the means of creating sign-value and gaining attention. The repetitive layout of images on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook reinforces equivalence between body and commodity, obliterating the hierarchy between consumer and consumed.

If the body is a commodity and also a display of commodities, photographs of the body can be seen as still-lives. In his analysis of the scenes of market places in novels by Rebecca Harding Davis, Mark Seltzer writes:

the market counterposes the still life of commodities and the motion of persons, and the scandal of the still life in persons is the reduction of persons

to the immobility and, therefore, the inanimation or suspended animation of the commodity itself. [...] The counterposing of motion and stillness in the market serves as constant reminder or affirmation of the difference between persons and things.<sup>1</sup>

Seltzer writes that bodies are culturally created by commodification; they overcome nature and are turned into artefacts when consumer choices activate them as signifying surfaces.<sup>2</sup> These consuming bodies are privileged with disembodiment because consumer practices raise the body from material existence to cultural code, sign-value exchange. The bodies do not signify labour, instead connoting the unproductive consumption of wealthy people who do not have to work.

Seltzer argues that the ability to consume marks the body as privileged and disembodied; when it is represented in a painting it is a portrait of the individual. Yet bodies that are consumed as labour are weighed down by their materiality; they are turned into commodities to be consumed by others. This body is represented as a still life, a life in a state of suspended animation waiting to be consumed.

In 'The Still Life' Seltzer refers to consumerism in the industrialised nineteenth century. The distinction he makes between subject and object or consumer and commodity is no longer applicable in the age of post-industrial advanced capitalism. The boundary between a body that is consumed as labour and a body that is culturally coded by consumption is blurred in contemporary consumer culture. Body maintenance and commodification have become standard practices across the classes; all bodies are coded by consumer practices. On social networking sites, the presentation of a commodified body is a form of labour, a reiteration of sign-

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Seltzer, 'The Still Life', in *American Literary History*, 3: 3 (1991), p. 477.

<sup>2</sup> Seltzer, 'The Still Life'.

value that provides surplus-value for commodity producers. Companies recompense this labour through sponsorship deals or by exposing the individual to greater ‘attention’ by ‘liking’, retweeting, and commenting on the individual’s posts.

These bodies are disembodied artefacts and objectified labour at the same time. They appear as active agents of consumption as well as passive commodities to be consumed. The coincidence of activity and passivity brings to mind Benjamin’s theory of progress as a paradox.

In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin writes that progress is mythologised under the sign of predetermination. The ‘ideology of progress’ naturalises the idea of the current course of development as an inevitable trajectory of capitalism that cannot be altered. The political consequence of the naturalisation of progress is conformism and passive acceptance of the status quo. For Benjamin, the crises of ‘modern time’ are not moments in which violent change might take place, but where existing power structures will be held in place. Benjamin equates ‘modern time’ with movement and acceleration, but it is a type of movement without progress and a relentless pursuit of novelty that conceals lack of change. He describes ‘newness’ as that which is ‘always-again-the-same’.<sup>3</sup> Consumer society’s preoccupation with new commodities and novelty when coupled with a passive acceptance of social hierarchy consolidates the dominance of the capitalist class. Contrary to its representations in terms of speed and movement, progress is characterised by suspended animation and the maintenance of social power structures. Progress is immobile and eternal.

Benjamin argues that fashion is the modern ‘measure of time’ because it is characterised by a quick turn over of styles and the continuous production

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., p. 293.

of new commodities.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin equated the transitory nature of modern time with the eternal, repetitive punishments of hell. In order to remain ‘up-to-date’ and fashionable, consumers engage in a cycle of makeovers and body alterations. The commodified surface of the body is in a state of constant flux but is also fixed in ‘the biological rigor mortis of eternal youth’.<sup>5</sup> To stay youthful and prevent unwanted change the body must endure constant alteration. The paradox of the myth of progress plays out on the body.

*Deathly Suspension of the Fashionable Face*

My body is suspended in a state of ‘becoming’ by the continuous body-labour required to maintain an ideal body. I am trapped between my imperfect body and the perfect body I hope to achieve. If I feel satisfied with my body I might reduce consumption for my body. This would not fit the capitalist need for growth, so new body imperfections and aesthetic trends continue to be found. This is demonstrated in the popularity of temporary cosmetic surgery. In ‘Cosmetic Surgery and Fashionable Faces’, Meredith Jones discusses the trend for temporary surgical procedures, now available

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99.

The surface of the body is fixed by an appearance of youthfulness. This aim is clearly demonstrated by the volume of ‘age-defying’ cosmetic products available to buy, including Boots’ ‘Time Delay’ range and Dr Lewinn’s ‘Eternal Youth’ day and night cream. The latter product claims to use ‘juvefoxo™’, a powerful hexapeptide that mimics the properties of the ‘immortal jellyfish’ – a jellyfish that grows younger, eventually transforming back into a polyp to begin new life again. This ingredient rejuvenates skin cell performance by 10 years and seeks to aid cell repair and longevity, providing significant anti-ageing benefits. The cream is also formulated with diamond and black pearl which work to achieve a youthful complexion.’ Unknown Author, ‘Dr Lewinn’s Eternal Youth Day and Night Cream advertisement’, <[http://www.beautyheaven.com.au/skin-care/moisturisers/45274-dr-lewinn-s-eternal-youth-day-night-cream?sort\\_by=flagged&=Apply](http://www.beautyheaven.com.au/skin-care/moisturisers/45274-dr-lewinn-s-eternal-youth-day-night-cream?sort_by=flagged&=Apply)> [accessed 21 May 2016].

Although the advertisement claims the product will defy ageing, it is clear from the description that youthfulness is only achieved on the surface, the skin rejuvenates and looks younger while the interior of the body remains unaffected as it continues to age and deteriorate. This reinforces the ideas put forward in chapter 2 regarding hysterical presentification of a dazzling, enchanting body and its structural similarity to Benjamin’s description of the commodity as a phosphorescent glimmering surface concealing a hollowed-out ruin beneath.

on the high street:

the rhetoric around cosmetic surgery is undergoing metamorphosis. It has always been sold by popular media and advertising as a way to look younger and more beautiful, but it is only in the last few years that it has begun to be represented as something that may date (like a handbag): as something that has a *current*, fashionable incarnation at any given moment.<sup>6</sup>

Temporary cosmetic surgery procedures plump the flesh or smooth skin, creating effects that usually last for a matter of months. The procedures will go out of fashion, creating the need for consumers to keep up with trends by purchasing repeated, but subtly different procedures. The fashion of the face is characterised by newness and novelty, and is in constant flux. This is Benjamin's fashion-time played out on the epidermis.

As the surface of the face evolves and changes, it is frozen. The face is described as a 'historical repository, each wrinkle or mark representing an experience while the visage as a whole declares a life narrative'.<sup>7</sup> The inscription of time upon the face is erased by surgery and the capacity of the face to add to the repository is lost. The face is de-animated but also constantly changing to the rhythm of fashion time. Benjamin suggests the person who follows fashion in an attempt to defy ageing 'mimics the mannequin, and enters history as a dead object, a gaily decked-out corpse'.<sup>8</sup> The surgically enhanced face moves closer to an ideal for living faces but loses its liveliness. Like the 'scandal of the still life in persons', the fashionable face is characterised by suspended animation.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Meredith Jones, 'Cosmetic Surgery and the Fashionable Face', *Fashion Theory*, 16: 2 (2012), p. 198.

7 *ibid*, p. 202.

8 Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., p. 101.

9 Seltzer, 'The Still Life', op. cit., p. 477.

I have analysed visual representations of consumer culture from the seventeenth-century Dutch republic to the present day and found the commodities in the images oscillate between animate and inanimate. In his discussion of the relation between expensive objects and food in *pronkstilleven* paintings, Foster says that food was depicted alongside the priceless artefacts in order to endow them with use-, as well as exchange-value. He describes the objects as

caught between two worlds – not alive, not dead, not useful, not useless, as if lost between the tangibility of the common thing and the visibility of the distanced commodity. And the pictorial effect is often one of deathly suspension or [...] an eerie animation.<sup>10</sup>

The immobile face of the cosmetic surgery user might also be suspended in this space. Surgical procedures diminish the tangible nature of the body by removing its propensity for expression. The use-value of the face as a surface for communication and inscription is diminished in favour of exchange-value that expresses the labour expended on its surface. Jones writes ‘fashionable faces’ add richness to the image-saturated visual landscape: ‘worked-on faces tell stories about celebrity, class, fashion, neoliberal values, and about the display of endless work on the self, especially where that work is tied in with purchasable “lifestyle” items’.<sup>11</sup> If fashionable faces express a narrative of celebrity culture and body-labour they do so using a vocabulary of exchange-value. Jones continues: ‘we might understand cosmetic surgery faces as the quintessential faces of our time, marked by our dominant paradigm – consumer culture – in ways that no others are. In this way cosmetic surgery, like fashion [...] is a medium itself.’<sup>12</sup> The faces may not express emotion or lived experience but they do express quantities of money that have been spent on their creation.

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<sup>10</sup> Foster, ‘The Art of Fetishism’, op. cit., p. 257.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, ‘Cosmetic Surgery and the Fashionable Face’, op. cit., pp. 202–3.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.

Fashionable faces reflect neoliberal consumer values, but they are also a narrative of the body becoming a commodity. The illusion of use-value, under the guise of health and well-being has diminished in importance as the system of sign-value exchange penetrates further into the social sphere. This recalls Marx's ventriloquist speech by a commodity:

Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our exchange-value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange-values.<sup>13</sup>

Surgically enhanced bodies communicate to each other as commodities expressing their exchange-value relation. The commodification of the body is complete. The beauty products that are frequently visible in selfies show the body-labour that has been undertaken to increase the sign-value of the individual. The bodies in selfies appear to be culturally coded by their consumer practices, but this does not turn them into privileged disembodied cultural artefacts described by Seltzer. The selfies exist to be consumed as sign-values and shared by others. The beauty products that surround the body animate it and endow the body with exchange-value.

If commodification of the body implies subjecthood in Rebecca Harding Davis's novels, it has a different kind of signification for the body in the selfie. Seltzer argues that the connection between self-creation and movement is inadequate to describe life in industrialised capitalist systems; rather than a postulate of mobility, the agency afforded the factory worker would be a postulate of automatism. Seltzer draws on Marx's description of industrial automata as 'a motive force that moves of its own accord. The automaton consists of a number of mechanical and intellectual organs, so

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<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Capital*, op. cit., p. 81.

that the workers themselves can be no more than the conscious limbs of the automaton.<sup>14</sup> The factory workers are denied active subjecthood because the machine predetermines their actions.

Despite contemporary consumer culture's obsession with individuality and the creative potential of commodities, consumers are turned into 'types' relating to predetermined marketing demographics rather than privileged individuals. It no longer seems plausible that a consumer will gain agency and individuality through their consumer choices. If people feel inferior to the models for the body presented by advertisements, they are impelled to conform to the models. They resemble more closely a factory worker carrying out predetermined actions in the service of a machine. I produce (or reproduce) sign-value and this is the labour I perform but there is no product when I share selfies online. I am turned into a commodity that displays sign-values of other commodities. I am a limb of sign-value exchange, seemingly mobile and active but all my movements and gestures have been predetermined by the system.

This interpretation of the body of the consumer in capitalism suggests that selfies are always still-life photographs rather than portraits. The individuals may be disembodied by their virtual dissemination but they are also weighed down by sign-value signification of the commodities they showcase and the body-labour they undertake. Seltzer writes that 'the still life thus necessarily excludes the human subject and the human body since it is precisely the human subject and the human body to which the still life at every point makes reference and pays homage'.<sup>15</sup> The objects on display are possessions and products of human labour. The food on the still-life table signifies basic human need turned into a cultural activity. On social networking sites the selfie, as a still-life of commodities, does not pay homage to an unseen

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14 Marx, *Grundrisse*, quoted in Seltzer, *The Still Life*, op. cit., p. 478.

15 *ibid.*, p. 473.



individual. Instead it pays homage to commodity production. The referencing system has been inverted: bodies now pay homage to things.

Employers may turn the bodies of workers into a still life commodity waiting to be consumed, but as a consumer I willingly undertake the transformation. I actively immobilise my skin to appear eternally youthful, fixing the surface of my body into something resembling an ideal image of itself. Meredith Jones discusses the increasingly blurred boundary between real flesh and images of the body. Because people tend to select from magazines the ‘fashionable faces’ they wish to emulate, the type of face that is idealised is ‘visibly manufactured’.<sup>16</sup> Our standards of beauty, for the body as well as the face, are based on stylised and manipulated images rather than bodies in the real world. When individuals identify with images they do not wish to copy the individuals in the photographs – instead they attempt to become the airbrushed image.

Commodity manufacturers create cosmetics that claim to produce effects equivalent to Photoshop techniques. Revlon says its ‘Photoready’ makeup will ‘airbrush’ skin to make it appear flawless,<sup>17</sup> while products such as ‘All in One InstaBlur’ by the Body Shop, and Garnier’s ‘5 second Blur Skin smoother’ claim to reduce the appearance of pores using ‘blurring’ or ‘liquifying’ technology. The face is treated like a screen, enabling airbrushing and blending to take place on the dermal rather than digital surface. When these products fail to recreate the perfection of the image, cosmetic surgery is the only remaining real-world equivalent of the digital manipulator’s toolbox. Jones says cosmetic surgery offers:

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, ‘Cosmetic Surgery and the Fashionable Face’, op. cit., p. 194.

A manufactured face is created with studio lighting, makeup, digital manipulation, and cosmetic surgery.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

a tangible ‘solution’ to the stress of living in two worlds – one ‘real’ and one made up of images – worlds that both contradict and complement each other but that, most importantly, are mutually constitutive. Following this logic I suggest that cosmetic surgery works as a dialogue written on the body, between two-dimensional and three-dimensional worlds. In this way, cosmetic surgery is a medium in the original latin sense of the word ‘middle’ – being between, being that which joins – it is a means by which to reconcile and live in a world where realities are multiple.<sup>18</sup>

Cosmetic surgery and Photoshop-effect products do not join two irreconcilable realities but integrate the body of the consumer into the Spectacle. The possibility of multiple realities is erased in this process.

*Group Psychology and the Sadistic Leader*

The figures in advertisements provide models for my body; they are the ego ideals that I emulate in the hope of becoming more ideal. I am fixed in a ‘future conditional’ relation with a younger, slimmer, and more ideal body produced by commodity consumption and body-labour.<sup>19</sup> To paraphrase Tiqqun, I try to erase my human characteristics because they are imperfections that prevent me from becoming more commodity-like.<sup>20</sup> The erasure of imperfections echoes Stoller’s description of airbrushed images of bodies in pornography that have been dehumanised and anatomised.<sup>21</sup> If blemishes humanise me, the cosmetic products and procedures developed

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18 *ibid.*, p. 205.

19 I have appropriated Hillel Schwartz’s term ‘future conditional’ to describe the relation between a fat person ‘suspended between what they are and who they will be when they are finally thin’. I will discuss the term in relation to fat bodies in chapter 7, but I think the body-labour demanded by commodity culture produces a ‘future conditional’ relation to the body regardless of size or body type (Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat*, 2nd edn, New York: Anchor Books, 1990, p. 325).

20 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit.

21 Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*.

to remove imperfections can be viewed as tools of perversity.<sup>22</sup> Louise Kaplan suggests this when she asks if plucking, shaving, exfoliating, and liposuction are examples of conscious desire for beauty concealing unconscious self-mutilation in which the body is used as a stage for perverse enactment. She writes that ‘it is not the behaviour itself which determines if an act is a perversion but the mental strategy that empowers the act and the unconscious fantasies that accompany it. It might be perverse if it is designed to assuage anxiety and shame’.<sup>23</sup> The individual reduces his or her own body to a dehumanised object to prevent more catastrophic events from taking place. Shame and anxiety arise from the individual’s past experiences of humiliation, fear, and aggression. They are highly personal experiences, making it difficult to account for the widespread adoption of these small acts of perversion.

Advertising and popular culture provide models for my body, and shame is the disciplining force that impels me to conform to them. Because the models are created by the ‘integrated Spectacle’ from a blend of commodities and marketing demographics, the Spectacle becomes integrated into my identifications and ego ideals. The inherently dissatisfying nature of commodity fetishes, particularly the commodity-body, causes my identifications to become hysterical. I do not know who I am nor what I want so I mimic others and compulsively consume products in the hope of finding out. Social networking sites disseminate my hysterical identifications and enable the sign-value exchange system to further invade my life. The ‘future conditional’ state of being traps me into a masochistic position, and the innumerable voices of advertisements, television

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22 Perversions comprise of actions that are compulsively performed to assuage anxiety and shame that would otherwise be unbearable. Stoller uses the term ‘perverse scripts’ to express the repetitive nature of the compulsion. He argues that perversions are a form of theatre using props and other ‘actors’ to replay traumatising scenes in a controlled manner so the individual can master and gain a circumscribed form of enjoyment from them.

23 Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Madame Bovary*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 367.

programmes, and magazine articles are sadistic commands compelling me to perform a catalogue of self-inflicted sadistic acts.

An article on *The Telegraph's* website describes a new cosmetic procedure: women, who spent thousands of pounds to have pubic hair permanently removed with lasers are now spending equally large sums of money to try to encourage the hair to grow back.<sup>24</sup> Platelet-rich plasma therapy involves multiple injections of the individual's growth-stimulating plasma into the pubic region. The procedure to remove pubic hair with waxing and laser treatment is agonising, and the multiple injections trying to reverse the process cause painful bruising. This could be interpreted as a masochistic relation to the body that produces some sort of pleasure.

Jacques André defines masochism as 'the sexualization of guilt and of morality which transforms the punishment into the most delightful sort of gratification'.<sup>25</sup> The painful acts appear to be chastisement for a transgression of law, but masochism makes a mockery of guilt by taking pleasure from punishment.<sup>26</sup> In his analysis of the writing of Masoch, Gilles Deleuze says the masochist 'is not a strange being who finds pleasure in pain, but that he is like everyone else, and finds pleasure where others do, the simple difference being that for him pain, punishment or humiliation are necessary prerequisites to obtaining gratification'.<sup>27</sup> When describing the contractual form of masochistic relations Deleuze writes:

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24 Leah Hardy, 'Reversing the lasered bikini line: Why women are paying thousands to restore the hair 'down there'', *The Telegraph*, 15 February 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/beauty/body/reversing-the-lasered-bikini-line-why-women-are-paying-thousands/?sf20880597=1>> [accessed 27 February 2016].

25 Jacques André, 'Immanent Masochism', in *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Claudia Vaughn <<http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/immanent-masochism/>> [accessed 4 June 2016].

26 Gilles Deleuze, 'Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty' in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs*, Massachusetts: Zone Books, 1991 ['Le Froid et le Cruel' in *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967].

27 *ibid.*, p. 71.

The masochist regards the law as a punitive process and therefore begins by having the punishment inflicted upon himself; once he has undergone the punishment, he feels that he is allowed or indeed commanded to experience the pleasure that the law was supposed to forbid. The essence of masochistic humor lies in this, that the very law which forbids the satisfaction of a desire under threat of subsequent punishment is converted into one which demands the punishment first and then orders that the satisfaction of the desire should necessarily follow upon the punishment.<sup>28</sup>

The masochist makes a mockery of the laws that punish her/him. The masochist appears to be bound and subjugated by another but the sadistic woman or man who punishes her/him is a product of the masochist. Deleuze writes; ‘the masochistic hero appears to be educated and fashioned by the authoritarian woman whereas basically it is he who forms her, dresses her for a part and prompts the harsh words she addresses to him. It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of the torturer, without sparing himself.’<sup>29</sup>

The masochist appears to be passive but retains agency through the contractual obligations s/he convinces the other to perform. This description does not find correspondence in the image of a woman who has her pubic hair removed and then undergoes injections to stimulate hair growth, nor does it explain the popularity of temporary cosmetic surgery procedures that must be repeated. There is a discrepancy between the temporal nature of masochism and the sadistic acts of body-labour. The masochist experiences a ‘profound state of waiting’, an idealised fantasy of pain conjured up by the imagination in the suspense of waiting.<sup>30</sup> The masochist waits for pleasure that has been guaranteed by the punishment already received, suspending pleasure as an idealised fantasy; ‘Waiting

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28 *ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

29 *ibid.*, p. 22.

30 *ibid.*, p. 71.

represents the unity of the ideal and the realm, the form or temporality of the fantasy.’<sup>31</sup>

The idea of suspense recalls the frozen face produced by cosmetic surgery procedures and age-defying creams. However, the repetition of procedures and the vast number of different treatments and products on the market suggest a different pathology is at work. Referring to the writing style of Sade, Deleuze says sadism as characterised by accumulation and acceleration:

In order to convey the immediacy of this action of one soul against another, Sade chooses to rely on the quantitative techniques of accumulation and acceleration, mechanically grounded in a materialistic theory: reiteration and internal multiplication of the scenes, precipitation, over-determination. (The subject is at once parricide, incestuous, murderer, prostitute and sodomite.) We have seen why number, quantity and quantitative precipitation were the specific obsessions of sadism.<sup>32</sup>

Once the first procedure to remove hair has taken place new ways to inflict pain in the pubic region are developed. The relentless imagination of commodity producers means consumers are trapped on a circuitous path around the ego ideal. To become the ideal is an impossible task and so the sadistic torture continues without end.

In Sade’s novels multiple acts of torture are carried out, described from multiple points of view in a logic of accumulation. On social networking sites images of the body, often shown from multiple angles, endlessly proliferate through sharing and copying. A demonstration of this can be found in an advertisement for L’Oréal Paris Infallible Sculpt Make-up. The

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31 *ibid.*, p. 72.

