



TIME OUT



David Jones' Elizabeth St store, Sydney, 1920s.

Photo: courtesy David Jones.

The Most Beautiful Store In The World

Gail Reekie

I was recently given a postcard bearing the slogan 'I shop therefore I am'. My immediate response was to agree. Shopping can be pleasurable, and what I buy to some extent expresses my individuality.

But shopping only gives me pleasure under certain conditions: that is, when I find what I'm looking for at a price that seems reasonable, or when my desire to be self-indulgent overcomes good economic sense, or when I'm not feeling hot, impoverished or grumpy.

I certainly don't enjoy it when what I want is outrageously expensive, and what I can afford appears with depressing ubiquity in every chain store in Sydney. Shopping can be, let's face it, a tiresome and anxiety-inducing chore to be dispensed with as quickly as possible.

To make matters worse, consumerism comes dangerously close to being ideologically unsound from the moral highgrounds of socialism

and feminism. As a socialist I know that consumption is a capitalist strategy to divert class conflict; as a feminist I know that consumption is a patriarchal plot to keep me at home and enslave me to fashions at best beyond sense and at worst life-threatening. Yet these knowledges don't stop me from shopping, or from occasionally deriving personal enjoyment from buying pretty things.

It is this conjunction of pleasure and pain that makes consumption the subject of somewhat tortured debate, especially on the left. Some writers characterise us (or, more safely, the working class) as the defenceless prey of mass marketing strategies; others argue that we have the autonomy to construct our own meanings and self-image from commodities in general and fashion in particular.

Is consumption a trap or a political act? Until recently we have had little choice but to cast ourselves in the role of victim or heroine in the

social and historical drama of consumption.

Two writers have recently suggested alternatives to this double bind. Judith Williamson argues that the left cannot afford to dismiss or boycott consumption as counter-revolutionary.¹ Rather than adopt the postmodernist option in which 'one can claim as radical almost anything provided it is taken out of its original context,' she suggests we analyse consumption as a form of ownership and control denied us in the productive sphere.

Shopping is a socially endorsed event in which we translate our wants and needs into consumption. I shop therefore I am a *social* being.

Wolfgang Haug also stresses that commodities and the way they are marketed mesh with our psychic needs.² He suggests that manufacturers, advertisers and retailers use 'commodity aesthetics' — the creation of a sensually-appealing appearance designed to realise exchange

value — to turn objects into desirable and therefore saleable articles.

What they market is the appearance, not the substance of commodities. Producers and their agents sell the consumer the promise or illusion of use value, where use value represents the material and nonmaterial necessities of life. The advertising industry 'packages' commodities in ideas, associations and meanings which reflect the perceived but nevertheless real sensual needs of the consumer.

Let me illustrate Haug's theory by describing a familiar showcase of 'commodity aesthetics': the recently remodelled ground floor of David Jones Elizabeth Street store in Sydney. The store designers have used colour, light, texture, odour, sound and reflective surfaces to create a store-specific 'commodity aesthetics' intended to promote a distinctive corporate image as well as sell merchandise.

The impression the shopper has on entering the store is of the restrained elegance associated with precious stones and their qualities of durability, luminosity, clarity and agelessness. The walls and ceilings echo the discreet grey of the marble floor but suggest a more yielding, velvety texture. Constellations of small spotlights in the ceilings pick up the shine from the floor and the glitter of brass fittings, glass display cases and mirrored columns. The mirrors are faceted to increase their reflective surface, as diamonds are cut to make them sparkle.

Neutral colours associated with bourgeois good taste dominate, and link the cosmetic and jewellery sections of the floor — silver, gold, grey and pastels. These central departments are ringed in a controlled anarchy of colourful protrusion by islands of brilliant colour encapsulated in scarves, flowers, handbags, stockings and belts.

Music from a (grey) grand piano — according to Haug the salesroom is designed as a stage on which an elaborate entertainment is enacted and commodities arranged — and scent from the perfume and dried flower counters, add auditory and

olfactory dimensions to the store's assault on the senses.

David Jones' display of expensive chocolate captures in essence the 'commodity aesthetics' of the department store. Arranged with military precision, some plain, some decorated with a single restrained motif, some adorned with crystal-lised violets, others wrapped and shimmering like coloured jewels, the bite-sized morsels do indeed offer the illusion of sensual gratification to those shoppers unfortunate enough to be waiting for the lifts to which the counter is strategically adjacent.

'Commodity aesthetics' can only be maintained, and exchange value realised, with the co-operation of the store's employees. Their appearance and behaviour must be as polished and unblemished as the counters they stand behind. Walk through the store during a quiet time of the day and you will see numerous assistants, armed with spray gruns, busily spraying and wiping. I wonder, too, what it feels like to stand on marble floors all day long.

But for most customers the marble floors, grand piano and glittering displays do represent a comparatively pleasant shopping environment. The experience of walking around the Elizabeth Street David Jones is physically and emotionally different — I would argue more enjoyable — than that of loading up the trolley in the local Coles New World. This difference is certainly in part a result of differences in the commodities themselves. But it also reflects contrasting approaches to commodity aesthetics.

Department store managers have been leaders in mass marketing techniques since the late nineteenth century. Australian drapery shops developed into 'emporia' or 'universal providers' in the 1880s and 1890s when they expanded their range of stock to cover furniture, ironmongery, crockery, grocery, leather and fancy goods. By the time the term 'department store' came into common use in the 1920s, Sydney big stores were selling almost every variety of manufactured goods.

The managers of Sydney's big

stores, with the aid of advertisers and sales experts, began deliberately to cultivate a mass market after 1905. During the next twenty years they increasingly adopted, refined and articulated a theory of marketing that embraced window dressing, interior displays, advertising, and store promotions.

The dark and cluttered interiors of the nineteenth century emporium