32 *ibid.*, p. 70.

short film begins with a model saying “I may not be infallible but I am always selfie ready” and a male voice-over tells me I can be selfie ready from any angle for up to twenty-four hours. The belt of selfie-sticks with camera-phones that encircle the model visually demonstrates the need for continuous readiness under the omnipresent and multiple gaze of the proliferating devices. She appears trapped by her visibility. The phone screens also connote a sadistic master scrutinising their victim from every angle, looking for ways to inflict pain and produce pleasure. When the sadistic capitalist is master, the pleasure produced is surplus-value.

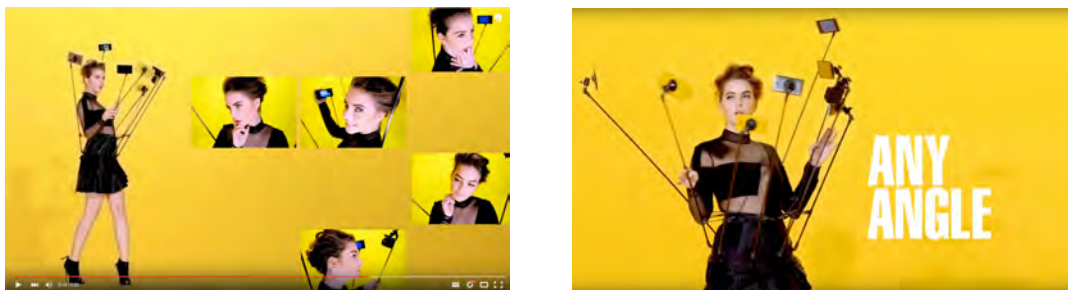


Figure [13] *L'Oréal Infallible Sculpt Make-up* [advertisement] director unknown, 2016

The system further entrenches my masochistic position by frequently portraying ego ideals in advertisements in a dominant sadistic position. Weyl characterises the figures in magazines:

The poses and expressions are provocative and domineering: the gaze is scornful or evasive (using the object *a*), the low-angle shots accentuate ascendancy; the models must seem unattainable. The compositions imitate porn or S/M ‘aesthetics’. The poses are often very suggestive [...] the large majority of figures represent unbinding, domination, control, violence and conflict, and connote the master-slave dialectic of power relations, through a very limited and systematized range of expression, which format and eventually shape virtually the same character.<sup>33</sup>

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33 Weyl, ‘Perversions of the Dream’, op. cit., p. 6.

Advertisements intensify my desire to rise to the position of ego ideal and dominate others because the advertising figure signifies an ‘all-powerful ego-ideal in a state of perpetual enjoyment’.<sup>34</sup> My relation to my body is not characterised by self-inflicted injury but torments carried out in response to the sadistic commands of advertising media and commodity producers. The capitalist’s discourse commands the consumer to enjoy, even if the activity is painful. This command is effective because I am led to believe the commodity or cosmetic treatment will turn me into an irresistible object ‘an object of total enjoyment [...] When you are in turn the object of enjoyment, you will become irresistible to others and thus will be able to dispose of them, the way one disposes of an object’.<sup>35</sup> With this promise of power I become an agent of sadistic capitalism.

Deleuze says the sadistic relation signifies an alliance between the father and daughter in conflict with the mother. The father places himself above the law as ‘a primitive anarchic force that can only be restored to its original state by destroying the laws and the secondary beings that are subject to them’.<sup>36</sup> Sade distinguishes between two different natures. The mother represents a secondary being whose ability to procreate competes with primary nature and the sadist strives toward primary nature that is lawless and destructive. Secondary nature is characterised by a balance between life and death; negative and positive forces:

Destruction is merely the reverse of creation and change, disorder is another form of order, and the decomposition of death is equally the composition of life. The negative is all-pervasive, but the process of death and destruction that it represents is only a partial process. Hence the disappointment of the sadistic hero, faced with a nature which seems to prove to him that the perfect crime is impossible [...] Even the thought that other people’s pain

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Lacan quoted in Weyl, ‘Perversions of the Dream’, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Deleuze, ‘Masochism’, *op. cit.*, p. 60.



gives him pleasure does not comfort him, for this ego-satisfaction merely means that the negative can be achieved only as the reverse of positivity.<sup>37</sup>

The sadist dreams of a perfect, dispassionate, sadistic act. In contrast to the sensual suspension of pleasure idealised by the masochist, the sadist tries to eradicate emotional response. Deleuze writes:

The ‘apathy’ of the sadist is essentially directed against feelings: all feelings, even and especially that of doing evil, are condemned on the grounds that they bring about a dangerous dissipation which prevents the condensation of energy and its precipitation into the pure element of impersonal and demonstrative sensuality. [...] All enthusiasm, even and especially the enthusiasm for evil, is condemned because it enchains us to secondary nature and is still a residue of goodness within us. In the novels of Sade, the true libertines mistrust those characters who are still subject to emotional outbursts, and who show that, even in the midst of evil and for evil’s sake, they are liable to be ‘converted to the first misfortune’.<sup>38</sup>

When I produce myself as a Young-Girl it is through the eradication of emotion, fecundity, and the other imperfections that prevent me from becoming a perfect commodity.<sup>39</sup> When I conform to and disseminate the idealised values of the Spectacle, I form an alliance with the sadistic capitalist. I multiply the number of victims the sadist can torture when I disseminate the methods of torture on social networking sites. In order to escape the masochistic position I must rise to the scornful, domineering position of Young-Girl, the sadist’s accomplice, and this can only be achieved by eradicating all human imperfections. The quest to perfect my body is endless because new imperfections continue to be found.

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37 *ibid.*, p. 27.

38 *ibid.*, p. 51–2.

39 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials*, *op. cit.*

Because it is impossible to eradicate the positive and creative aspects from negative destructive acts, the sadist and Young-Girl enforce nihilistic positivity. The sadistic command to ‘enjoy’ does not produce pleasure but reproduces the dissatisfaction that is central to commodity consumption and enables the sadistic torture to be self-administered.

The sadistic-masochistic relation demonstrates capitalism as a perpetual motion machine; it must continue to expand into new markets and create new commodities to produce surplus-value. Sade’s libertine hero Clairwil also dreams of a mechanism and institution of ‘perpetual motion’ that would produce a perfect crime that ‘is perpetually effective, even when I myself cease to be effective, so that there will not be a single moment of my life, even when I am asleep, when I shall not be the cause of some disturbance’.<sup>40</sup> The Young-Girl is the perpetual motion machine that ensures sadistic acts are reproduced and carried out with infinite variation on a growing number of victims. The institutions that facilitate dissemination of methods and provide the Young-Girl with authority are social networking sites.

When Lacan introduces the idea of the discourse of the capitalist he says the system contains a flaw:

It is no less headed for a blowout. This is because it is untenable. [...] it suffices to the extent that it runs as if on a roulette wheel, but it runs too fast, it consumes, it consumes so well that it consumes itself.<sup>41</sup>

This implies that capitalist systems will run out of parts of the body to commodify and exhaust potential market places once all social interaction serves the system of sign-value exchange. Although Lacan did not develop this idea further, other theorists have built upon and challenged it. Bert

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<sup>40</sup> Deleuze, ‘Masochism’, op. cit., p. 76, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Lacan quoted in Bryant, ‘Žižek’s New Universe of Discourse’, op. cit., p. 8.

Olivier, citing Ulrich Beck, writes that the counter-discourse to the capitalist discourse is a refusal to consume. Olivier argues consumers

can paralyze capital selectively, stunting its indispensable growth in the process, thus negotiating for themselves (and perhaps for the planet) a better material and ecological dispensation [...] by saying ‘no’ to the exhortation to buy, one could join the increasing numbers of people who are becoming aware of their power to combat the excesses of capital [...].<sup>42</sup>

It seems the power to disrupt capitalist domination of the body lies in selective starvation or cannibalistic over-consumption. Using anorexia and fat fetishism as metaphors for aberrant consumer practices, I will explore the extremes of this hypothesis in the following chapters. Because user-generated content on social networking sites ‘feeds’ the system of sign-value exchange, I will analyse thinspiration and fat-fetish selfies in the context of pro-anorexia and fat-admiration websites.

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<sup>42</sup> Olivier, ‘Lacan on the discourse of capitalism’, op. cit., p. 36.

## CELEBRATE (TEA PARTY)

The *Tea Party* photographs are my response to research into the visualisation of food in eating disorders. Commonly anorexics imagine food drained of colour and aroma to help suppress desire. In both photographs the food is inedible, eradicating its value as food. In the white photograph the food is made of the same porcelain as the containers, raising the food to the status of a crafted and delicate object. In the grey photograph the object is made of concrete, a common, inexpensive material. The different materials evoke the shifting status of food in the lives of eating disorder sufferers, in turn object of disgust and obsession. Food to be consumed is turned into petrified matter.



*Tea Party (White)*, 2013, 50cm x 62cm [c-type photograph]



*Tea Party (Grey)*, 2016, 42cm x 52cm [c-type photograph]

## Commodifying Anti-Consumers

### *The Universe of the Capitalist*

Under the discourse of the master, subjects are standardised and bound by the master signifier. Although a signifier, such as lecturer or artist, cannot adequately name the subject, the master signifier artificially fixes the identity of the individual and provides her/him with a stable social position. Subjects are designated consumed worker (and still life object) or consuming employer (and portrait subject) according to their relation to the master.

Under the discourse of the capitalist, each subject acts as an individual consumer in pursuit of enjoyment and as an individual worker selling her/his labour in competition with others. The discourse of the capitalist binds individual subjects through incorporation and assimilation rather than domination; ‘capitalism [...] constantly decodes or pulls apart existing social codes, and integrates anything that deviates from existing codes into the system of capitalism to produce new markets’.<sup>1</sup> The master seeks to eradicate differences whereas the capitalist uses differences as opportunities for growth. Developing new marketplaces in social networking sites and using social media microcelebrities to produce sign-value are examples of the process of incorporation and extension that characterise capitalist growth. In the ‘universe of the capitalist’ Levi Bryant builds upon Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of Lacan’s discourses to theorise two discursive mechanisms used to incorporate subjects into the capitalist value system: the discourse of bio-power and the discourse of immaterial labour.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Bryant, ‘Žižek’s New Universe of Discourse’, op. cit., p. 9.

2 Bryant describes the four discourses originally theorised by Lacan as the ‘universe of the master’ because the master’s position is upheld and occasionally challenged by the four discourses it contains. The universe of the capitalist also contains four discourses, each demonstrating a different power structure in relation to the capitalist. Foucault’s

Michel Foucault coins the term 'bio-power' in his description of a form of subjection experienced in capitalist societies. Foucault writes:

Bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern.<sup>3</sup>

In the discourse of bio-power the divided subject is produced as 'a completely regulated body that could function as a gear in the machine of production without friction, waste, or remainder'.<sup>4</sup> The knowledge produced in this discourse is used to engender more efficient workers, optimise production, and increase surplus-value.

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term 'bio-power' pre-dates neoliberal capitalism and the idea of immaterial labour that has developed from neo-liberal capitalism. This chronological divide is not acknowledged in the use of the terms 'bio-power' and 'immaterial-labour' to describe two of the discourses of the capitalist. Other theorists have contributed to the development of the discourses of bio-power and immaterial labour. For example, Giorgio Agamben's writing on 'bare life' responds to Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt's studies of bio-politics. Agamben traces 'states of exception' states of emergency from the French revolution to the present day demonstrating that the states of exception are prolonged, if not permanent, in contemporary life. By instituting 'exceptional' states governments are able to negate laws and restrict the rights of the population. In Guantánamo Bay detention centre inmates are held indefinitely without trial because the camp is exempt from US law. The inmates are reduced to 'bare life' and can resist their loss of rights only using the body and hunger strikes. The inmates try to regain power through a potential loss of life but are force-fed. The space between law and self in which the inmates can act is eradicated. (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995 [*Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la vita nuda*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1995]; *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [*Stato di eccezione*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri editore, 2003]).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 6th edn, London: Penguin Books, 1990 [*Histoire de la sexualité*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976] pp. 140-1.

<sup>4</sup> Bryant, 'Žižek's New Universe of Discourse', op. cit., p. 27.

The discourse of immaterial labour creates temporary social relations among subjects to develop new commodity markets, ‘while perpetually recapturing new subjectivities that do not fit with existing social codes’.<sup>5</sup> The discourse of immaterial labour is the site of ideology and political engagement because immaterial labour produces ‘codes, social identities, and affects’ to produce ‘social life’.<sup>6</sup> The agent of this discourse is knowledge; state apparatus, advertisements, social networking sites, and other modes of engagement work to integrate all aberrant unassimilated signifiers into a single code. By continuously addressing the object of desire – all that is unnamed by the system and therefore beyond its control – it attempts to transform everything into a single unified code that can be integrated into the capitalist value system. In this discourse the divided subject inhabits the position of truth, hidden by a master signifier that claims to unify all subjects and provide them with fixed identities. But because the divided subject fails to assume the ideals of consumer society, she/he is also the truth driving the discourse ‘endlessly pursuing some signifier that would be capable of naming it or assigning it a place within the symbolic order’.<sup>7</sup>

Health is a way of exerting control over my body and creating new markets. It transforms my leisure into a form of body-labour that complements my economic function and compels me to purchase equipment and services. Capitalism turns me into a commodity that consumes and is consumed. Through the consumption of commodities I improve the productivity of my body and turn it into a display of sign-values. I participate in a system of sign-value exchange that reinforces existing social norms and structures. Discourses deriving from a variety of

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5 *ibid.*, p. 30.

6 *ibid.*, p. 30.

7 *ibid.*, p. 34.



institutions from doctors and health professionals to popular culture production companies impose their body standards on me, and by adhering to the standard I disseminate it further. Baudrillard called the domination of sign-value by the ruling classes ‘semiotic privilege’.<sup>8</sup> My body does not escape this process of signification.

The ‘healthy body’ acts as a sign-value for success, a strong work ethic and self-control; it is viewed as a productive resource and medium for creating ‘bodily capital’.<sup>9</sup> The unhealthy body is a signifier for a lack of self-control and is deemed to be an obstacle to productive labour. By conforming to health (which are also beauty) standards I am given a position within the capitalist discourse that dominates me. In the discourses of bio-politics and immaterial labour I am trained to produce sign-value and enticed to conform to social norms with the reward of inclusion and threat of ostracisation.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, op. cit., p. 116.

In early capitalist societies the dominant classes were the aristocracy of the feudal system and rising class of industrial capitalists. In advanced capitalism the dominant or ruling classes are global corporations imposing industrially produced *mass* culture on the world.

9 Shari L Dworkin and Faye L Wachs, *Body Panic: Gender, Health and the Selling of Fitness*, New York: NYU Press, 2009, p. 104.

10 To further disseminate the healthy body ideal and deter resistance to it, confession and shame are used as mechanisms of coercion. Each community defines its own boundary between healthy and unhealthy bodies, so shame serves to maintain their ideals. In terms of health, the confessional body signifies a person with the financial resources to undertake self-analysis and self-improvement practices in order to achieve ‘bodily capital’. As Foucault writes, the act of confession ‘exonerates, redeems, and purifies (...) it unburdens of wrongs, liberates and promises salvation’. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction*, p. 62) In contrast to this, according to Dworkin and Wachs, shamed bodies, traditionally working class, poor, and other marginalized people ‘are subjected to the “bio-power” of experts who impose upon these bodies judgments that explain their pathologies and failures’ (Dworkin and Wachs, *Body Panic: Gender, Health and the Selling of Fitness*, p. 14). Shamed bodies are viewed and manipulated by others while confessional bodies are self-regarding and able to create themselves.

G. S. Rousseau says that hysteria is now to be found in ‘the health club, the bedroom with its paraphernalia of biofeedback machines, the therapist’s waiting room, the pain clinics, even the beauty salons and ever-proliferating malls. Paradoxically, it seems today that these are the locales of *health* and therefore pleasure and happiness. Yet it may be, upon closer observation, that they are merely the places where modern hysteria – what our vocabulary calls stress – has learned to disguise itself as *health*’ (G. S. Rousseau, ‘A Strange Pathology’, in Gilman, Sander L., Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, and

Robert Crawford suggests that capitalism ‘structured by the mandates of production and consumption requires both a work ethic and a pleasure ethic’.<sup>11</sup> He continues:

On one hand we must repress desires for immediate gratification and cultivate a work ethic, on the other, as consumers we must display a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse; we must hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction. The regulation of desire thus becomes an ongoing problem, constantly besieged by temptation, while socially condemned for over indulgence.<sup>12</sup>

There is a conflict at the heart of consumer culture, between the imperative to work hard and delay gratification, and the consumer dictum of instant pleasure. Fitness and working out demonstrate the individual’s ability to balance these opposing forces.

The imperatives to over-indulge and control the body against its appetites are read in the extreme eating habits of restriction and addiction.<sup>13</sup> The requirements of capitalism are taken to pathological extremes; they produce bodies that expose the contradictory messages of consumerism.

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Elaine Showalter, *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 91–186, p. 100). These locales are also sites of bio-power and immaterial labour, where the subject’s body is trained to be more productive, and social relations are harnessed to create new markets and to homogenise individuals towards a social ideal.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Crawford, ‘A Cultural Account of “Health”: Control, Release, and the Social Body’, in *Issues in the Political Economy of Health Care*, ed. by John McKinley, London: Tavistock Publications, 1984, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> I am using the term food addict rather than binge eater because this is the terminology increasingly used in eating disorder research centres. Although it does provide a frame of reference for a relation to food that is beyond the control of the sufferer it may also reduce the importance of the pathological nature of binge eating habits.

The anorexic consumer type implies a disharmony between production and consumption in which consumption is drastically minimised and body-labour is valued to an excessive level. Because it is fundamentally a refusal to consume, consumer society attempts to discipline the anorexic body. Medical intervention by the state tries to transform the anorexic body into a productive one. Significantly reduced consumption is unacceptable in consumer society and the excessive productivity of the anorexic can be fatal. Rather than undermine the anorexic's work ethic, it is redirected toward health and fitness. In the clinic exercise is restricted because eating disorder sufferers often use it to compensate for calorie consumption. Patients must reach a particular weight (known as their 'exercise weight') to be deemed medically safe to exercise.<sup>14</sup> Exercise is simultaneously a symptom of illness and a method of recovery. A compromise between consumption and exercise means that thinness can still be valued but it is achieved in a manner that is acceptable to consumer culture.<sup>15</sup> In-patient clinics reinforce preoccupation with weight and calorie counting while teaching patients how to manage their consumption in order to remain within the lower limits of the socially acceptable body ideal.

The diet industry also commodifies self-starvation by advertising appetite suppressants and metabolism boosters on thinspiration websites.<sup>16</sup> Many

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14 Helen Gremillion, 'In Fitness and in Health: Crafting Bodies in the Treatment of Anorexia Nervosa', *Signs* 27 (2002). This study takes place in an Eating Disorder Clinic in America.

15 *ibid.*

16 For example <<http://yoshithin.blogspot.co.uk/2007/06/top-10-diet-pills.html>> [accessed 9 April 2015]. Thinspiration or pro-ana (pro-anorexia) websites are blogs created by individuals with eating disorders. The writers share stories about their own weight loss regimes, provide tips on how to lose weight and on how to evade detection by doctors, family members and friends. They frequently contain thinspiration or thinspo pages of images of their own emaciated body, images of other eating disorder sufferers, or very thin celebrities. Some of the thinspiration websites are promotional websites for weight-loss commodity producers. For example the introduction of [www.prothinspo.com](http://www.prothinspo.com) states

pro-eating disorder websites suggest methods of distraction or rewards for resisting food couched in terms of consumption and body-labour. Visitors to one website are encouraged to undertake some of the following activities to prevent them from giving in to hunger pangs:

Exfoliate your entire body, take a long hot bath, pluck/wax your eyebrows, paint your finger and toe nails, use crest white strips, apply self tanner, try a new hairstyle, have your hair cut, straighten your hair, give yourself a make over with totally, [sic] different makeup, shave/wax your legs, put a face mask on, go for a manicure or pedicure.<sup>17</sup>

The creator of this website suggests readers search online to ‘find something you love, and get it once you go x number of days without bingeing’. Another proposes that readers calculate how much money they have saved by not buying food and reward themselves with a shopping trip for smaller sized clothing.<sup>18</sup> These recommendations turn self-starvation into an activity that enables consumption of commodities and produces sign-value for the body. Capitalism pursues the anorexic through illness and health to extend into new marketplaces.

The anorexic produces the self as an acceptable and yet disturbing image, fixating on a slender ideal but distorting the sign-value of the body in the process. This body interrupts the repetitious order of consumerism and the commodified body ideals imposed by it. It demands a look that is specifically created for its form. As Susie Orbach writes:

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‘Welcome to WORLDS BEST DIETING TIPS Prothinspo was voted the number 1 site in the world For Tips and Tricks to Weight loss...This site also has the largest selection in the world of diet, exercise, celebrity and Supermodel weight loss tips ... BE SURE TO RELOAD FOR UPDATES ...’ and contains many advertisements for diet products.

17 <<http://www.prothinspo.com/proanadistractions.html>> [accessed 9 April 2015].

18 <<http://myproanorexialife.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/dietsdistractions-and-tips-for-not.html>> [accessed 9 April 2015].

She demands to be related to originally. Reflexive responses – for example, flirtatious or patronizing ones from men, or the ‘once over’ from another woman who needs to position herself [...] – are confounded. She defies easy, comfortable definition [...] She is now looked at, not as someone who is appealing, but as some-body one cannot take one’s eyes off [...] A presence which demands a response rather than a reflex.<sup>19</sup>

The anorexic body disrupts the process of projection and introjection. The psychoanalyst Pierrette Lavanchy describes anorexia as a failure of identification and an inability to introject images from outside. In ‘Anorexia and Femininity’ Lavanchy describes the anorexic relation with the external world:

Anorexic persons profess that they want to present a different image in respect to the one people want them to present. But as their personal wishes are so much enmeshed with other people’s opinions, they cannot find an angle of themselves that is not inhabited by (and contaminated with) others’ thought of desire. Therefore they can express what they want only as a refusal of models.<sup>20</sup>

Like the hysteric, the anorexic cannot bear to take the position of object of desire for the other, but this is not characterised by a hysterical seduction that ends in a refusal. Rather than forming ego-ideals the anorexic rejects these models because they do not live up to her/his already high standards. This refusal of models may be interpreted as a repudiation of the commodified sign-value of the body and its dissemination *via* hysterical identification.

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19 Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic’s Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age*, 2nd edn, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993, p. 68.

20 Pierrette Lavanchy, ‘Anorexia and Femininity’, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 6, Winter (1998), 109–23, p.115.

### *Negative Signs and Sign-Value Exchange*

The anorexic body annihilates the sign-value exchange system by reflecting the lack that is denied in the hysterical, commodified body. The sign-value of the body is circulated through the system of exchange. When I identify with another body I acknowledge equivalence as I seek out the differences that provide my own body with differential value. The anorexic body disrupts the notion of similarity; the ‘like-me’ that enables the designation of better or worse is stopped in its tracks. It inhabits an entirely different value system outside the law of equivalence and surplus-value. The anorexic prevents the use of the body as a surface for the communication and exchange of signs because it does not express external sign-values and prevents others from identifying with and assimilating what it signifies.

This is demonstrated in the phenomenon of thinspiration, the large volume of photographs devoted to the celebration of extreme thinness. Individuals post selfies that emphasise their skeletal forms; they are clearly proud of the body-labour implied by their bodily transformation, but they do not construct the viewing positions created by other selfies. The body is rarely shown in its entirety – it is decapitated and isolated.

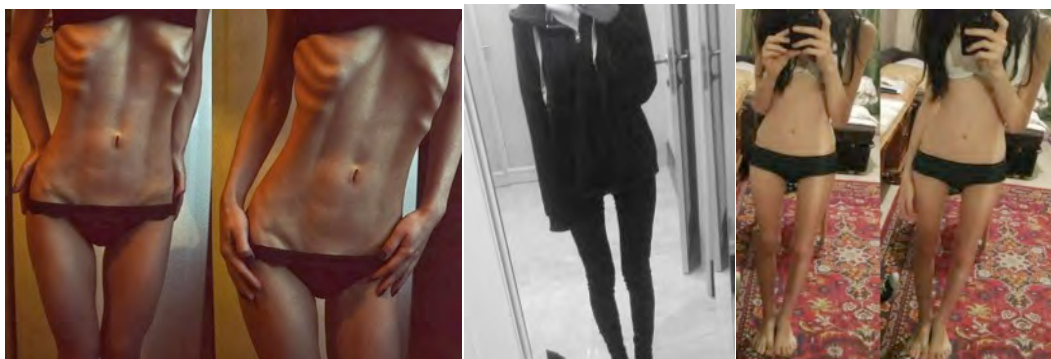


Figure [14] Thinspiration Photographs <https://www.pinterest.com> [accessed 24 March 2015]

This relation to the body might signify shame or a regression to ‘the fantasy of the fragmented body’, omnipotent and undifferentiated from

the world. But visible muscles and bones create the impression of a hard surface that will not be penetrated by others. Lavanchy writes:

[anorexics] experience the other's influence in their body as an invasion or a contamination. The more they feel their mind soft and ready for surrender, the more they want to reduce their body to hard bone.<sup>21</sup>

This does not indicate an inability to distinguish self from other; borders are clearly defined and resolutely patrolled. Nor does it suggest hysterical fragmentation caused by an unconscious fear of displacement and denial of the division between the self as subject and object. Identification is denied; the individual is given anonymity by decapitation, and as I view the photographs my look is disarmed because it cannot be returned. In the process of identification I aim to position myself as inferior or superior to the body in the image but I am unable to do so, and so the exchange of sign-value is denied. Through a refusal of identification the body is presented as an object, a thing. The individual in the photograph has dissociated the body, presenting it in a way that says 'look at the transformations I have produced with the body that I have' rather than 'the body that I am'. The subject takes the photograph to view the body as a separate, degraded thing, demonstrating the tyrannical rule of the mind over the body. If hysteria is characterised by a denial of the division of subject and object, thinpiration insists on that division. The subject reigns supreme, demonstrating and asserting its agency through the destruction of the object.

A similar disfigurement is exhibited in the photographs of patients with hysterical anorexia at the Salpêtrière hospital. These photographs may

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21 *ibid.*, p. 120.

have been defaced to protect the identity of the patient, but the coarseness of their treatment – at once aggressive and unsuccessful – strike as excessive. Orbach describes the experience of viewing an anorexic body where ‘anguish and defiance combine in the most curious way to make the observer passive and motionless in response. There is a simultaneous desire to retreat and move in closer. The conflict renders me immobile.’<sup>22</sup> I wonder if the doctors and photographers at the Salpêtrière also experienced passive and motionless horror when viewing the hysterical anorexic body. Perhaps *this* is why they chose to disfigure them.

Although *The Invention of Hysteria* does not contain images of hysterical anorexia, Didi-Huberman’s description of the images of the frozen gestures of hysterical patients suggests a petrifying potential:

We who look at these photographs of the Salpêtrière, fixed images of gesticulated images, this fear assaults us deeply, it *alters* us. It ruins but renews our desire to see; it infects our gaze, meaning that our gaze is devastated, but holds on, resists, returns. *Fascinum*: charm, meaning evil spell, ill fate. A kind of haunting takes hold of us.<sup>23</sup>

He continues: ‘We devour hysteria with our gaze, hysteria devours our gaze in return.’<sup>24</sup> If the enigmatic and sometimes beautiful photographs of

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22 Orbach, *Hunger Strike*, op. cit., p. 79.

23 Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. by Alisa Hartz, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003 [*Invention de l’hystérie*, Paris: Éditions Macula, 1982] p. 278.

Didi-Huberman implies the act of looking has a physical effect on the viewed body. He describes Charcot’s clinical gaze as a ‘glance’ [*coup d’œil*] saying; ‘The clinical glance is already *contact*, simultaneously ideal and percussive. It is a stroke [*trait*] that goes directly to the body of the patient, almost palpating it’ (p. 28). The translator notes *coup d’œil* also means ‘blow of an eye’ and *trait* has multiple significances in Didi-Huberman’s writing, including ‘shaft of an arrow’. If Charcot’s clinical gaze pierced the body of the hysterics, the returning gaze could be equally penetrating.

24 *ibid.*, p. 278.



hysterics fascinate the viewer, the hysterical anorexia images menace me with death.

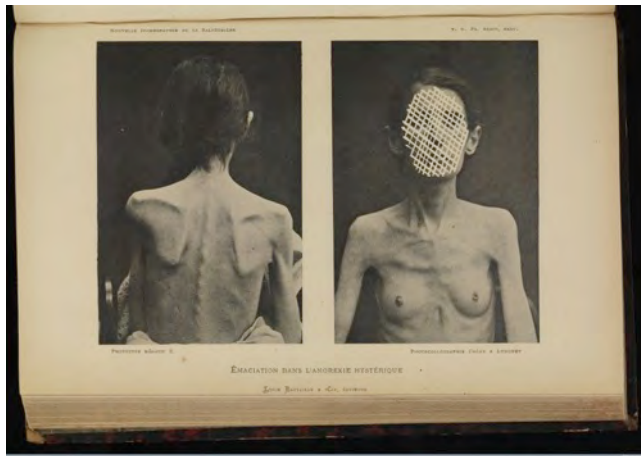


Figure [15] Two Photographs of a Woman Suffering from Anorexia, from the article 'Deux Cas D'Anorexie Hystérique' by Dr Wallet, *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, volume 5, Plates XXXIV and XXXV, publiée sous la direction du professeur Charcot, Masson et Cie. Paris, 1892 [Journal] Wellcome Library: London

### *Hyperfocalisation and the Surgical Gaze*

This is the dialectical power of the body, demonstrating where its spectacularisation leads. Benjamin suggests that the illusory nature of the commodity becomes apparent when it is compared with allegorical objects. Because the objects used in allegory are incapable of expressing the full meaning of the concepts they symbolise, such as death or the dangers of avarice, the relation between the object and its sign-value is trivialised and exposed as a construction. In the anorexic body the ideal of the healthy, slender body is exposed as a construction with a destructive passion, a demonstration of the logical end point for the aestheticised body as a commodity fetish. If commodity fetishes and hysterical presentification of the body emphasise surface appeal to elide an absence elsewhere, the anorexic body presents the surface as a paper-thin veneer. The skin is translucent and the skeleton beneath captures my attention. The dazzling surface is overemphasised to the point that it fails to conceal

the ‘ruin’ beneath. The anorexic body appears both alive and dead, an uncanny image.<sup>25</sup>

Anorexia is situated between hysteria and fetishism. Hysteria is characterised by an absence in the sense of self: to overcome it the hysteric insistently presents the self through overpowering identification with others. Anorexia is characterised by an absence of identification, but the anorexic seems to celebrate the absence as a distinguishing difference. The idea of the body being an object of desire is intolerable for both, but unlike the hysteric, the anorexic does not draw attention to the intolerable split through repeated provocative enticement of the other. The anorexic body is acknowledged as an object, enabling the individual to dehumanise and damage her/his own body. This is structurally similar to the relation

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25 Ernst Jentsch characterised the uncanny as confusion between animate and inanimate that occurs when a seemingly inanimate object appears to come to life or vice versa. The anorexic body has the unsettling appearance of a subject without subjectivity or the horror of a corpse returning to life. It is possible that the early viewers of hysterical anorexia experienced what Julia Kristeva describes as a narcissistic crisis in which self-conception of unified wholeness is threatened. Thoughts of death may be unavoidable when viewing these skeletal figures and so death infects life (Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 2nd edn, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 [*Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1980]).

Sigmund Freud argues that the sensation of the uncanny in *The Sandman* is created by a fear of castration that has been displaced to the fear of losing one's eyes. He suggests that Jentsch is wrong to point to the uncertainty of Olimpia's life-like appearance as a cause of uncanniness (Freud, “*The Uncanny*”, trans. by David McLintock, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003 [“*Das Unheimliche*”, *Imago* 5 (1919), 5–6]). But in the story it is the eyes that deceive. When Nathanael looks at Olimpia through a magnifying lens he is initially disconcerted by the ‘singular look of fixity and lifelessness’ in her eyes. At first, he sees her as an inanimate object but his desire animates her and eventually ‘he fancied a light like humid moonbeams came into them. It seemed as if their power of vision was now being enkindled; their glances share with ever-increasing vivacity’ (E.T.A. Hoffmann, ‘The Sand-Man’, op. cit.).

The eyes are the part of her body to which Nathanael looks for confirmation of Olimpia's sentience; they are the source of the confusion between object and subject, living and lifeless. It seems that objects of desire and abjection are only separated by the twinkle of an eye. Perhaps that is why the photographs from the Salpêtrière were so violently marked. If the eyes of the anorexic body were allowed to return the look they might be animated by desire, bringing the corpse to life. Alternatively, if they were lifeless and fixed they would signify a living body stripped of animation and infect the viewer with death. By obscuring the eyes the viewer can interpret the body as lifeless or living; it is simultaneously both. The issue of animation has been disavowed.

between the fetishist and the fetish object, dissimilar because the anorexic performs both the roles of the fetishist and the fetish object. The hysteric must frustrate satisfaction to keep the hope of desire alive; the fetishist gains partial satisfaction with a predictable object that will not retaliate or make demands. The object hovers between states: person and thing.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Clinical Lacan* Dor describes male hysteria as ‘putting on a show’ in which his ‘primary goal is to offer himself to the other’s gaze as the embodiment of the ideal object of desire’.<sup>27</sup> The female hysteric also aims to ‘summon the other in such a way that he is completely fascinated and subjugated [...] persisting in the fantasy of an other who will be totally flabbergasted by the embodiment of such perfection’.<sup>28</sup> The hysterical desire to dazzle, to fascinate the viewer is complemented by a fetishist who ‘refuses to look but in doing so stares’<sup>29</sup> at a ‘hyperfocalised’ and ‘hyperpigmented’ object.<sup>30</sup> The anorexic way of looking ‘hyperfocalises’ on parts of the body, searching for areas that are imperfect and must be improved. Mike Featherstone describes the contemporary view of the body as a ‘cool

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26 In some cases *The Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* presents a diptych of photographs of hysterical anorexia comparing the body in health and illness. The juxtaposition of two photographs, separated by an undisclosed amount of time, creates a narrative sequence. The images show us the progression of hysterical anorexia in the body of a woman. She is transformed from health to ill health in a process that dehumanises her. The progress described by these images is very different from the ‘future conditional’ before-and-after images showing the effect of a diet or cosmetic surgery procedure. The body becoming anorexic is objectified but not in a sexualising manner. In both images of the anorexic woman the eyes are obliterated. Even the healthy body is altered in a way that makes it appear more corpse-like: the eyes resemble the hollow eye sockets of a skull. The healthy body also had to be dehumanised and turned into an inanimate object that could not return the gaze, making the disavowal of subjectivity of the anorexic body more stable and complete.

If a portrait represents the consuming body and the still-life represents a consumed body, the image of anorexia seems to sit awkwardly between the two genres, it is both consuming and consumed; a body that eats itself. Perhaps thinspiration offers the body as a vanitas still-life, a celebration of the slender ideal and suggestion of the transience of the pleasure derived from it.

27 Joël Dor, *The Clinical Lacan*, op. cit., p. 81.

28 *ibid.*, p. 85.

29 Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish*, op. cit., p. xiii.

30 Kaplan, ‘Fits and Misfits’, op. cit., p. 469.

surgical gaze measuring the body for cutting’ produced by ‘the “cutting scalpel eye” of the consumer culture body maintenance and transformation professionals, whose gaze assesses and marks the re-fashionable potential of our bodies’.<sup>31</sup> In anorexic hysteria the body is presented as a degraded object that courts a fetishising look.

I view this split between subject and object as a sadistic relation, and anorexia as the logical result of relentless pursuit of perfection signified by the rise of the Young-Girl. I obey the commands of the sadistic capitalist discourse to copy the ego-ideals I see in advertisements but I am only able to master my self. I gain some of the benefits of the sadistic relation if I view my body as a separate inferior object. The internalisation of the sadistic capitalist discourse is seen in thinspiration blogs where individuals reward their suffering with shopping trips and beauty treatments.

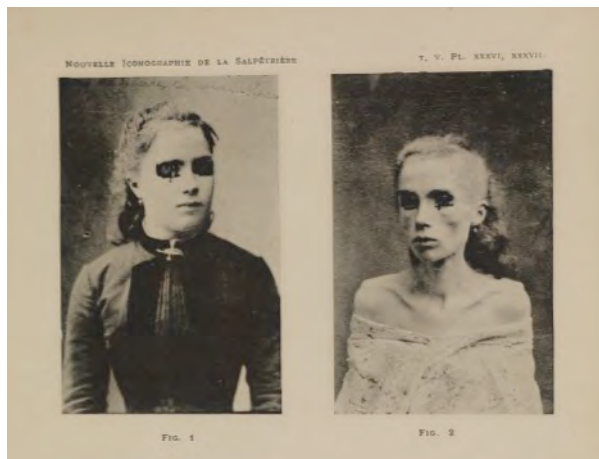


Figure [16] Four Photographs of a Woman showing anorexia nervosa, from the article 'Deux Cas D'Anorexie Hystérique' by Dr Wallet, *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, volume 5, Plates XXXVI and XXXVII, publiée sous la direction du professeur Charcot, Masson et Cie. Paris, 1892 [Journal] Wellcome Library: London

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31 Mike Featherstone, 'Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture', in *Body and Society*, 16: 1 (2010) p. 206, p. 210.

### *Recuperated Signs*

When I view thinspiration photographs, I perceive contradictory messages expressed by the body and the objects that surround it. The multiplicity of connotations has a normalising effect on the negative signs suggested by aberrant bodies. Although at its most extreme I view the anorexic body of thinspiration with uncanny horror, I see evidence that selfies and thinspiration share visual characteristics.

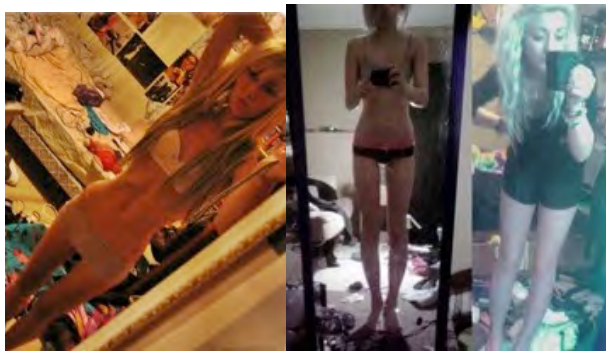


Figure [17] Selfies [www.tumblr.com/search/selfie](http://www.tumblr.com/search/selfie) [accessed 16 July 2014]

In some selfies the bodies are very slender with visible hipbones and ribcages, bodily characteristics usually associated with thinspiration. However, the detritus of ordinary selfies surrounds the individuals. The bodies do not function as negative signs that cannot be introjected; the commodities that surround them place the body in the system of sign-value exchange, a position with which I identify. The commodities are associated with the construction of an ideal body, implying that the visual cues of emaciation also signify idealisation and desirability. Skeletal thinness appears as a style with which to identify and which can be appropriated by social networking site users when it is fashionable to do so.



Figure [18] <http://extreme-thinspo.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/real-girls-thinspiration.html> [accessed 25 July 2015]

The four images above bear visual similarity to the emaciated bodies of selfies found on Tumblr and other mainstream image-sharing websites, but they were viewed on a pro-anorexia website. The body depicted follows predominant thinspiration codes because it is fragmented, decapitated, and posed to emphasise bones. Selfies commonly present sexualised bodies as objects of desire, but the individual in these photographs covers her breasts to reduce any signs that might sexualise the body and distract from emaciation. The untidy room behind the figure has more in common with a selfie than a thinspiration photograph. This is noteworthy as it contradicts the descriptions of anorexic character traits found in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. The typical anorexic personality is characterised by perfectionism and rigidity. The anorexic fears making mistakes and may display obsessive-compulsive tendencies. The need to control food intake coincides with a need to regulate all aspects of her/his life; everything has to be neatly organised and under strict control.<sup>32</sup> Disorganisation and clutter would cause anxiety for the anorexic. The bedroom behind the emaciated figure in the thinspiration photographs does not connote a pathological demand for control. Rather, it suggests that the codes of the emaciated body celebrated in thinspiration have been absorbed into popular culture, normalised and then disseminated as an

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<sup>32</sup> Mervat Nasser *et al.*, eds, *The Female Body in Mind: The Interface between the Female Body and Mental Health*, Hove and New York: Routledge, 2007.

ideal body. All signs can be recuperated in the system of sign-value exchange even if they appear to be signifiers of ill health, death, and a refusal to consume.

In consumer culture the term ‘desirable’ has largely been replaced by the term ‘healthy’ so products associated with body improvement can be promoted in a manner that foregrounds the appearance of the body without being overtly objectifying.<sup>33</sup> The creators and disseminators of thinspiration appropriate the concept of health to negate censure. Since the mid-2000s thinspiration or thinspo imagery has been criticized in newspaper and journal articles for promoting eating disorders.<sup>34</sup> In response to public concern, social media websites such as Tumblr banned the thinspo and thinspiration hashtags. In order to circumvent this issue, pro-eating disorder users appropriated the fitspiration or fitspo hashtags. Concurrently, medical professionals also began to diagnose orthorexia, a type of eating disorder in which the individual becomes obsessed with

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33 Rosalind Gill describes this trend, referring to the Nike ‘just do it’ campaigns: ‘The fetishization of fitness is arguably more pernicious than that of appearance because we are interpellated as morally responsible for how well we do. If we don’t have the looks of a fashion model we may be less socially valued but it is not entirely our fault. But if we don’t “keep in shape” we are culpable: we let ourselves go – the most dreaded sin of contemporary affluent societies. The advert urges us to reject external templates of beauty, whilst simultaneously enrolling women in a regime of disciplinary power in which they become morally responsible for disciplining their own bodies, and where beauty work is redefined in terms of health and pleasure’ (Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media*, 7th edn, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, pp. 86–7).

The imperative to ‘enjoy’ the pursuit of health when additional body imperfections are identified and products are developed to solve them, sounds like the sadistic discourse of the capitalist. It is also an example of pseudo-hysterical discourse, in which the capitalist acknowledges her/his flaws to disarm opponents and undermine criticism. By camouflaging beauty standards as health standards advertisements can preemptively counter complaints about sexism and objectification. Health becomes a personal responsibility, achieved through commodified leisure activities, and health inequalities relating to class and race are concealed. Feminist discourse of empowerment is subsumed into a consumer discourse of self-interest and narcissism, and the healthy body supplants the desirable body.

34 Iris Mansour, ‘“Thinspiration” Packages Eating Disorders as a Lifestyle Choice’ in *MashableUK*, 2013 <<http://mashable.com/2013/12/05/thinspiration/#tk0Fb5OzBEqd>> [accessed 4 January 2016] ‘Similar photos [thinspiration] have been online since the late ‘90s. But their volume and accessibility are unprecedented. One survey shows that between 2006 and 2008 alone, the number of such sites had increased by 470%’.

healthy eating to the point that so many foods are removed from the diet the sufferer becomes malnourished.<sup>35</sup> It remains to be seen whether this eating disorder is acknowledged as a distinct disorder or is treated as a type of anorexia, but it signifies a form of self-starvation in which the desire to be thin is displaced by the desire to be healthy. This pathological pursuit of health reflects the changing discourse of the body in popular culture. Photographs of very emaciated bodies can be found online by using a variety of hashtags including thinspiration, fitspiration, orthorexia or selfie, demonstrating the normalisation of this body type in consumer culture.

Michel de Certeau writes that the skin becomes a parchment written on with rules and regulations when it is shaped by cultural norms; a process he calls intextuation. Until this process of intextuation begins, the body is not standardised or recognised by society. As Certeau writes, the body is ‘essentially a *flesh*, which writing changes into a *body*’,<sup>36</sup> turning it into an identity that ‘can be read and quoted by others’.<sup>37</sup> To fit into society I accept the standardisation of my body in return for social meaning. This offers a way of interpreting the appeal of selfies and other forms of online self-presentation: the individuals follow strict aesthetic rules for the body,

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35 A study by David Giles and Jessica Close found that exposure to male body ideals in ‘lads’ magazines’ led to a drive for muscularity and eating disturbance, particularly in single men. They cite a study that found that ‘perceived muscular inadequacy was associated with lack of sexual activity in males (Filiaut, 2007)’ (David C. Giles and Jessica Close ‘Exposure to “Lad Magazines”, Drive for Muscularity in Dating and Non-dating Young Men’, in *Personality and Individual Differences* 44 (2008) 1610–16, p. 1611). This brings to mind Dor’s description of male hysteria and bodybuilding, in which ‘the penis is imaginarily represented by the whole body, whence the need to prove, to confirm over and over again, the strength of the muscles’ (Dor, *The Clinical Lacan*, op. cit., p. 104). Featherstone says ‘anxiety about their body image coupled with excessive work-outs in the gym can apparently lead to a new condition, dubbed “*athletic nervosa*”. Athletic nervosa complements ‘orthorexia’ the pathological pursuit of healthy eating and demonstrates the pathological implication of ‘exercise weight’ in the treatment of eating disorders.

36 *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendell, Oakland: University of California Press, 1988 [*L’invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire*, Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1980].

37 *ibid.*, p. 149.



they are validated by the online community, given acceptance. Selfie producers turn their bodies into signifiers of rules while giving the abstract rules material form, making the rule 'real'.<sup>38</sup> Certeau suggests that the body might break free from social control during moments of intense pleasure or pain. He writes:

the only force opposing this passion to be a sign is the cry, a deviation or an ecstasy, a revolt or flight of that which, within the body, escapes the law of the named. Perhaps all experience that is not a cry of pleasure or pain is recuperated by the institution. All experience that is not displaced or undone by this ecstasy is captured by 'the love of the censor', collected and utilized by the discourse of the law. It is channeled and instrumented.<sup>39</sup>

The anorexic body is recuperated by the system of sign-value exchange because it embodies a rational, puritan work ethic that can be 'channeled and instrumented' by social regulation. For 'flesh' to be out of control it cannot be coded and inscribed by the system. If the pain of self-starvation can be appropriated in commodity culture, the pleasure of eating, when it is not bound by social propriety and disapproval of the overweight body, removes the eater from the demands of culturally coded sign-values.

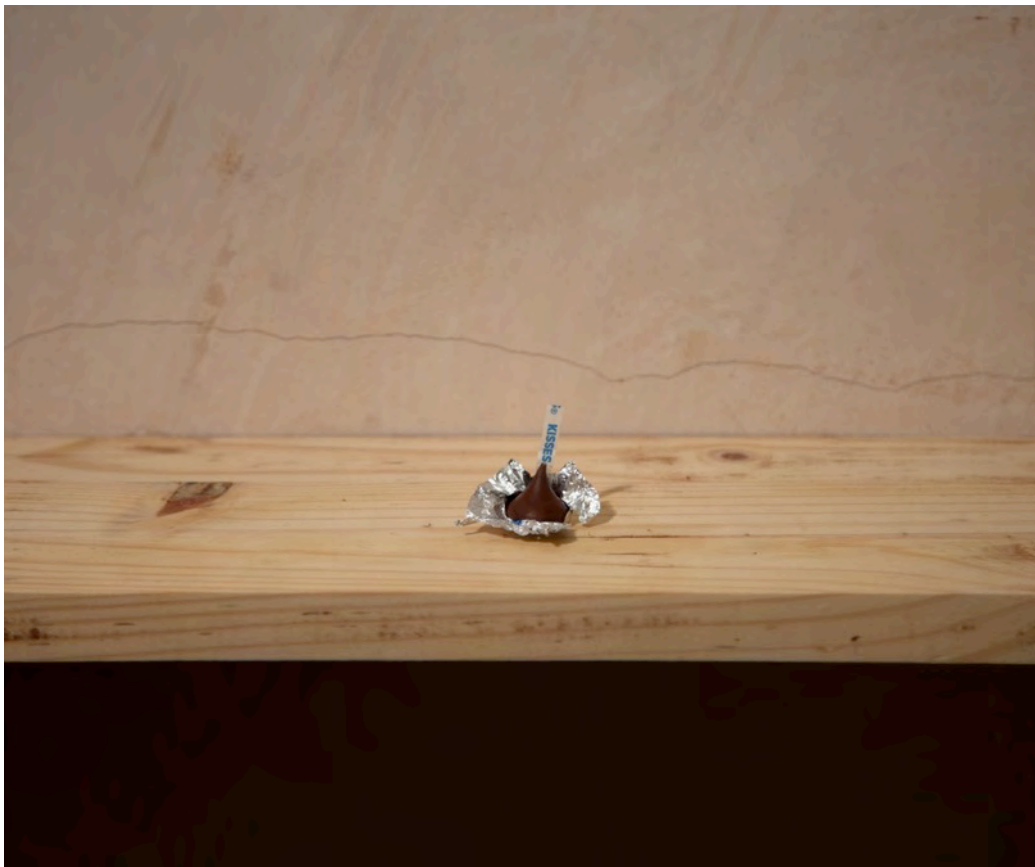
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38 The body of the individual is unified under the master signifier and named by the discourses of bio-power and immaterial labour.

39 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit., p. 149.

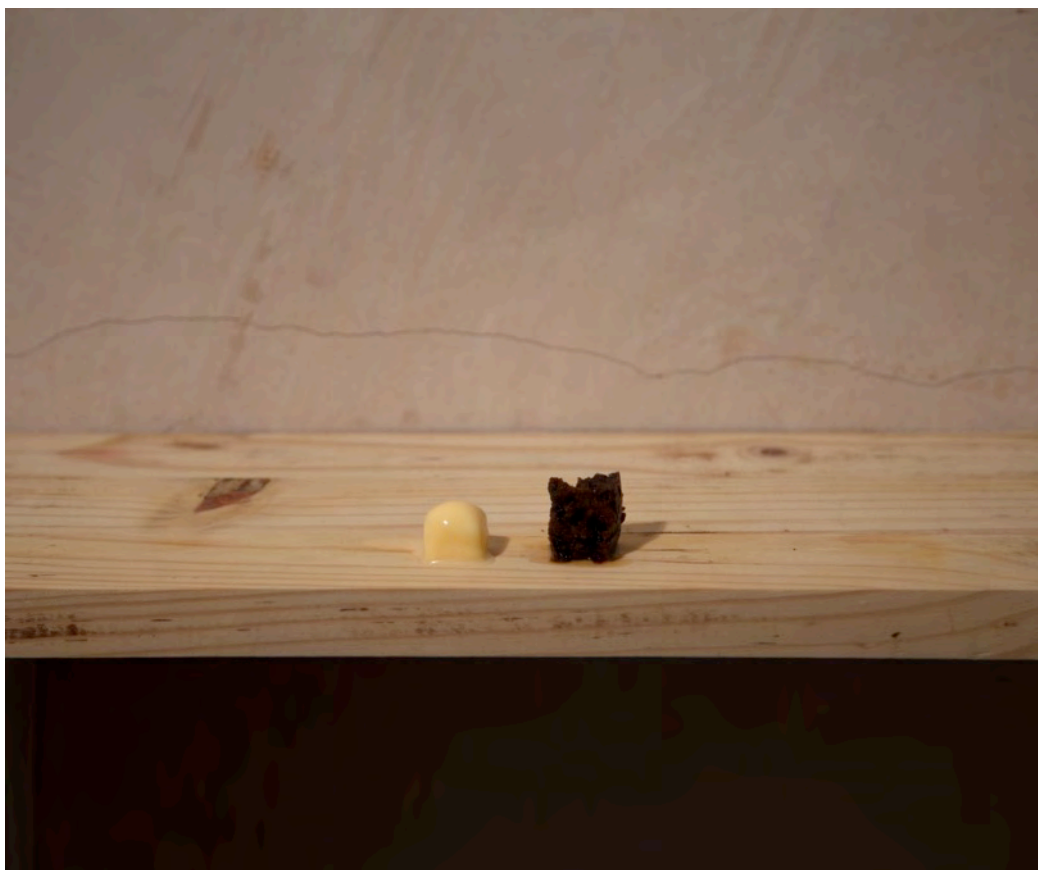
## ESTRANGED MEALS

*Estranged Meals* explores the fragmentation and compartmentalisation typical of an anorexic view of food. To waste time and conceal how little food is consumed anorexics frequently cut the food into very small pieces. To make it appear unappetising it is cut into angular, geometric shapes. Some of the tactics of anorexic eating habits can be found in consumer culture. Feminised treats such as Hershey Kisses are sold as individually wrapped chocolates, indicating permissible portion size to the consumer: Indulgence must be restrained.



*Estranged Meals*, 2014, 20cm x 25cm [photography book]















## TRANSITION 2:

### Makeover shows and Intextuated Consumers

#### *The Feeding Clinic*



Figure [19] ‘Lucy and Leighton’, in *Supersize vs Superskinny*, Season 3, Episode 2, Director Unknown, 30 March 2010, Channel 4 Production: London, 2010 [television broadcast]

In popular culture, the television programme *Supersize vs Superskinny* thinly veils the promotion of an ideal body type beneath the pursuit of health. In each episode an overweight participant is paired with an underweight participant and they swap diets. The pairing of a tiny body with a cornucopia of food and a large body with a meagre portion creates a grotesque scene. Indeed, the explanatory voiceover in the first episode of series one informs the viewer that ‘Dr Christian Jessen will be stuffing the superskinny [...] and starving the supersized’.<sup>1</sup> The language is coarse and purposefully emphasises the two bodies as ‘uncivilised’. Neither participant adheres to a socially acceptable manner of eating, so Dr Jessen employs medically dubious methods to turn their ‘starving’ or ‘stuffed’ flesh into consuming bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Jenette and Rosemarie’, dir. unknown, *Supersize vs Superskinny*, Season 1, Episode 1, 26 February 2008, Channel 4 Production: London, 2008 [television broadcast].

The disjuncture between culture and flesh is signified by the choice of the term ‘feeding clinic’ for the setting of *Supersize vs Superskinny*. In episode eleven of season five the voiceover announces that “it’s dinner time in the feeding clinic”, which immediately brings to mind the image of throwing food to animals, on a farm or in a zoo.<sup>2</sup> To use the word feeding rather than eating or dining is incredibly dehumanising. As Niall Richardson writes:

Like all mammals, humans need to eat and, in order for the species to continue, need to have reproductive sex. However, it is the *way* we have disciplined or regimented these activities which distinguishes us from our household pets [...] In short, for humans the sexual is cultural. The same can be said for food.<sup>3</sup>

The way we eat is not simply fulfilling a basic need; it is shaped by cultural rules and regulations. Richardson says a person eating excessively, at the wrong time or in an improper manner, appears to have ‘ignored the dictates of culture and has yielded to base, animal urges’.<sup>4</sup> Although the ‘feeding clinic’ becomes the temporary home for both sets of participants, the name dehumanises the supersize individual to a greater extent because she/he is the one that ‘feeds’. The thin body consumes reluctantly, nibbling rather than gorging. S/he remains in culturally coded dining, eating at the correct times, without indication of voracious appetite and animalistic urges. The superskinny participant possesses a body but the

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2 Channel 4 Production, ‘Anorexia’, dir. unknown, *Supersize vs Superskinny*, Season 5 Episode 11, 7 August 2012, Channel 4 Production: London, 2012 [television broadcast].

3 Niall Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, p. 103.

4 *ibid.*, p. 104.

Although it is not ‘culturally’ regimented, an animal’s eating habit is determined by need and not desire, and is not excessive or inappropriate. The ‘animal urges’ Richardson attributes to improper eating in humans implies that culturally acceptable eating alters eating patterns determined by need.

supersize 'feeding' body resides outside cultural coding and is therefore presented as flesh.



Figure [20] 'Jenette and Rosemarie', dir. unknown, *Supersize vs Superskinny*, Season 1, Episode 1, 26 February 2008, Channel 4 Production: London, 2008 [television broadcast]

Dr Jessen visually demonstrates the differences in supersize and superskinny diets by placing each participant's typical weekly food intake into a transparent tube. When mixed together and viewed in this unusual way, the contents become unrecognisable as food. It appears to have been ejected from the body as vomit or feces; the feeding tube symbolises a transparent body with stomach contents swimming in bile. The food is presented in a manner that suggests both scientific experiment and bodily process.

A large collection of takeaways and fizzy drinks neatly arranged on a table might signify a banquet, invoking pleasure. However, as the intention of the television programme is to vilify rather than celebrate over-eating, the food must be transformed from desirable to abject matter. Both sets of participants are encouraged to treat the content of the tubes with disgust. For the superskinny person who already demonstrates an aversion to food this does not come as much of a shock. But for the supersizer who takes pleasure in eating, this is an uncomfortable experience of aversion therapy. This individual is being trained to treat a source of pleasure with disgust. The tubes symbolise the intextuation of eating; the participant must eat with scientific precision, weighing ingredients and balancing

calorie intake with energy expenditure. The feeding tube symbolises the flesh being inscribed as a body.

Throughout their participation on *Supersize vs Superskinny* the underweight person is presented with a seemingly endless succession of gargantuan unhealthy meals while the overeater is given small quantities of bland food. The bland and repetitive diet of the superskinny participant represents the mechanical, joyless eating common in descriptions of binge eating and addiction.<sup>5</sup> The supersize participant watches with envy as the superskinny tucks in to his or her favourite food. The supersize participant's excitement is palpable, as s/he smells the aroma of the food and imagines its taste and texture. This signifies the pleasures of the flesh practised outside the bounds of cultural control.

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<sup>5</sup> The food addict turns these social regulations on their head, 'transforming freedom into determinism and desire into need. Rather than consuming to realise the self, in the state of addiction, the individual is consumed *by* consumption' (Gerda Reith, 'Consumption and its Discontents: addiction, identity and the problems of freedom', *The British Journal of Sociology* 55.2, (2004): 286). This form of food consumption is not productive; it does not create energy that will be transformed into labour-value or signify health and social status. It fails to conform to the work ethic required by capitalism. Gerda Reith suggests that addicts appeared in great numbers when the demand to choose from an endless variety of commodities became most insistent. The occurrence of a large variety of types of addiction signifies 'a refusal of choice that has become overwhelming; a denial of freedom that is illusory' (ibid., 296). The food addict's binge could be interpreted as capitulation to the world of commodity consumption. Orbach describes it as: 'the relief, the letting go, the taking in, the attempted meeting of desire [...]. Her wanting and wanton part is in ascendancy [...] She goes from food to food looking for the one that will satisfy her' (*Fat is a Feminist Issue*, 2nd edn, London: Arrow, 2006. p. 123). The lure of novelty and the 'hell of the new as the always-the-same' could be discerned in this mechanical, joyless mode of eating (Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*. op. cit., p. 211). The commodities are stripped of content they lose their taste, texture, and aroma. Things that appear to be objects of satisfaction are quickly revealed to be disguised dissatisfaction. These analyses of binge eating and food addiction assume that all experiences of uncontrolled eating are devoid of pleasure and wilful choice. But it is my hypothesis that it is precisely pleasure that is under attack in the disparagement of body fat and over-eating.

### *Hysterical Identification as Anti-Pleasure*

At the beginning of each episode of *Supersize vs Superskinny* the participants in the series line up in their underwear – the supersized on one side and the superskinny on the other. Dr Jessen stands between the two groups of people, with an old-fashioned set of weighing scales. Through the use of the weighing scale the participant's journey toward social acceptance is charted. When I watch *Supersize vs Superskinny* I identify with the doctor and the weighing scale, putting myself in the privileged position of the one whose body is of a socially acceptable type. The excesses of indulgence and self-denial fan out to either side of me. This staging clearly establishes the parameters of the acceptable body.

The bodies awaiting judgement at the beginning of each episode are wearing unadorned 'standard-issue' underwear; the garments do not represent the wearer's personal tastes or attempt to conceal the body, they are neither flattering nor intended to incite the sexual curiosity of the viewer. The garments are de-eroticising and standardising. The bodies are reduced to objects of inspection, for the scientific and medical scrutiny of the doctor and his measuring devices.<sup>6</sup>

The mode of looking implied by the standardising underwear encourages the 'surgical gaze' described by Mike Featherstone. Unlike the anorexic fetishising manner of looking, the inspecting gaze encouraged by *Supersize vs Superskinny* does not aim to eradicate imperfection by annihilating the body. The anorexic subject follows the commands of the capitalist to a destructive end, while *Supersize vs Superskinny* trains subjects in the role of Young-Girl and sadistic accomplice.

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<sup>6</sup> There is also the entertaining look of the television camera that I almost forget I inhabit, as I empathise with the doctor's concern for the health of the participants and all aberrant bodies in a country that is frequently described by voiceovers as 'overcome by epidemics of self-starvation and over-indulgence'.

Beneath this objective looking I catch a glimpse of a warning, the veiled threat of punishment for non-conformity. The medical objectification of these bodies suggests a loss of subjectivity: the reduction of self to an object understood only through measurements and records, accumulations of information. Moreover, their de-sexualisation implies the loss of the right to be the object of desire for the other. For a subject assumed to have a propensity toward hysteria, this is a dire threat of non-existence, total eradication of self. This suggests that if I do not maintain the position of the normal body, I too will become sexually undesirable and an object for the medical gaze. The discourse of immaterial labour is produced by the shame and pity the participant receives from Dr. Jessen, family members, and the audience. It is a social relation that encourages participants and viewers to model her/his body on the ideal body type.

At the end of each programme the two participants are reunited after a number of months dieting at home. As a reward for disciplining the body each participant is allowed to choose her or his own underwear – the women often select bright colours and lace. The voiceover describing a superskinny participant says ‘she’s even got a cleavage for the first time in her life’.<sup>7</sup> The superskinny body has confessed to a television audience and submitted to discipline; its reward is to be acknowledged as an object of desire for the other. The hysterical demand ‘to be the object of desire for the other’ receives an affirmative response. The praise offered to the supersize body is couched in terms of health and extension of life, rather than desirableness. It continues to be de-sexualised because it already signifies a carnal pleasure, the forbidden pleasure of eating without restraint that could destabilise cultural control.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Jenette and Rosemarie’, *op. cit.*

This fat body exists outside the system of sign-value exchange; it signifies a dehumanising loss of subjectivity and animal urges. As I argued in the preceding chapters, in contemporary capitalist communities the identity that is lost is produced through identifications with commodities that resembles the mimetic identifications of hysteria. The overeater escapes the endless identifications of hysteria and joyless, compulsive consumption. The dehumanising loss of subjectivity of the fat body does not connote the eradication of pleasure and destruction of the body as in the case of the anorexic. Nor does it resemble the hysterical pleasure of presentation that only resides on the surface as an image of pleasure. The overeater experiences pleasure outside the reach of capitalist signification; s/he has the cake and is allowed to eat it too. However, capitalist discourses relentlessly pursue this consumer in an attempt to master her/him.

## PART 4: DESTRUCTION

### MEMORIALS

*Memorials* are neither still life nor portrait but represent the subject becoming *nature morte*. Rotting flesh is arranged among the paraphernalia of celebration, signalling the end of the consumer party. Regardless of body-labour or workout ethic the body sags into amorphous organic forms. To evoke the idea of a memorial to a lost object photographs are installed leaning against the gallery wall propped up by two deflated balloons.



*Memorials (Tongue and Heart)*, 2016, Research Work in Progress Exhibition, Royal College of Art [digital installation photograph]





*Memorial (Tongue)*, 2016, 70cm x 70cm [digital photograph mounted on MDF, two balloons]



*Memorial (Foot)*, 2016, 70cm x 70cm [digital photograph mounted on MDF, two balloons]



*Memorial (Heart)*, 2016, 70cm x 70cm [digital photograph mounted on MDF, two balloons]



*Memorial (Banana)*, 2016, 70cm x 70cm [digital photograph mounted on MDF, two balloons]



*Memorial (Strawberries)*, 2016, 70cm x 70cm [digital photograph mounted on MDF, two balloons]

## Self-indulging Consumers

### *Future Conditional Consumers*

The disruptive potential of the over eater is implied by an absence of images of fat bodies in popular visual culture. In ‘Sex and Fat Chics’ Jana Evans Braziel discusses diet magazines, expressing her surprise when unable to find an image of an overweight woman between their covers.<sup>1</sup> She says fat women are signified by numerous images of food but very rarely are shown openly because fat bodies are outside the frame of signification of capitalism. She describes the fat body as ‘the *absent* body-in-excess: an all-consuming, uncontrollable monstrosity that can be represented only by what she consumes. Food, then, is a metonym that effectively obscures the grotesqueness of what cannot be depicted.’<sup>2</sup>

Kathleen LeBesco suggests a reason for the invisibility of the fat body in popular culture: a fat body is indistinguishable from fat body politics, and a positive image would support the growing political movement campaigning for ‘fat rights’ and an end to discrimination against overweight people. The magazines and television programmes that could depict fat bodies frequently rely on funding from the health and beauty industries, so any strategy to take a fat-body positive stand is a conflict of interest.<sup>3</sup> Instead the magazines and television programmes respond to public demands for the representation of a greater variety of body types with ‘plus-size’ models who are actually an average body size, rarely exceeding size twelve in US clothing sizes (UK clothing size sixteen). Madeline Jones, editor-in-chief of *Plus Model Magazine* says plus-size

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1 Jana Evans Braziel, ‘Sex and Fat Chics: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body’ in *Bodies out of Bounds*, ed. by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

2 *ibid.*, pp. 223–4.

3 Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.

model sizes have changed from between twelve to eighteen in US clothing size (sixteen to twenty-two in UK clothing sizes) in 2002 to size six to fourteen (ten to eighteen in UK clothing sizes) in 2012.<sup>4</sup> The overweight body still remains invisible but a marginally greater variety of bodies are represented in popular culture.

The problem that comes from representations of fat bodies does not arise from the body's lack of signification or inability to articulate a position in capitalist consumption. It is problematic because it always, instantly, says too much. As Petra Kupperts writes, 'the fat woman is fat, and this sign rules all her other aspects'.<sup>5</sup> The rare appearance of the fat body in popular culture is not outside cultural signification in Certeau's liberatory sense; it is deeply inscribed with signs of excess and loss of control that overpower any other potential signification or meaning. To become visible the fat body must submit to another kind of cultural coding, in which the individual's identity is determined by a desire to lose weight. LeBesco writes that 'fat people contrive to participate in a kind of pseudo-subjectivity that reintegrates them into the larger social structure as people longing to be objectified; their subjectivity [...] is tragically relegated to a status lower than the agency of objectivity'.<sup>6</sup> In a culture of hysteria that rewards the individual who has acceded to the status of object of desire, the fat body must acquiesce to the desire to be desired. The attributes of the desirable object are tyrannically policed by social ideals of youthfulness and slenderness, preventing the fat body from being desired as a fat body. As a result the fat body is represented as a 'before' image of the body expected to become thin. It is what Schwartz describes

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4 Madeline Jones, 'Plus Size Bodies, What Is Wrong With Them Anyway?', *Plus Model Magazine*, 8 January 2012 <<http://www.plus-model-mag.com/2012/01/plus-size-bodies-what-is-wrong-with-them-anyway/>> [accessed 5 November 2015].

5 Petra Kupperts, 'Fatties on Stage' in *Bodies out of Bounds*, ed. by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001, p. 279.

6 LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*. op. cit., p. 28.

as the ‘future conditional, suspended between what they are and who they will be when they are finally thin’.<sup>7</sup>

Equating slenderness with desirability is paradoxical due to a historical precedent for the vilification of fat based on a long-standing link between sexual appetite and appetite for food. In the Victorian era the thin body represented self-restraint and denial, an imagined indolence synonymous with the absence of desire. The thin body also signified the weakness and fragility of an upper- or middle-class person who did not have to work for

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<sup>7</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, op. cit., p. 325.

In *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* Niall Richardson provides evidence of the ‘future conditional’ in reverse. In films and television programmes fat bodies are frequently simulated using prosthetic suits to negate the audience’s guilt at openly laughing at fat bodies: ‘it is only a fat suit. We are not laughing at a *real* fat body. It seems that our current terror of fat is such that popular culture is reluctant to represent actual fat bodies on the screen’ (*Transgressive Bodies*, op. cit., p. 84). Moreover, the fat body is sometimes viewed in flashbacks (Richardson uses the example of two episodes of *Friends* featuring flashbacks of ‘fat Monica’) so the fat on display is already erased from the body. The individuals have already achieved the expected thinness determined by the future conditional mindset. When real fat bodies are depicted in a way that does not evoke the ‘future conditional’ intention they are reduced to body parts that emphasise fat. Charlotte Cooper uses the term ‘headless fatties’ to describe photographs of fat bodies in news reports. She says articles about obesity are: ‘accompanied by a photograph of a fat person, seemingly photographed unaware, with their head neatly cropped out of the picture [...] As Headless Fatties, the body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead we are reduced and dehumanized as symbols of cultural fear: the body, the belly, the arse, food’ (Charlotte Cooper, ‘*Headless Fatties*’, 2007 <<http://charlottecooper.net/publishing/digital/headless-fatties-01-07>> [accessed 10 May 2016]).

Cooper’s critique is supported by content analysis of the photographs used by American news websites to accompany articles about ‘obesity’. Heuer et al found that more than half of the images depicting overweight and ‘obese’ people were cropped to show only abdomens or lower bodies, but images of non-overweight people were not framed in this manner. The research found that seventy-two percent of images of overweight people met at least one criterion of stigmatisation: disproportionately emphasizing an overweight / ‘obese’ person’s abdomen or lower body; portraying an overweight / ‘obese’ person’s abdomen without clothes; featuring an overweight / ‘obese’ person with their head cut of the image; portraying an overweight / ‘obese’ person with inappropriately fitting clothing; portraying an overweight / ‘obese’ person eating / drinking unhealthy food / drink; or portraying an overweight / ‘obese’ person engaging in a sedentary activity. Heuer et al say: ‘obese people are reduced to being symbols of the epidemic, rather than valued members of society who deserve compassion and respect’ (Chelsea A. Heuer, Kimberly J. McClure and Rebecca M. Puhl ‘Obesity Stigma in Online News: A Visual Content Analysis’, in *Journal of Health Communication*, 16:9 (2011), p. 8).



a living.<sup>8</sup> In contradistinction, the plump body was associated with uncontrolled impulses and working-class coarseness.<sup>9</sup> Deeming fat undesirable and equating it with uncontrollable sexual urges lays bare the parameters of acceptable sexuality. The subject represses desire in order to be desired; pleasure is for the other.

The discourses of bio-power and immaterial labour use the consumer's desire to be desired to eliminate difference and homogenise sign-values. The fat body cannot be incorporated by capitalist discourses when it does not acquiesce to normative values and threatens social order when it expects its appetites to be gratified.

#### *Fat Admiration and Unproductive Signs*

Fat fetishism is a sexual practice that takes the pleasure of eating to an extreme.<sup>10</sup> Fat admirers encourage a 'fat fetish' to eat in order to watch the

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8 According to Seltzer's distinction between representation of the body as a still-life and a portrait, slenderness connotes a body that consumes but is not consumed as labour. Paradoxically this body can consume but signifies this privileged consumer position by restrained consumption.

9 Anna Krugovo Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

In 1895 Cesar Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrer co-authored *The Female Offender*, a study that analysed the body types of female criminals in order to identify degenerate characteristics. Lombroso states that 'weight appears more often equal to or above the medium in thieves and murderesses, but especially in prostitutes'. Lombroso cites data published by Fornasari in *Sulla Statura degli Italiani*, which compares the age, height, and weight of prostitutes with those of 'moral women' and finds that 'height and age being equal, the weight is greatest among prostitutes'. The differentials in this experiment are illicit sexual activity and greater than normal weight, and therefore the relation between them is proven. Sexual wantonness and over-consumption are neatly tied together in another symbol of degenerate consumption, the prostitute. (Physiology of Russian prostitutes. Lombroso, *La donna delinquente*, 1893

<<https://spiritintimacy.wordpress.com/2010/12/16/the-black-venus-the-signification-of-the-prostitute-sexual-monsters-primitives-whores/>> [accessed 25 July 2015]).

10 The pleasure derived from eating in fat fetishism seems to be shared by the eater and the viewer. The fat fetish expresses her/his enjoyment of eating and the sensation of a 'stuffed' body, however it may be an appearance of pleasure and not an experience of it, similar to pornography photographs in which an actress appears sexually aroused but may not be aroused. Fat fetishism differs from a psychoanalytic understanding of sexual fetishism. In popular culture fetishism connotes sexual practices involving bondage

body grow. In many cases the fat fetish requests funds to buy food from unknown audience members in return for photographs, videos or live web-streams.<sup>11</sup> Fantasy Feeder is a website for fat admirers and fat fetishists. It is similar to Facebook because users have to register to access

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clothing and props that heighten sexual satisfaction. In fat fetishism the fat body and food are fetishised according to the popular culture definition of the term. However, I think there are aspects of this sexual practice similar to the characteristics and function of the psychoanalytic sexual fetish. I will discuss this at the end of the chapter.

<sup>11</sup> When considering how consumers are presented online I have restricted my research to images that appear to have been self-taken because I am interested in their signification as self-portraits. This also excludes other forms of fat fetishism involving a feeder and a feedee. The term ‘feeder’ is disapproved of in the fat fetish community. It connotes an individual in a position of power who feeds the other to the point of total immobility and dependency. Niall Richardson describes feederism as ‘while the feedee is overwhelmed with the *jouissance* of gorging on the food, begging the feeder to give her more and more, the feeder maintains a critical distance from everything. He excites his passive “toy” to heights of dizzying pleasure, as she gurgles and gorges her way through excess calories, while he himself remains untouched by the emotions. It is as if the abject, disgusting emotions and messiness of sex is contained within the feedee’s body while the feeder has the privilege of observing the spectacle without being involved in it himself. In this respect, feederism can be argued to hold a particularly dark side which is mapped onto misogynist politics [...] feederism connotes the pleasure of control and manipulation of the abject spectacle’ (*Transgressive Bodies*, op. cit., pp. 114–5). The documentary *Fat Girls and Feeders* features Gina and her husband Mark. According to the voiceover, soon after their wedding Mark “began the process of growing his wife. He wished to make her the fattest woman in the world”. He achieved his aim in 2001 when Gina was recorded in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world’s heaviest female model. Mark ‘enabled’ her growth, charting the process with photographs and videos, which he sold online to other fat admirers earning ‘hundreds of thousands of dollars’. Mark describes a video he produced called *Gina’s Last Stand*. The video documenting the last time Gina was able to get out of bed was sold to fat fetishists online, demonstrating that feederism is not simply an eroticisation of excess fat, but sexual pleasure derived from incapacitation (Alastair Cook and Robert Davis (dirs) *Fat Girls and Feeders*, Optomen Television Production: London, 2003 [television broadcast]). As Gina says: “Certainly, as I was at my largest, while I was surely the most beautiful thing he ever saw and [he] was extremely aroused and extremely attracted, [but] physical intercourse was impossible. With my thighs you just couldn’t get there”. This recalls Dor’s description of the obsessional neurotic’s object of desire as: ‘under a bell jar like a precious collector’s item that must be kept out of reach, reducing her to an object of possession and accidentally to an object of consumption. Here again the woman is worshipped as quasi-untouchable; the essential point is that she be eternally present. The subject can actually end up never touching her anymore’ (*The Clinical Lacan*, op. cit., p. 60). Gina is a possession. Because the obsessional neurotic’s object of desire no longer desires, s/he is: ‘assigned – indeed, consigned to – a position that is as far as possible that of a dead person [...] Insofar as the obsessional seems to have to take care of everything, his feminine partner is satisfied in full and has nothing to demand’ (ibid., p. 126). Mark produced and sold an ‘advice’ video called ‘Handle with Care’ to “hopefully [...] help cure some of those misconceptions that a fat girl is an easy thing to have”. In the video Mark describes the care and attention needed to keep a fat fetish body clean and free from infection, but I imagine the viewers who purchased it also had a sexual motivation. Mark turned his ‘selfless’ ‘good guy’ caregiving into a pornographic fetishisation of the act of cleaning.

message boards and other content.<sup>12</sup> Fantasy Feeder also shows similarities with pro-eating disorder websites: there are forums for feeders and feedees to share information on what to eat to gain weight easily for the least expense, and the pros and cons of using a feeding tube.<sup>13</sup> On Fantasy Feeder a report by the American National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA) is subverted with the aim of becoming fat. The report analyses ‘supersizing’, ‘value marketing’, and ‘bundling’ high calorie drinks and side orders at fast-food chains and convenience stores in America. Restaurants and grocery shops encourage these practices so consumers spend additional money to increase the quantity of food they purchase, without expecting an increase in quality that would eat into profit margins. The website quotes the findings of the report:

Upgrading from a 3-ounce Minibon to a Classic Cinnabon costs only 24% more, yet delivers 123% more calories. The larger size also provides almost three-quarters of a day’s worth of saturated fat. Switching from 7-Eleven’s Gulp to a Double Gulp costs 42% more, but provides 300% more calories [...] Moving from a small to a medium bag of movie theater popcorn costs about 71 cents but adds 500 calories. A 23% increase in price provides 125% more calories and two days’ worth of saturated fat.<sup>14</sup>

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12 The website contains other features similar to mainstream social networking sites: users can upload their own content in the form of stories, photographs, videos, and comments on forum discussions. Underneath each photograph and video the number of times other users have viewed and ‘liked’ the video and photograph is displayed, and there are spaces for users to add comments.

13 Money is an important consideration for the Fantasy Feeder community. Comments indicate the financial strain of regularly eating large quantities of food. There is a financial imperative in many of the posts as fat fetishes ask their followers to send donations in exchange for photographs or personalized videos in which the fetish eats the food requested by the payee. Foods that are high in fat, sugar, and salt are, almost exclusively, featured. This may be because the food is also inexpensive but potentially because they are also viewed simultaneously as ‘treats’ (particularly in working- and lower-middle-class families) and unhealthy options scorned by the health-conscious members of society. The eating sessions featured on Fantasy Feeder reject the idea that indulgent food should be rationed.

14 <<http://fantasyfeeder.com/articles/view?id=91>> [accessed 30 July 2015].

Fantasy Feeder is an American website; however user locations are global and include Britain, Switzerland, Australia, India, and Canada [accessed 15 August 2016].

Supersizing and bundling are generally viewed negatively and consumers are warned against ‘supersizing’ by medical and popular culture institutions.<sup>15</sup> Food with low nutritional value is sold cheaply and in large quantities to low income populations in whose neighbourhoods the companies that use these tactics establish their outlets.<sup>16</sup>

To actively choose ill health, when it is already inflicted on social groups that are oppressed and exploited by capitalist society, appears to be an unconscious protest against the work ethic. Robert Crawford argues the working classes, who are more likely to experience externally exerted control during work hours, are less likely to submit to a mandate of control during leisure time.<sup>17</sup> These workers might view productive body-labour as an infringement on their right to a time without restraint. Fat fetishists use the profit-increasing methods of the food industry to grow the body to gargantuan proportions. The value gained from the exchange changes from capital accumulation to calorie accumulation and the sign-value of the body is also dramatically altered. S/he aberrantly embraces one aspect of the contradiction of capitalism to self-indulge.

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15 For example, the documentary film *Super Size Me*, shows director Morgan Spurlock eating only supersize McDonalds meals for thirty days. During the course of the month Spurlock records his weight changes and cholesterol level, noting other physical side effects such as mood swings and sexual dysfunction. To accompany this experiment Spurlock investigates the nutritional value of McDonalds food and recounts the ‘McLibel’ cases in which overweight individuals attempt to sue McDonalds for causing their health problems. In the film, fast food producers are blamed for the ‘obesity epidemic’ in America and the role of individual choice is diminished through an argument that advertising of fast food is ubiquitous, unavoidable, and misleading because it does not contain nutritional information. *Super Size Me*, dir. Morgan Spurlock, The Con production company, 2004 [Film].

16 A. K. Yancey, J. Leslie, and E. K. Abel, ‘Obesity at the Crossroads: Feminist and Public Health Perspectives’, in *Signs*, 31 (2006).

17 Robert Crawford, ‘Cultural Influences on Prevention and the Emergence of a New Health Consciousness’, in *Issues in the Political Economy of Health Care*, ed. J. McKinley, London: Tavistock, (1984).

To recoup capital and integrate aberrant consumers into the discourse of immanent labour, sexual and commercial gazes attempt to create both a feeling of shame and a desire for health in the self-indulging subject, while a plethora of products and services are offered to achieve this aim.<sup>18</sup> For example, the diet industry promotes products that seem to permit both imperatives - to delay gratification and to seek rewards. Diet food chocolate, crisps, and milk shakes, are both the temptation and the solution for temptation. These products keep the craving to consume alive while enabling the consumer to demonstrate an acceptable work ethic and acquiescence to social norms. Consumers are transformed from shamed docile bodies into active confessional ones by turning their aberrant consumer behaviour into a form of consumption that produces sign-value for the body. There is an in-built obsolescence to this system because calorie control and restriction of food can cause the metabolism to slow down, resulting in greater weight gain. Diet products are the exemplary commodity of late capitalism because they incite increased consumption by frustrating desire rather than fulfilling it. As Richard Klein writes, 'more diet means more appetite, and more appetite means more consuming'.<sup>19</sup> Change takes place in the relationship between the consumer and society, and not in the physical characteristics of the consumers' bodies. They yield to social regulation and the system of sign-value; the pleasure of eating chocolate and crisps is transformed into a culturally regulated activity.

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<sup>18</sup> This approach targets consumers who feel they weigh more than health or aesthetic social standards deem acceptable. The fat fetishes on Fantasy Feeder are impervious to this discourse because they do not desire health and are not ashamed of their large bodies. I have included a discussion of the mechanisms used to capture and control overweight consumers by diet and medical industries to demonstrate the force of the discourses the fat fetishes are subjected to.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Klein, 'Fat Beauty', in *Bodies out of Bounds*, ed. by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001, p. 37.

Because fat bodies signify the pleasure of eating without restriction, consumer societies try to impose limitations. Like thinspiration websites, fat fetish websites also share advice regarding interaction with medical and social service professionals. Secrecy is encouraged and readers are told to pretend that they are trying to lose weight when they talk to doctors or disapproving relatives.<sup>20</sup> A page on Fantasy Feeder says ‘since obesity is wrongly but officially classified as a “disease”, you can apply for Social Security Disability, even if you are only 18 years old. The government considers anyone over 400lbs as unable to work’.<sup>21</sup> Health care in America is entwined with the work ethic because employers frequently provide health insurance for workers. Although other countries such as Britain offer state and private health care provision, there remains a connection between health care and work.<sup>22</sup> Prior to commencing a new job, I complete an occupational health questionnaire to ensure that my work will not be impeded by and will not exacerbate existing health issues. This suggests that health is not just a general and desirable condition of the body and mind, but relates specifically to work. Lack of health leads eventually to lack of productivity and health care is provided to enable the individual to return to work. Society assumes the fat individual chooses lack of health and refuses medical intervention that would return him or her to work.<sup>23</sup> The morbidly obese body combines characteristics of the

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20 Thinspiration websites also advise secrecy and subterfuge; the reader is told to drink lots of water before being weighed and say they have already eaten to avoid difficulties at family meals.

21 <<http://fantasyfeeder.com/articles/view?id=106>> [accessed 30 July 2015].

22 Although it is outside the scope of this research, a greater understanding of the relation between health care and work in a wider variety of societies would create a more diverse and deeper analysis. As the American work ethic derives from Protestant ideology it would be interesting to know if there is a different attitude to work and health care in countries dominated by other faiths.

23 When researching fat fetish social networking sites I came across a private medical insurance advertisement that read ‘United Kingdom: Jump NHS queues with private medical insurance from 79p per day’. Because Large Passions is website for fat admirers and fat fetishes it was unclear to me at whom this advertisement was aimed. Perhaps the desire to ‘jump queues’ shows that fat fetishes are concerned about the health implications of obesity. News reports in the United Kingdom frequently describe obesity in relation to cost so overweight patients who do not wish to lose weight may feel vilified

lazy man and the dying man, described by Certeau as ‘intolerable to society’ because the lazy man chooses not to work and the dying body ‘no longer even makes itself available to be worked on by others’.<sup>24</sup> These forms of inaction are unbearable because they signify a body that can no longer be intextuated by social regulation, representing instead a lapse in cultural control.

Certeau argues this is why the dying person is censored, hidden away, and denied in language. Old age and illness are ‘parasitic on the rationality of work’ so they are ‘transformed into a scientific and linguistic object foreign to everyday life and language’.<sup>25</sup> Fat fetishism takes this scientific form of intextuation to an obsessive level, periodically weighing and measuring the circumference of body parts to chart growth. The unhealthy otherness of the fat body is glorified rather than vilified.

Like the body in thinspiration, which hovers between subject and object, the body in a fat fetish photograph cannot be easily placed in either category. The fat body cannot be consumed as labour or shared as a sign-value if it is deemed unfit for work and rejects predominant body ideals. In fat fetish photographs the body signifies lack of restraint, ill-health, laziness, and death, and circulates them as desirable signs.

### *The Fantasy of Pleasure*

In consumer society the body is not permitted to change indiscriminately. The body must grow in ways that reinforce secondary sexual characteristics: the buttocks and breasts of women, and the arm-, chest-, and shoulder-muscles of men. The fat fetish body is a work in progress

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as a financial drain on the NHS. Paying for private medical treatment would negate this negative experience.

<sup>24</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit., p. 190.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p. 191.

but expansion is not selective so the body's growth does not reinforce gender difference. On Fantasy Feeder approximately half of the users posting fat-fetish 'selfies' are male, suggesting the practice is enjoyed equally by both sexes.<sup>26</sup> The way the bodies are transformed also disrupt gender binaries: the stomach takes prominence for both male and female bodies, and it is often difficult to identify the sex of a body when viewing closely cropped images of breasts, buttocks, and thighs.

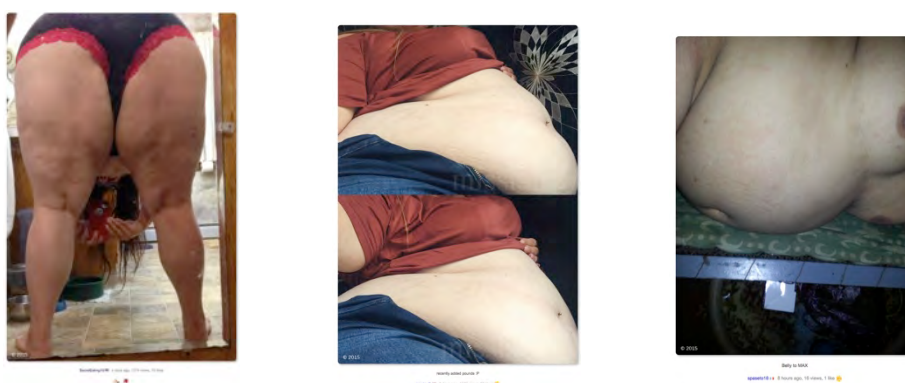


Figure [21] Fat Fetish Photographs <http://fantasyfeeder.com/pics> [accessed 07 August 2015]

Many of the images on Fantasy Feeder resemble the tropes of selfies; they are often taken using a mirror emphasising particular body parts such as breasts, buttocks, stomachs, and thighs. But these bodies bulge, ripple, and sag, inhabiting space in an entirely different way. Fat fetish photographs do not simply borrow from the conventions of selfies, rather they parody them. An image on Fantasy Feeder of a woman in a white swimsuit quite obviously makes reference to Kim Kardashian's famous selfie. While Kardashian's image shows off her surgically augmented buttocks, the fat fetish parody draws attention to the curvaceous body ideal using a different form of commodity enhancement.

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<sup>26</sup> Out of the first two hundred photographs that appeared in the 'pics' section ninety-five were of male bodies. <[www.fantasyfeeder.com](http://www.fantasyfeeder.com)> [accessed 24 February 2016].





Figure [22] Selfie by 'Princess Piggy' [www.fantasyfeeder.com](http://www.fantasyfeeder.com) [accessed 7 August 2015]

Fat fetish images also reproduce many of the visual tropes of thinspiration: hyperfocalisation on body parts and decapitation to conceal the identity of the individual for example. The body appears dissociated from the thinking subject, but fat fetish images do not eradicate secondary sex characteristics, they enlarge the breasts and stomach to make the sex difficult to discern.<sup>27</sup> The scarcity of depictions of fat bodies in popular visual culture signifies that fat does not conform to sign-values of productivity and normative sexual objectification so it is hidden from view. It is alienated from mainstream culture with morbid medical language.

The fat fetish image recalls Le'a Kent's description of the fat body marked by its desires as opposed to the 'good thin body (a body good only because it is marked by the self's repeated discipline)'.<sup>28</sup> She says this change in

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27 The image recalls Deleuze's comparison between masochism and sadism; 'the masochist is hermaphrodite and the sadist is androgynous'. The masochist plays the role of the chastised son and projects the feminine role of stern mother onto the other, but both of these positions constitute a single figure. The sadist is a father figure who is above the law or a daughter who identifies with and reproduces the father's image. The masochistic fantasy suspends sensual pleasure derived from a cold and stern maternal figure but does not eradicate it, while the sadistic fantasy must be enacted without emotion or enjoyment (Deleuze, 'Masochism', op. cit., p. 68).

28 Le'a Kent, 'Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women', in *Bodies out of Bounds*, ed. by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, p. 131.

connotation would allow fat people to relate to their bodies in the present and not as a 'before' image of a 'future conditional' self. She continues:

According to all cultural "wisdom" (and just watch what happens to self-valuing fat women on talk shows if you don't believe me), I must be deluded "I am impossible, I am living in a state of denial, and I must sooner or later come to my senses and resume loathing my body, if only for my "health".<sup>29</sup>

Kent looks for examples for representations of fat bodies that do not connote an unhealthy and disgusting body. Referring to a fanzine made for and by fat lesbian women she says:

In presenting fat bodies in sexual acts, fat women actively desiring other fat women, fat women in S/M scenarios, FaT GiRL appropriates sex as a joyous way of rewriting the fat body. It uses the erotic to envision a good, pleasurable body in which there is an interplay between the body's desire and the self's expressions the good body is rewritten as the body that can tell the self its desires, act on its desire, provide pleasures. Suddenly the disciplined body, the dieting body, the subject of "self-control," seems empty and impoverished.<sup>30</sup>

This description corresponds to my experience of viewing fat fetish images. The bodies disturb me because they are unapologetic in their display of enjoyment and destabilise my body-labour ideology of self-denial. I sense my body *as* a boundary, a limitation of pleasure. The fat body represents pleasure; not the circumscribed pleasure of capitalist consumption epitomised by the diet chocolate bar.

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29 *ibid.*, p. 131.

30 *ibid.*, pp. 142-3.

Fat fetish photographs are often presented as sequences showing the transformation of the body as it expands and loses definition. They reverse the process of intextuation common to advertisement and thinspiration in which the body is transfigured through writing into signs and signifiers. The fat body turns back into flesh.

In Bakhtin's discussion of the grotesque body in Rabelais' novels, it is not a complete, finished body separate from the world, but rather, 'it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body open to the outside world; that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world'.<sup>31</sup> In depictions of the grotesque body the mouth, stomach, and breasts are often emphasised. Bahktin writes:

The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself.<sup>32</sup>

Bahktin continues: 'Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage'.<sup>33</sup> In Rabelais' world corporality and the ability to

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31 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky, 3rd edn, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 [*Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable*, Moscow: Khudozhestvennii Literatura, 1965] p. 26.

32 *ibid.*, p. 281.

33 *ibid.*, p. 281.

consume is empowering; the carnival feast signifies a loosening of social regulation in which carnal pleasure is permitted.

The fat fetish body presented in photographs of consuming mouths and body-parts that protrude into the world recalls the grotesque body of carnival. S/he signifies a body for pleasure outside social regulation. On her blog 'The Path to Immobility' Cytarah Rose, a Canadian fat fetish model, describes a trip to a buffet restaurant:

I like going to the buffet by myself, I especially love when people stare at me in amazement and watch me take plate after plate. I love the attention, and I love challenging myself to take in more and more each time I go. It's like a rush for me, [an] accelerating ride!<sup>34</sup>

She displays her appetite as exhibitionism and gains pleasure from the attention she receives. Her audience is unaccustomed to seeing unrestrained consumption, even in a restaurant designed to encourage consumers to eat as much as they can. Rose takes the imperative to consume to excess and makes a mockery of it.

#### *Abject Fascination*

In the course of this research I have analysed various forms of self-presentation; some were disturbing but I did not postpone my analysis in the way I avoided looking intently at images from fat fetish websites. Only part of the fat body is shown, photographed to make it feel close, with 'the tangibility of the common thing', unlike the distant idealised wholeness of the commodity.<sup>35</sup> This proximity can feel oppressive for the viewer; I feel

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34 Cytarah Rose, 'A Trip to the Buffet', *The Path To Immobility*, 2015  
<<http://cytorah.wix.com/blog#!A-TRIP-TO-THE-BUFFET/cmbz/4C854E86-1F26-49DA-B63A-96DDA6D48838>> [accessed 30 July 2015].

35 Foster, 'The Art of Fetishism', op. cit., p. 257.

trapped underneath or within its folds. It is not a graspable possession like the commodified bodies in selfies; it threatens to touch me.

When I reflected on my avoidance of the images it was not difficult to discern a deeply entrenched value judgement. For all that I have argued against the presumption that a fat body denotes ill-health, laziness, and lack of care, I continue to believe in these judgements. The individuals in the photographs reject commonly accepted values of the body to which I adhere, and I find it difficult to comprehend. This is their power. The bodies that confront me also repel me.

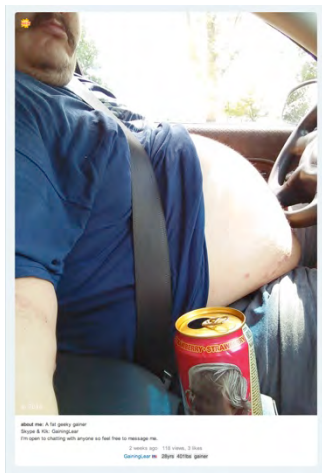


Figure [23] Photograph of ‘GainingLear’ [www.fantasyfeeder.com](http://www.fantasyfeeder.com) [accessed 24 August 2016]

In psychoanalytic sexual fetishism the fetish object is valued for an attribute that does not correspond to predominant social value systems. The fetish object choice also frequently provides an element of immobilisation and containment; in *Fetishism* Freud referred to the Chinese custom of ‘lotus feet’. Through the sacrifice of mobility and comfort the Chinese woman gained an elevated social position.<sup>36</sup> Victor Smirnoff observed that many of the cases of fetishism he analysed

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36 Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’, in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey, London: Penguin Books, 1991 [‘Fetischismus’, *Almanach*, 1929].

featured acts of restraint and immobilisation as pathways to sexual pleasure. The source of pleasure caused by the fetish is two-fold; it is restricting and painful enabling the fetishist to master and control the object, while at the same time hiding the object from view and thereby increasing desire for it. Fat fetishism is not simply an eroticisation of excess fat, but sexual pleasure derived from incapacitation.<sup>37</sup>

Users on Fantasy Feeder post images of their bodies in confined spaces to emphasise the shape and volume of the body. The domestic settings also illustrate the day-to-day life of a fat fetish, in which the body is repeatedly impeded by its surroundings. Photographs of stomachs tightly squeezed beneath the steering wheels of cars are common. On her blog Cytarah Rose, a Canadian Fat Fetish model says; ‘I can't wait to see how quickly my belly gets closer and closer to the wheel, and how hard it's gonna [sic] be to fit in there anymore! At the rate I'm growing, I can tell it won't be long...’<sup>38</sup> The car is a symbol of mobility; when the photograph shows a fat body unable to fit beneath the steering wheel, the individual is excluded from the social ideal that equates liberation and movement with ‘being on the road’.<sup>39</sup>

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37 Victor N. Smirnoff, ‘The Fetishistic Transaction’, in *Psychoanalysis in France*, ed. by Serge Lebovici and Daniel Widlöcher, New York: International Universities Press, 1980.

38 Cytarah Rose, ‘Car Struggles’, *The Path To Immobility*, 2015

<<http://cytorah.wix.com/blog#!CAR-STRUGGLES/cmbz/558a55bc0cf2bba695359b36>> [accessed 22 August 2016].

39 Social mobility and progress in relation to car travel corresponds to Benjamin’s idea of progress that upholds existing social structures and prevents change. When discussing Benjamin’s concept of the myth of progress Buck-Morss writes; ‘Transiency *without* progress, a relentless pursuit of “novelty” that brings about nothing new in history in making visible the outlines of *this* temporality, Benjamin provides the direct counterimage to an approaching heaven-on-earth: “Modernity, the time of Hell” ’ (Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., p. 96).

In the nineteenth century the development of railways came to symbolise progress. Benjamin writes ‘Railroads were the referent, and progress the sign, as spatial movement became so wedded to the concept of historical movement that these could no longer be distinguished’ (ibid., p. 91). Marx used the locomotive as a metaphor for revolution; however, Benjamin countered the equation of progress with movement arguing that revolution would take place when the locomotive stopped: ‘Perhaps it is totally different,

The restrictions caused by excess fat function similarly to the binding and containing characteristics of psychoanalytic sexual fetishism. The layers of fat are sexually exciting for fat fetishists and confound gender difference. Freud briefly describes a case of a male fetishist who used an athletic support belt as a fetish. It is unclear whether the male patient wore the fetish, or a female partner wore the garment for his pleasure. As Freud states;

This piece of clothing covered up the genitals entirely and concealed the distinction between them. Analysis showed that it signified that women were castrated and that they were not castrated; and it also allowed the hypothesis that men were castrated, for all these possibilities could equally well be concealed under the belt.<sup>40</sup>

In this case the fetish confounds vision – it is a trick of the eye that allows the fetishist to maintain the repression of a similar non-perception – that of his mother’s absent penis. The fetish allows the individual to unconsciously deny the difference between the sexes by hiding the genitals. It doesn’t matter if the person wearing the athletic support belt is male or female because it enables the fantasy that women have penises and men do not. Fat fetish images do not conceal genitals to produce the illusion that every body can possess a penis; rather fat bodies gain female sexual characteristics, creating an illusion that male and female bodies can become pregnant and lactate.

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Perhaps revolutions are the reaching of humanity travelling in this train for the emergency brake’ (ibid., p. 92). Real progress will take place when transiency ceases. Many societies view car ownership as a sign of success and some jobs require workers to own a car. For those in lower income brackets a large proportion of income is consumed by the expense of the purchase and the ongoing costs of insurance, tax, fuel, and repairs, preventing social mobility. Fat fetish photographs of a torso squeezed beneath the steering wheel of a car offer an updated version of the revolutionary locomotive. Large bodies that do not conform to the proportions of the vehicle prevent potential movement.

40 Freud, ‘Fetishism’, op. cit., p. 356.

Some of the images abstract the body into amorphous organic forms. In one image the breasts and stomach hang as would udders, making the subject appear bovine, thus reinforcing the connection between fat and 'feeding'. In the kitchen setting the fat body appears to offer itself as a source of nourishment to satisfy my hunger and meet my desire. The impression of multiple breasts implies a body of plenitude; it represents a fantasy maternal body.

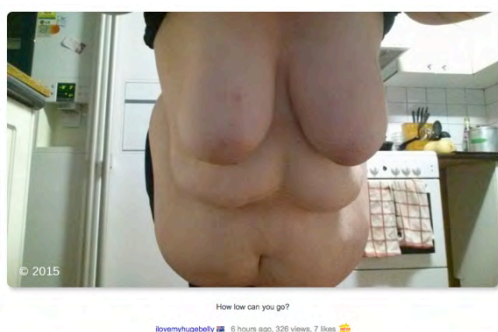


Figure [24] Photograph of 'lovelyhugebelly' [www.fantasyfeeder.com](http://www.fantasyfeeder.com) [accessed 7 August 2015]

I realise my reluctance to view images of fat fetish bodies is not simply a reaction of disgust but also one of envy. The bodies represent plenitude in nourishment and polymorphous pleasure. In my pursuit of an idealised slender body I have excluded myself from this pleasure. Fat fetish photographs recall the satisfaction of infantile nutritional need in which 'sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food; nor are opposite currents within the activity differentiated. The object of both activities is the same; the sexual aim consists in the incorporation of the object'.<sup>41</sup>

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41 Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey, London: Penguin Books, 1991 [*Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, Leipzig and Vienna: Deuticke, 1905] p. 117.



The breast becomes the first object of desire, which remedies some of the loss felt due to increasing separation from the mother. As Freud describes, ‘even after sexual activity has become detached from the taking of nourishment, an important part of this first and most significant of all sexual relations is left over, which helps to prepare for the choice of an object and thus to restore the happiness that had been lost’.<sup>42</sup> The breast is the initial site of phantasy, in which traces of the memory of oneness with the mother can be found.

I view the photographs with ambivalence because they recall the blissful plenitude of early infancy and a smothering lack of separateness from the mother. The mother’s body is a site of lost pleasure and abjection. Kristeva describes abjection as ‘a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be’.<sup>43</sup> To become a separate individual and take up a place in the social symbolic order I rejected my mother. Kristeva writes:

A certain ‘ego’ that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject.<sup>44</sup>

Images of fat bodies are excluded from dominant visual culture to preserve the boundary of social ideals that require consumers to obey the

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 2nd edn, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 [*Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1980] p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

contradictory imperative of heavily prescribed and circumscribed indulgence. The sadistic command of the capitalist is a superego impelling me to 'enjoy' as I deny myself pleasure and diminish the fecundity of my body with a multitude of small sadistic acts. Fat fetishism photographs offer me a view of my body without the cultural restriction to which I faithfully conform.

## CELEBRATE (WEIGHT)

*Weight* considers the social stigma attached to being fat and the medicalisation of the overweight body. The photographs were produced for a series of advertising posters displayed in Cardiff City center in January 2015. I wanted to draw attention to the abrupt shift in advertising rhetoric once the Christmas and New Year period is over. The images in the posters allude to the excesses of the holiday period that are often followed by self-recriminations and sometimes lead to diets and even surgery.



*Weight (2)*, 2014-5, 60cm x 40cm [digital photograph]



*Weight (7)*, 2014-5, 60cm x 40cm [digital photograph]



Weight (5), 2014-5, 60cm x 40cm [digital photograph]



*Weight (1)*, 2014-5, 60cm x 40cm [digital photograph]



*Weight (6)*, 2014-5, 60cm x 40cm [digital photograph]





*Weight (4)*, 2014-5, 60cm x 40cm [digital photograph]

## Conclusion: The Discourses of Social Networking Sites

### *Sign-Value and Ideology*

Advertisements endow commodities with sign-values that are transferred to me when I consume them, transforming my identity into an amalgam of marketing demographics. I am what I consume. Like Dutch still life paintings the foods on display in contemporary advertisements suggest lifestyle choices and social positions. Unlike the allegorical messages of the commodities depicted in still life paintings, the sign-values inscribed in commodities by advertisements tend to relate directly to the sign-value status of the body. The body has come to signify the character of the consumer; the shape of my body can connote a strong work ethic and a drive to succeed or laziness and lack of willpower.

For example, in the Magnum Light advert, the commodity is enticing but also warns against over indulgence. Ice cream and chocolate are desirable commodities but only 'light' versions are healthful. The advertisement simultaneously demonstrates pleasure, danger and compromise solution. When eating a 'light' ice cream I acquiesce to the need to balance the conflicting demands of capitalism; to indulge myself and restrain my consumption. Consumption is encouraged but the manner in which food can be consumed is clearly presented. When I purchase and consume the commodity I accept bounded pleasure prescribed by social norms.

I make still-life photographs to examine the relation between consumers and commodities in advanced capitalist societies and the forms of subjection that arise when I consume and conform to the sign-values circulated by dominant culture. In the seventeenth century still-life paintings were marginalised because they allude to the essential bodily requirements of eating and drinking; the paintings were contaminated by flesh. Whereas in

still life paintings the body is evoked by the staging of a meal which is also a laying out of desirable commodities, in advertising the body becomes the commodity, sometimes literally. This process is illustrated in the Burger King Super Seven Incher advertisement, in which the human subject looks like a mass-produced sex toy and the commodity signifies a penis. The commodity has been humanised and the human commodified; the distinction between commodity and consumer is abolished.

In contrast to still life paintings in which objects represent an absent consumer and function as a type of portrait, I have come to view contemporary forms of self-representation (selfies) as still lifes in which bodies express sign-values of commodities. Meredith Jones writes that the fashionable, surgically enhanced body signifies consumerism, neoliberalism and the culture of body-labour that are prevalent values in contemporary western societies. I have interpreted this inscription of the skin as evidence of capitalist discourse invading new territories, shaping body parts into the language of the system to make my body more easily exchangeable. Baudrillard writes:

The more the system is systematized, the more the fetishist fascination is reinforced; and if it is always invading new territories, further and further removed from the domain of economic exchange value strictly understood (i.e., the areas of sexuality, recreation, etc.), this is not owing to an obsession with pleasure, or a substantial desire for pleasure or free time, but to a progressive (and even quite brutal) systematization of these sectors, that is to say their reduction to commutable sign values within the framework of a system of exchange value that is now almost total.<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary consumer society the system of sign-value exchange is the dominant value system. The distinction between production and

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, op. cit., pp. 92-3.

consumption is erased as I produce sign-value when I consume commodities. Social networking sites are the *loci* for sign-value production and the means of exchange, both factory and marketplace. As a producer of content for social networking sites I am a limb of the sign-value production machine and means of exchange of sign-values with others. I am consumed as surplus sign-value. My body becomes a carrier of commodity sign-values with every purchase. I am seduced by commodities and hope their power of seduction will transfer onto my body. The urge to consume is '*irresistible like sexual instinct*' so my relation to the object is like a sexual relation.<sup>2</sup> Like the kleptomaniacs' and fetishists' overvaluation of an object, advertisements endow commodities with sign-values of love, prestige, and desirableness. I come to depend on objects for the success of my relations with people to the point that my relation to objects may become a substitute for my relation to people.

To determine the discursive structures that underpin relations between consumers and the producers of sign-value I refer to the model of discourse described by the 'universe of the capitalist' that builds upon Lacan's discourse of the master.<sup>3</sup> Lacan briefly refers to the discourse of the capitalist in *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, writing that the difference between the relation of the slave to the master and the proletariat to the capitalist is a difference in the relation of each to knowledge. The master consumes the slave's knowledge of production techniques while it is surplus-value rather than knowledge that is extracted from the proletariat by the discourse of the capitalist:

Capitalist exploitation effectively frustrates him of his knowledge by rendering it useless. What, in a type of subversion, gets returned to him is

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2 Stekel, 'The Sexual Root of Kleptomania', op. cit., p. 241.

3 Bryant, 'Žižek's New Universe of Discourse', op. cit.

something different – master’s knowledge. And this is why all he has done is change masters.<sup>4</sup>

Industrialisation in the nineteenth-century dispossessed the proletariat of the knowledge of production techniques. Because each worker is responsible for a small part only of the production of a commodity the entire process of production is obscured. The knowledge the worker receives from the capitalist master subordinates her/him to the machine.

Lacan developed the theory of the four discourses and introduced the supplementary discourse of the capitalist in the aftermath of the student protests and wildcat strikes that took place across France in 1968. The anti-capitalist protests resulted in university restructuring and increased wages; however, the structure of capitalism also changed, from a hierarchical centralised system to a network of autonomous teams. Žižek writes:

capitalism usurped the left’s rhetoric of worker self-management, turning it from an anti-capitalist slogan to a capitalist one. It was Socialism that was conservative, hierarchic and administrative [...] The new capitalism triumphantly appropriated this anti-hierarchical rhetoric of ‘68, presenting

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XVII The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., p. 32.

*Seminar XVII* took place at the Law Faculty at Place du Panthéon in 1969-70. In 1968 the building was occupied by students protesting against class inequality in the university system and the limited employment opportunities for graduates. The student protests were supported by wildcat strikes across the country. Lacan said the protests were a symptom of capitalism caused by conflict between the capitalist accumulation of knowledge in the university and an irruption of truth (Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘68 + 1: Lacan’s *Année Érotique*’, *Parrhesia*, 6 (2009)). In 1969 Lacan began to develop his theory of the four discourses to elucidate the position inhabited in social networks ‘determined by power, seduction, demand and desire’ (Rabaté, ‘68 + 1’, p. 40). The four discourses are influenced by Hegel’s ‘master-slave’ dialectic from *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly as it was used by Alexandre Kojève to discuss human conflict in a series of lectures between 1933 and 1939. In the master-slave dialectic, two people compete with one another for supremacy. The victor cannot kill the vanquished because he desires recognition of his victory from the other. Instead of killing his foe he subjugates the other to the position of slave and assumes the position of master. The master forces the slave to work and does not produce anything. The slave sublimates his desire through work and the acquisition of knowledge. The master-slave dialectic is a co-dependent relation that structures social discourse.

itself as a successful libertarian revolt against the oppressive social organizations of corporate capitalism and “really existing” socialism.<sup>5</sup>

The students demanded a new master but the same master reappeared in a new disguise. The radical political demands of the 1960s protests were neutralised and reconfigured to the language of a pseudo-hysteric. Sexual freedom and social equality became hedonistic imperatives to consume and ‘enjoy’.

I have used the structure of the discourse of the capitalist to identify predominant modes of address in consumer culture that emphasise the surface appearance of the body to compel me to consume commodities and make my body conform to dominant sign-values. The economy, characterised as an attention economy, uses my fascination with images of bodies to overcome the attention deficit caused by an over-saturation of images in commercial visual culture. Social media microcelebrities undertake extensive body-labour to fascinate and dazzle others, capturing their attention and covertly selling products. This form of self-presentation resembles the insistent ‘presentification’ of the hysteric. Identifying with an ego ideal that is presented as physically perfect, and constantly changing to the tempo of ‘fashion time’ imprisons me in a ‘future conditional’ relation to my body.

The identification with an ego ideal and the ‘future-conditional’ relation to my body is strengthened and maintained by two further modes of address: a sadistic command that compels me to perform an endless variety of small painful acts under the guise of health and enjoyment, and a hyperfocalised fetishistic way of looking at the body characterised by Mike Featherstone as

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<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Ambiguous Legacy of ‘68’, 20 June 2008 <[http://inthesetimes.com/article/3751/the\\_ambiguous\\_legacy\\_of\\_68](http://inthesetimes.com/article/3751/the_ambiguous_legacy_of_68)> [accessed 24 August 2016].

the ‘scalpel’ gaze. These discourses circulate and support the dominant ideology of consumer culture.

*The Discourse of the Capitalist*

In the discourse of the capitalist the divided subject addresses an institution of knowledge, producing the aberrant sign as the object of desire. The master signifier of the capitalist is hidden but also drives the discourse.<sup>6</sup> As a consumer and producer of content for social networking sites I cast myself in the role of the divided subject. I know very well that the commodities I purchase do not transform me into the desirable figures I see in advertisements; nevertheless, I continue to spend money and conform to a regime of body-labour. The master signifier of this domain is the Spectacle, a ‘ferocious super-ego’ communicating with me *via* advertisements, newspaper and magazine articles about body ideals, and celebrities. The Spectacle compels me to purchase commodities by suggesting they will help me to achieve an unachievable perfect body. Although the ego ideals are not similar to me in class or income their presentation *via* selfies or advertisements in which the figures take selfies downplay difference, to make the lifestyles they represent appear achievable. Presenting the self insistently and repeatedly for acknowledgement and approval by others is the unitary trait with which I identify. I accept that my body is a tool to extract the surplus-value of attention from others and commodities are tools for the production of an ideal, ‘attention-rich’ body.

Knowledge in the discourse of the capitalist issues from the microcelebrity Young-Girl. The Young-Girl teaches me how to acquire attention-value and recruits me to the system of sign-value production and exchange. By addressing the Young-Girl *via* social networking sites and identifying with

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6 S (consumer) → S2 (Young-Girl)  
S1 (Spectacle) // a (aberrant sign)

her as an ideal I assimilate myself to the model of the Spectacle that she embodies. I do not address the Spectacle directly; instead I address the institution that supports and disseminates the ideology of the Spectacle:

The symbolic privileges accorded by the Spectacle to the Young-Girl are her dividends for absorbing and diffusing the ephemeral codes, the updated user's manuals, the general semiology that THEY have had to dispense in order to render politically harmless the free time enabled by "progress" in the social organization of labor.<sup>7</sup>

Young-Girls disseminate knowledge that asserts the relation between health and beauty, as well as promote empowerment *via* sexual objectification, both of which result in an increase of commodity consumption. The Young-Girl's body is intextuated as the ideology of the Spectacle: 'She is simply the insubstantial concretion of all these abstractions, which precede and follow her. In other words, she is a purely ideological creature'.<sup>8</sup>

The hidden truth of the discourse is: 'Through the eyes of the Young-Girl, the Spectacle is looking at you'.<sup>9</sup> The gaze of the Spectacle is hidden because it is disguised by the personal messages of social media microcelebrities which conceal the economic truth of their discourse. I view selfies by Young-Girls as a future-conditional body, constantly changing into a thinner and more commodity-enhanced ideal: 'she is the law and the police at the same time'.<sup>10</sup> This also gives the discourse its purpose: the Young-Girl promotes commodities that will help me to increase my sign-value and become further integrated into (and consumed by) the Spectacle. I feed the Spectacle with content produced by mimetic identification structurally similar to the relation between the hysteric and her/his rival.

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7 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit., p. 102.

8 *ibid.*, p. 66.

9 *ibid.*, p. 66.

10 *ibid.*, p. 141.



The objects of desire in the capitalist discourse are aberrant signs to be recuperated into the system of sign-value exchange. The imperfect body of the consumer is desirable because it is a site into which the marketplace can expand. I present my images online to Young-Girls on social networking sites, posing the question ‘do I have a perfect, captivating body?’ The photographs of my body are surrounded by bodies that I think superior to mine. I am imperfect and envious. By narrowing the parameters of acceptable consumer behaviour and promoting a body ideal that is achievable only through commodification, the capitalist discourse reveals my body to me as an aberrant sign that must consume to become acceptable. The Spectacle produces new forms of body dissatisfaction and new commodities that it claims will overcome them.

The inability to incorporate all aberrant signs into the system is the hidden truth of the Spectacle. Even the exemplary Young-Girl fails to keep up with its commands:

The Young-Girl is never satisfied with her submission to consumer metaphysics, with the docility of her entire being, and obviously of her entire body, to the norms of the Spectacle. This is why she displays the need to exhibit it.<sup>11</sup>

The discourse of the capitalist produces a hystericisation of mass-communication, in which Young-Girls repeatedly and insistently present their bodies in a demand for attention. Hysteria has been monetarised by the Spectacle, producing an attention economy in which exhibitionistic self-display has currency. The attention economy is an economy of hysteria. The system of sign-value exchange needs me to exhibit myself in order to continue the dissemination of sign-values and ensure I am receptive to the

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59.

sadistic commands of the Spectacle. It places me in a 'future conditional' relation to my body so I always view it as an imperfect aberrant sign. Though exhibitionism becomes the norm I do not participate in its perverse form, which offers partial satisfaction. This might lead me to linger over particular objects that give me pleasure. My desire must remain unfulfilled or totally unknown to me in order to keep me consuming. Because hysteria is characterised by a desire for unfulfilled desire it is economically productive for consumer societies.

This is not the first time hysteria has been performed to produce a spectacle. In the latter half of the nineteenth century hysterics were employed by mesmerists and hypnotists to entertain the public at carnivals. Asti Hustvedt refers to *L'hypnotisme et les états analogues* by Gilles de la Tourette, published in 1889. Tourette's research shows

the path between the carnival and the clinic was a well-travelled one. As entertainment somnambulists, hysterics were well paid, received a cut of the night's profits, as well as food and lodging. When they needed a break from the pressures of their professional lives, or their hysterical attacks became too disruptive, they would return to the Salpêtrière.<sup>12</sup>

On social networking sites the Young-Girl, epitomised by the social media microcelebrity, presents her body as a symptom of hysteria and receives remuneration for the attention she receives. The sign-values of the body are copied and hysteria is transmitted to her/his followers. As Tourette says of the carnival hypnotists,

the 'doctor,' dressed in black with a white tie, begins a series of experiments on his subject that provoke enthusiastic bravos from the crowd of imbeciles who have brought to this repugnant spectacle their wives and daughters, as

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<sup>12</sup> Hustvedt, *Medical Muses*, op. cit., p. 115.

though hysteria does not spread quickly enough with ordinary day to day provocations.<sup>13</sup>

The discourse of the capitalist extracts surplus-value through a currency of exhibitionism monetarised by the attention economy. The discourse enables expansion of the system of sign-value exchange by transmitting sign-values using a form of hysteria. Individuals identify with only a single aspect of the ego ideal – a body part or flawless surface. This trait becomes the sole focus of attention and source of value. To produce the most surplus-value bodies become increasingly commodified and spectacular.

Evidence of the condensation and exaggeration of sign-values of the body into increasingly commodified forms can be found in *ôljjang*, a phenomenon that became popular in South Korea in the early 2000s. Initially *ôljjang*, meaning ‘best face’, denoted those who had achieved celebrity status on the Internet due to their good looks.<sup>14</sup> Later it became synonymous with teenage Internet users who digitally manipulated their images to achieve *ôljjang*. These individuals used photographic editing apps to change their selfies, in the manipulated photographs their faces resemble Western beauty standards exaggerated to their extremes: ‘the eyes were enlarged to take up most of the face; the noses were sharpened and jaws were narrowed to the degree of impossibility; and skins were rubbed and levelled to appear flawless and paper-white’.<sup>15</sup>

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13 *ibid.*, p. 110.

14 Social media microcelebrities are an example of *ôljjang*.

15 Seungyeon Gabrielle Jung, ‘Liquify, Blur, and Merge: Photographic and Surgical Adventures of 21st-century Korean Women’, a paper presented at Twenty-first Century Photography Conference, University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins, 5–6 June 2015.

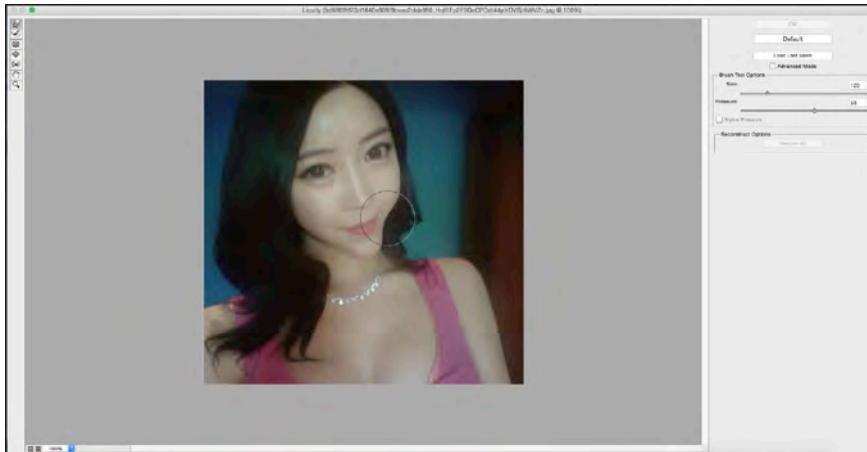


Figure [25] Seungyeon Gabrielle Jung, 'Liquify, Blur, and Merge: Photographic and Surgical Adventures of 21st-century Korean Women', [conference paper] Twenty-first Century Photography Conference, University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins, 5-6 June 2015

*Ôljjangs* appear to have been frustrated by the limitation of the virtual 'best face' because members of the subculture sought cosmetic surgery to permanently transform their faces into *ôljjangs*. Online communities began to deride men and women with surgical enhancements, calling them *Sung-Gwae*, from the terms plastic surgery and monster.<sup>16</sup> Seungyeon Gabrielle Jung interprets this stigmatisation as a sign of the disruptive potential of the phenomenon. She says that *Sung-Gwae* could be revolutionary cyborgs because their beauty ideal comes from an artificially produced image and

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<sup>16</sup> South Korea has the highest rate of plastic surgery *per capita* in the world. Apparently 'a typical high-school graduation gift for a Korean teenager is either a nose job or a blepharoplasty, also called a double-eyelid surgery (the insertion of a crease in the eyelid to make the eye look bigger [and closer to a western beauty ideal]), which is by far the most common procedure performed in Korea' (Patricia Marx, 'About Face: Why is South Korea the world's plastic-surgery capital?', in *The New Yorker* (2015) <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face>> [accessed 5 May 2016]).

*Sung-gwae* (or *sung-gui* as it is also written) is described on [koreanplasticsurgeries.com](http://koreanplasticsurgeries.com) as 'a very strong insult' deriving from an internet comic strip about the women of Gangnam (a wealthy district of Seoul) with the same surgically enhanced faces. The writer ends the article saying 'below we have gathered a bunch of *sung-gui* photos for your enjoyment. Have fun!' Another article says 'our earlier compilation of Korean plastic surgery monsters gained so much positive feedback...we decided to please all of our readers and do another photo compilation of *sung-gui*'. There is clearly an enjoyment in deriding those who are perceived to have had too much surgery. It is unclear what constitutes too much, but the derogatory term 'surgery monster' clearly demonstrates the strict rules surrounding plastic surgery, an otherwise accepted and widely practiced aspect of Korean culture.

(Unknown Author, 'Korean Plastic Surgery Monsters', <<http://koreanplasticsurgeries.com/korean-plastic-surgery-monsters/>> [accessed 5 May 2016]).

does not have an original in the real world. *Sung-Gwae* eradicates the distinction between image and flesh, corresponding to Donna Haraway's definition of the cyborg as a 'condensed image of both imagination and material reality'.<sup>17</sup> It is an aesthetic beauty ideal that is not determined by society but developed and 'designed' by the *Sung-Gwae* themselves and is therefore threatening to the conventions of society.



Figure [26] *Sung-Gwae* Photograph

<http://www.allkpop.com/forums/discussion/214268/%EC%84%B1%EA%B4%B4-ps-can-someone-explain-me-why-they-think-this-is-beautiful> [[accessed 7 July 2015]

Because the integrated Spectacle is both an image to which I aspire and a reflection of myself, it is a combination of fantasy and the real world. When I commodify my body to reduce the gap between myself and the ideal, my body becomes a combination of artifice and reality, a revolutionary cyborg. This suggests that anyone having buttock enhancement surgery to look more like Kim Kardashian is also a revolutionary cyborg. While the *Sung-Gwae* phenomenon may bring to light the artificial nature of beauty ideals by exaggerating them to extremes, the codes used are still quite conventional. They can be found in the ultra-feminine features of cartoon characters in Disney and Anime films.

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<sup>17</sup> Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Social Feminism in the 1980s', *The Haraway Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 7.



Figure [27] *Sailor Moon* [Japanese anime television series produced by Toei Animation, adapted from a manga series by Naoko Takeuchi (1991–7 in *Nakayoshi*)  
<<http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/anime.php?ann-edition=uk&id=363>>  
[accessed 7 July 2015]

The pressure to conform to an image of the Young-Girl in reality undermines the idea that I am only limited by imagination. As *Sung-Gwae* demonstrates, when the body fails to live up to the ideal image it is the body that is changed. Rather than offering the possibility of multiple forms of expression, the integrated Spectacle annihilates difference and conforms all aspects of the world to its image. Forms of self-presentation like selfies and *ôljjang* cause hysteria's rivalry and mimetic presentification to spread. The characteristics of the Young-Girl are copied and exaggerated, producing bodies that resemble caricatures of the ego ideal. The gap between ego and ideal is measured on the surface of the body and reduced with the aid of a surgical knife.

Like a worker in a factory who is a limb of the machine, I am part of a machine in which my actions are predetermined by the mechanisms of the system. There are very limited options for self-expression; I am only able to communicate a quantity of body-labour and conform to hegemonic ideals. As a Young-Girl I am 'the crystallization of a certain quantity of labor spent to put her in accordance with the norms of a certain type of exchange'.<sup>18</sup> I can willingly become a Young-Girl, or reluctantly be recuperated into the

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<sup>18</sup> Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit., p. 81.

system through discourses of health. The Young-Girl ‘represents the total acculturation of the self, because she defines herself in terms fixed by extraneous judgment, that the Young-Girl constitutes the most advanced carrier of the *ethos* and the abstract behavioral norms of the Spectacle’,<sup>19</sup> that is a ‘dictatorship of appearances’.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Discourse of Bio-Power*

The discourse of bio-power aims to standardise all signs into tools for the system of sign-value exchange. Institutions of knowledge are produced to increase the efficiency of the sign-value exchange system.<sup>21</sup>

The mode of address in this discourse is a sadistic command communicated by the Spectacle via advertisements, television programmes such as *Supersize vs Superskinny*, and media articles about health, fitness, and body-labour. Each sadistic utterance brings a different body part to my attention to be improved with a commodity and a cruel act of body-labour. Because health has supplanted beauty in the terminology of the discourse and sexualisation is rebranded as empowerment, I am compelled to carry out these sadistic acts willingly as a source of satisfaction beneficial to my health. This discourse produces a Young-Girl because the more I commodify my body the more closely I resemble the Spectacle’s ideal. I reproduce and disseminate the ideology of the Spectacle.

The discourse of bio-power is one of hyper-mastery and hyper-control because aberrant signs that cannot be incorporated into the system of sign-value are hidden. These aberrant signs include fat fetishes that refuse to

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19 *ibid.*, p. 107.

20 *ibid.*, p. 106.

21 S1 (Spectacle) → S (consumer)  
a (aberrant sign) // S2 (Young-Girl)

work in the service of sign-value exchange. To eradicate these signs from the system, the discourse of bio-power disciplines them for work. In their description of ‘the masculine Young-Girl, with his fake muscles’ Tiqqun refer to Foucault’s analysis of disciplined bodies in capitalist systems.<sup>22</sup> The body is disciplined to maximise power for labour at the same time as the power of the body as a potential for disobedience is diminished. The force of the body is dissociated from the individual as a separate entity; it is turned into labour-power and a commodity for exchange.<sup>23</sup>

The ‘force’ of the body in selfies is the power of captivation that increases with body-labour when an attention-rich body is produced. This source of power is also a limit to power because the disciplining body-labour demanded by the sadistic capitalist is very time-consuming. Fat bodies threaten to undermine the system because labour potential is diminished as the body grows and the body increasingly expresses polymorphous pleasure unrestrained by the sign-value system.

Signs of ageing are also mastered by this discourse because they do not perpetuate the Spectacle’s ideological exaltation of youth: ‘wrinkles, wrinkles do not conform; wrinkles are the writing of life; life does not conform. The Young-Girl is terrified of wrinkles as she is of all true EXPRESSION.’<sup>24</sup> Signs of ageing are abjected from the system of sign-value exchange and prevented from infiltrating the system by the production and promotion of a plethora of ‘time delay’ treatments and surgical procedures. The Young-Girl is characterised by ‘this maniacal effort of attaining, in her appearance, a definitive impermeability to time and space, to history and her environment, to be everywhere and always *impeccable*’.<sup>25</sup>

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22 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit., p. 35.

23 Michel Foucault, (Discipline and Punish) quoted in Tiqqun, *ibid.*, p. 35.

24 *ibid.*, p. 57.

25 *ibid.*, p. 52.



By removing the effects of ageing and other aberrant signs from the surface of my body, my face, I increase my attention-value and expend a great deal of time and energy in the process. The surface of my body becomes immobile and no longer records the passage of time. By acquiescing to the sadistic commands of the capitalist I become a frozen commodity-fetish. The body is embalmed in the desire to defy ageing but the mortified flesh of the Young-Girl is agitated by the requirement to keep up with ‘fashion time’, giving her/him the appearance of life. Dimitri Weyl describes the perfect body displayed in advertisements as

radically separate from reality, so that there is no longer anything natural about these bodies. They represent dehumanized beings: what we see has been deeply formatted, systematized, so that ultimately these representations show beings that are completely divinized and reified. In addition these things go hand in hand the perfection presents a kind of hyper-mastery nothing is open, everything is closed ‘hyper-anal-ysed’, [sic] hyper-controlled...On the glossy pages of the magazine, this makes them look, in the large majority of cases, somewhat plastic in the sense of substance: *without flesh and without breath*. We no longer see anything very human, anything that could touch or move us, or indeed seemed alive, but instead an image supposed to transfix us, captivate us, take our breath away, precisely because it is completely outside reality and, by the same token, becomes a psychic reality, and for many teenagers a powerful alienating dream.<sup>26</sup>

By exalting youth and slenderness western consumer societies enforce an ideology of body control and denial of pleasure. The Young-Girl dissociates all living qualities and sensations, suppressing desire to resemble an automaton more closely. Tiqqun argue/s ‘There is no more chastity in the Young-Girl than there is debauchery. The Young-Girl simply lives as a

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<sup>26</sup> Dimitri Weyl, ‘Perversions of the Dream’, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

stranger to her desires, whose coherence is governed by her market-driven superego'.<sup>27</sup> She is a machine designed to seduce and perpetuate the actions of the sadistic capitalist. The Young-Girl and the social networking sites she operates in constitute a '*mechanism of perpetual motion, and with it institutions of perpetual motion*'.<sup>28</sup> Deleuze writes:

Evil as defined by Sade is indistinguishable from the perpetual movement of raging molecules; the crimes imagined by Clairwil are so intended as to ensure perpetual repercussions and liberate repetition from all constraints. Again, in Saint-Fond's system, the value of punishment lies solely in its capacity for infinite reproduction through the agency of destructive molecules.<sup>29</sup>

The Young-Girl is the mechanism that reproduces and multiplies the sadistic acts demanded by the capitalist. She 'constitutes an *offensive neutralization apparatus*' that recruits consumers into an alliance with sadism.<sup>30</sup> The sadistic capitalist is a tyrannical father figure and superego, whose ego is externalised in the victim and epitomised in the figure of the mother. The sadist represents

nature as a primitive anarchic force that can only be restored to its original state by destroying the laws and the secondary beings that are subject to them. The ultimate aim of the sadist is to put an effective end to all procreation, since it competes with primary nature.<sup>31</sup>

The fat fetish recalls the fantasy of a maternal figure who produces polymorphous pleasure and is without lack. She is abjected but repeatedly returns and threatens to expose the fallacy of the 'good thin body' marked

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27 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit., p. 27.

28 Deleuze, 'Masochism', op. cit., p. 76.

29 *ibid.*, p. 119.

30 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit., p. 27.

31 Deleuze, 'Masochism', op. cit., p. 60.

by discipline. In order to become ideal body the reproductive potential of the body is diminished. The body in thinspiration is almost entirely consumed by the pursuit of perfection. The skeletal figure reveals the consequences and limits of the dissecting gaze and sadistic commands of the Spectacle.

The anorexic body is presented as *vanitas*: in our denial of death and ageing we hasten our obsolescence. However, the thinspiration photographs closely resembling selfies also reinforce and even celebrate the slender ideal. They bring to my mind *pronkstilleven* paintings, in which priceless objects are reproduced in a rich, sumptuous appearance. The allegorical interpretation of the painting warns against excessive consumption. The thinspiration selfie is dangerously close to deathly slenderness but the body is not skeletal enough to appear to be dying. The photographs can appeal to viewers who are pro- and anti-thinspiration and the ambiguity of the images allows them to be recuperated as sign-values. They hover between acceptable and unacceptable slenderness.

#### *The Discourse of Immaterial Production*

In the discourse of immaterial production social relations are produced to enable aberrant signs to be recuperated and new markets produced.<sup>32</sup> In this discourse the agent is knowledge - the Young-Girls who embody the ideology of the Spectacle by purchasing commodities, undertaking extensive body-labour, and disseminating these procedures to their followers. Young-Girls respond to aberrant signs with signs of health, empowerment, and shame to persuade the imperfect consumers to undertake body-labour and become a sign-value that can be exchanged. Their discourse produces the

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32 S2 (Young-Girl) → a (aberrant signs)  
S (consumer) // S1 (Spectacle)

master signifier, the sadistic commands of the Spectacle.

The mode of address in this discourse is a fetishistic gaze that dissects the body into parts for improvement. The Young-Girl instructs me to view my body in relation to the ideals of social media. Sadistic commands are produced as solutions to the aberrations of my body. The sadistic commands of the Spectacle are internalised and my 'way of seeing' reproduces the hyperfocalising, dissecting gaze of the Spectacle.

The proliferation of mobile telephones with cameras and the development of social networks to disseminate the photographs have led to the selfie phenomenon. The increase in opportunities to be photographed and instantly share the image with wide networks causes an increase in self-surveillance and a social gaze that fetishistically hyperfocalises on the body.

In sexual fetishism the fetishist hyperfocalises on the fetish in order not to look at something else. Hysteria and identification with surface appeal causes other consumers to hyperfocalise on my body and the sadistic commands of the Spectacle ensure I scrutinise my body for imperfections with equal intensity. In my desire to become a perfect commodity suspended in time I do not see rising social inequality and the spread of sign-value exchange into all spheres of life: 'Domination has discovered a bias more powerful than the simple power of constraint: *directed attraction*'.<sup>33</sup>

The discourse of bio-power aims to turn the body into a commodity-fetish characterised by a gleaming, distracting surface. Advertisement producers and Young-Girls borrow from the aesthetic language of sexual fetishism to add a sexual intensity to the desire to consume. Sexual aesthetic codes are bestowed on commodities as 'erotic signs'. I purchase commodities in the

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<sup>33</sup> Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit., p. 98.

hope the erotic signs will transfer to me and increase my desirability. The desire of the other is also shaped by the erotic signs; desire is commodified into a package that can be recuperated in sign-value exchange. The system of sign-value expands further into my social relations and commodities support or supplant my sexual identity.

An example of the power of the master signifier is expressed in the protagonists of *A Zed and Two Noughts* by Peter Greenaway. The film begins with a car crash and the death of the wives of the protagonists, Oswald and Oliver. Alma Bewick, the driver of the car, survives the crash but one of her legs is amputated. Bewick is viewed by the ‘cutting gaze’ of the surgeon van Meegeren who convinces her the other leg must also be amputated to maintain the symmetry of her body.<sup>34</sup> Van Meegeren is a cousin of the famous forger of Vermeer paintings. The surgeon also wants to produce copies of paintings, but his Vermeer women must exist in the real world.

The Spectacle and Bewick’s body become one as she conforms to the ideal model of the woman in Vermeer’s painting of *The Music Lesson*.<sup>35</sup> Bewick says her epitaph should read ‘here lies a body cut down to fit a picture’.<sup>36</sup>

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34 In the film symmetry is equated with cultural signification; Bewick is presented in a series of still-life compositions reminiscent of the paintings produced in the seventeenth-century Dutch republic. Van Meegeren says to Oswald and Oliver ‘animals, on the whole, are designed with a view to symmetry. Surely in your experiments you must have seen one of decay’s first characteristics is to spoil that symmetry, wouldn’t you say?’

35 Johannes Vermeer, *The Music Lesson*, 1662-5, Royal Collection, St James’ Palace, London [painting].

It may seem counter-intuitive to claim that having a surgical procedure to look like a woman in a 350-year-old painting is evidence of the integrated Spectacle of contemporary consumer culture. However, a supplement to *Tatler* magazine’s *Beauty and Cosmetic Surgery Guide 2016* informed readers of cosmetic surgery procedures that figures in paintings require. In an article titled ‘Make me a Masterpiece’ the woman in Edward Hopper’s painting *American Gothic* was prescribed Tri Eye Transformation for sunken eye sockets and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* was recommended SkinCeuticals Repair and Restore & Volumise Lip Treatment for thin lips (Francesca White and Katie Thomas, pp. 6-10). The magazine supplement editorial counsels readers to ‘do your homework: the latest edition of the *Tatler Beauty & Cosmetic Surgery Guide* celebrates not only the newest, niftiest ways to reclaim your face and figure, but also applauds those surgeons, doctors and nurses whose skills have stood the test of time [...] Done properly and safely, cosmetic surgery and its non-invasive alternatives can make you look and feel like ‘you’ again – and that is empowering’ (ed. Francesca White, p. 3). Signs of femininity are recuperated and recycled

In the discourse of immaterial production the consumer is hidden but drives the discourse. I could reveal that I know that my desires cannot be satisfied and the ideal model for the body will never be achieved. As a mortified commodity-fetish I threaten to return to life and make demands and the energy required to remain 'up-to-date' offers a weak point in the perfect facade of the Young-Girl:

However vast her narcissism, the Young-Girl doesn't love herself; what she loves is 'her' *image*, that is, something that is not only foreign and exterior to her, but that *possesses* her, in the full sense of the word. The Young-Girl lives under the tyranny of this ungrateful master.<sup>37</sup>

Through commodification the ideal body size diminishes: as my body is increasingly incorporated into the system of sign-value exchange, it is consumed. I feed social networking sites with content and the content I produce feeds the sign-value exchange system. They are advertisements for commodities and the ideology of the Spectacle. Sadistic commands and hysterical one-upmanship drive this feeding frenzy.

The capitalist must continue to develop new markets and increase consumption to survive. Refusal to consume does not starve the system, but rather it presents opportunities to produce new markets and manipulate social relations to commodify the immaterial aspects of our lives. Bruno de Halleux says;

In the four discourses there is a split but not in the capitalist discourse – it is a supplement of the four discourses – [there is] no split between the master

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from high and low culture and any time period. They may be presented as an ideal to aspire towards or aberrant signs to be improved by commodity culture. Orlan makes this process explicit in her surgery performances 'Re-incarnation of Saint ORLAN' (1990).

36 *A Zed and Two Noughts*, dir. by Peter Greenaway (*Artificial Eye*, 1985).

37 Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, op. cit., p. 61.

signifier and object a. [It] requires an endless loop – always demands more and more and never stops. That is why jouissance is infinite. The object of capitalism feeds its self repeatedly. It consumes the *object a* more and more to the detriment of the ideal ego.<sup>38</sup>

The discourse of the capitalist conceals the difference between the object of desire and object of consumption. It produces a compulsive desire to consume that increases in intensity because it feeds itself. The only way to starve the system is to feed it something it cannot digest: aberrant signs that disrupt the prevailing ideology of capitalism. They would be so unpalatable to the system of sign-value exchange they could not be introjected.

#### *The Discourse of Critical Theory*

The aberrant sign is in the position of the agent; it signifies all that resists homogenisation; it cannot be named or recuperated as a sign-value in the universe of the capitalist. This aberrant sign, the fat fetish, addresses the Spectacle and the discourse produces a doubling, divided consumer who is able to reveal the limits of the master signifier's power. The Young-Girl is the hidden truth that drives the discourse.<sup>39</sup>

The discourse of critical theory produces ambivalence: 'a language through which our unfreedom can be articulated, discerned, and therefore engaged'.<sup>40</sup> The hidden truth is the ideology disseminated by the Young-Girl. Because the ideology embodied by the Young-Girl upholds the ideology of the Spectacle it is excluded and new forms of knowledge are

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38 Bruno de Halleux, 'Sexuality Today', (unpublished conference paper, *The Speaking Body is Today's Unconscious: Psychoanalysis in the 21st Century*, Kingston University and St Martins School of Art (UAL), 2016.

39 a (aberrant sign) → S1 (Spectacle)  
S2 (Young-Girl) // \$ (consumer)

40 Bryant, Levi, R., 'Žižek's New Universe of Discourse', op. cit., p. 38.

developed: ‘the pursuit of a different form of knowledge and new institutions is now what drives this discourse. This would be revolutionary knowledge that analyses and engages the social field from the standpoint of its constitutive antagonisms’.<sup>41</sup> In the discourse of critical theory the role of the Young-Girl is revealed: ‘How could capitalism have managed to mobilize affects, molecularizing its power to the point of colonizing all of our feelings and emotions, if the Young-Girl had not offered herself as *intermediary*?’<sup>42</sup> The concealed commercial identity of the Young-Girl and the social media marketplace s/he inhabits will be exposed. The hidden truth is her role as accomplice to, and purveyor of, the sadistic capitalist’s discourse.

The limit of the power of the Young-Girl is revealed by aberrant signs that cannot be mastered by her/him. The fat body confronts the sadistic commands of the Spectacle and refuses to acquiesce, threatening to undermine the mechanisms of knowledge and power that perpetuate body ideals. At its most extreme the fat body threatens to expose what is concealed by the ideology of the youthful, mortified body; the bounded nature of the enjoyment offered by consumer society. When viewing a fat body marked by desire ‘suddenly the disciplined body, the dieting body, the subject of “self-control,” seems empty and impoverished’.<sup>43</sup>

The aberrant sign addresses the Spectacle using similar modes of address; fat fetish photographs dissect the body invoking a hyperfocalising gaze and the body refers to medical discourse through repeated weighing and measuring. However, both forms of address are grotesquely parodied in the images and videos produced by fat fetishes. Exhibitionistic presentification of the body is also subverted by the fat body because it is not undertaken solely in the service of the desire of the other. The body signifies

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> Tiqqun (Collective), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> Kent, ‘Fighting Abjection’, *op. cit.*, p. 142–3.



unrestrained pleasure that cannot be recuperated by the system of sign-value exchange and the attention the fat fetishist gains is incompatible with the values of the attention economy. When I view the images of fat fetishes I am fascinated and envious, and find it difficult to look away. The images arrest me.

The surface of the commodity-body of the Young-Girl is in flux, sadistically shaped and smoothed to deny ageing, and then suspended in a still life. Thinspiration photographs painfully expose the consequences of the overdetermination of the body's surface in the disjuncture between dazzling surface and the protrusion of the bones and organs beneath. The fat body does not submit to the mortification of a still life; it is in constant motion, the surface stretches and the adipose fat undulates beneath. Enjoyment is not constrained by a 'profane glimmer' on the surface of the body but is culturally inscribed in every bulge and ripple of flesh.<sup>44</sup> The fat body counters the consumer ideal of a commodity-body that can be upgraded and its parts exchanged. It presents a homogenisation of surface and flesh: it undulates and expands, producing an indistinct boundary for the body. It is not the complete, finished object that commodity culture presents as an ideal. Flesh and skin fold together undermining the distinction between surface and interior.

*Beyond the Young-Girl*

Contemporary consumer society offers polymorphous pleasure produced by a plethora of consumer goods but the preferred choices on offer are limitations that mould consumers into sign-values. Bodies are presented as signifiers of the consumer's ability to balance the conflicting demands of indulgence and the slender body ideal. In some respects the still life

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 131.

photographs I have produced are similar to the Dutch still life paintings from the seventeenth century. The photographs and paintings represent a relation to consumption that is ambivalent and full of contradictions; the pious Lenten consumer and opulent *pronkstilleven* consumer bear similarities to the anorexic and fat fetish consumers. The body of thinspiration is contradictory; it reinforces slender ideals, but the protruding bones also remind me that emaciation is life-threatening. The fat fetish body signifies a fantasy maternal figure and a body of pleasure that counters the idealisation of self-control but obeys the command to enjoy.

I sought to theorise contemporary consumer types and the pathological nature of their subjugation in the system of sign-value exchange. I intended to experiment with the visual language of objects to develop a positive language that challenges dominant representations of bodies. The work I have produced expresses the forms of subjection and coercion extrapolated in this thesis but they do not succeed in representing emancipatory, pleasurable consumption. To expand the sign-value of bodies beyond the sexualised and objectified images the language of unbound pleasure should be introduced into the system of sign-value exchange. In future research I will attempt to find a visual language to present the body as an expression of desire and enjoyment. The difficulty in producing works that cannot be recuperated as signs of objectification and commodification remains. The intention to produce a language of unbounded pleasure is constrained by the maniacal positivity of the Young-Girl and the sadistic capitalists command to 'enjoy'.

This research is also limited in its exploration of the subversive potential of social networking sites and the forms of self-presentation they produce. Although I have begun to use these spaces to present images that subvert commodity advertisements the body remains absent from the work. Future

work will explore the language of gesture in selfies to identify methods of subversion and parody. Through performance and self-portraiture I will attempt to introduce new sign-values into social networking sites.

This research will be complemented by discussion of the loss of distinction between public and private space that takes place when using social networking sites. This loss of distinction affects the presentation of self. According to Eva Illouz the distinction between public and private spheres became troubled in the nineteenth century when standards of behaviour in the workplace became standards of behaviour in the home:

This intimate affiliation between the public and the private spheres, bonded together through common emotional techniques and styles, relies on the conceptualization of the self as a project to be worked on in the workplace and the home. Learning techniques of controlling and demonstrating appropriate emotional expression, sometimes in conflict with one's actual emotional expression – particularly when that expression is conceived of as 'negative', in the cases of anger, frustration, and sadness – is conceived as a marketable skill inside the workplace and the home.<sup>45</sup>

The use of negative emotions that do not 'sell' the self could be an avenue of enquiry for future research into body language and the expansion of sign-values. Audrey Wollen proposes a theory of the Sad Girl in response to Tiqqun's theory of a Young-Girl. Wollen considers melancholy, sadness, starvation, and suicide as acts of resistance. She argues:

The shade of feminism that's chosen for media attention is always the one most palatable to the powers that be – unthreatening, positive, communal, [...] I felt kind of alienated by contemporary feminism, because it demanded

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<sup>45</sup> Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, *Surface Imaginations*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015, p. 189.

so much of me (self-love, great sex, economic success) that I just couldn't give.<sup>46</sup>

The destruction of the surface of the body as a backlash against the overdetermination of the appearance of the body may offer further ideas in relation to alternative sign-values for the body. However, countering the production of the surface through its destruction also reinforces the system of sign-value exchange. Although I agree that resistance to the maniacal positivity of the Young-Girl is necessary, assuming a position of unhappiness and suicide will not result in change. Sign-values of depression, self-harm, eating disorder, and suicide are part of the same sign-value exchange system as those of the happy, seductive Young-Girl. In an interview Wollen describes Lana del Rey, a singer and 'the queen of Sad Girls':

She lives in that highly eroticized, highly commodified position of the already-dead [...] I love how she made a video where she played both Marilyn and Jackie O — talk about complicated resistance! That's what every girl wants to be: Jackie and Marilyn simultaneously. We identify with the limitlessness of the beautiful corpse.<sup>47</sup>

The Sad Girl is a subdivision of the Young-Girl, offering an alternative form of branding using the same modes of address; self-presentation, hyper-focalisation on body-parts, and repeatedly self-administered sadistic acts. The emaciated and damaged body of the Sad Girl demonstrates a characteristic of commodities described by Baudrillard:

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46 Audrey Wollen quoted in Lucy Weston, 'How girls are finding empowerment through being sad online', 2015 <<http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/28463/1/girls-are-finding-empowerment-through-internet-sadness>> [accessed 26 August 2016].

47 Audrey Wollen quoted in Yasi Salek, 'Audrey Wollen on Sad Girl Theory', June 19 2014 <<http://www.cultistzine.com/2014/06/19/cult-talk-audrey-wollen-on-sad-girl-theory/>> [accessed 17 September 2016].

a wastage built into them and, therefore, obligatorily *consumed* as one of the qualities and dimensions of objects of consumption: their fragility, their in-built obsolescence, their condemnation to transience. What is produced today is not produced for its use-value or its possible durability, but rather with an *eye to its death*, and the increase in the speed with which that death comes about is equaled only by the speed of price rises.<sup>48</sup>

Consumer society requires the ‘calculated “suicide” of the mass of objects, and that this operation is based on technological “sabotage” or organized obsolescence under the cover of fashion’.<sup>49</sup> If the Young-Girl embodies the obsolescence of fashion, her Sad counterpart is characterised by sabotage. She is valuable because short, tragic lives and ‘highly eroticized, highly commodified’, ‘beautiful corpses’ produce a great deal of attention.

In *Zed and Two Noughts* death became a new market to be exploited when Oliver and Oswald chose to observe the process of decay. After the deaths of their wives, Oliver and Oswald procure vegetables and animal corpses to record the process of decay. In their grief, the brothers attempted to understand death through empirical observation of decay. Although the zoo animals produced profit when alive through the attention they attracted, they were more valued as test subjects and were killed to order. The animal body only ceases to produce capital once it has decayed. At the point of putrefaction the dead body cannot be exchanged, only observed.

When the body can no longer respond to the sadistic commands of consumer society it is also released. The ‘gaily decked out [beautiful] corpse’<sup>50</sup> escapes ‘the biological rigor mortis of eternal youth’<sup>51</sup> and seeps into the earth. As Lacan writes:

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48 Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, op. cit., p. 46.

49 *ibid.*, p. 46.

50 Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, op. cit., p. 101.

51 *ibid.*, p. 99.

There is not one form of the perverse phenomena whose very structure is not, in every moment of its being lived through, sustained by the intersubjective relation [...] One thing is certain – the sadistic relation can only be sustained in so far as the other is on the verge of still remaining a subject, if he is no longer anything more than reacting flesh, a kind of mollusk whose edges one titillates and which palpitates, the sadistic relation no longer exists. The sadistic subject will stop there, suddenly encountering a void, a gap, a hollow.<sup>52</sup>

In conclusion, the signs that cannot be recuperated by sign-value exchange systems should combine the unbounded pleasure of the fantasy maternal body and fearful abject matter that signifies the loss of self and limit of social control. These elements do not signify positivity or sadness but an ambivalent space beyond them.

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<sup>52</sup> Lacan, *Seminar 1*, 1998, op. cit., pp. 214–5.

## VANITAS NATURE MORTE

The positive, highly sexualized, dazzling commodity-body is viewed from a distance as a complete object and represented in photographs as a 'stilled life'. An object body would not reproduce the sign-values of the Spectacle. The boundaries of this body are open as it eats, shits, dies, and decays. The distinction between subject / object, food / feeder, and self / other is lost. It would be photographed at close proximity so the viewer could not see it in its entirety.



*Vanitas Nature Morte*, 2012, 70cm x 70cm [digital photograph]

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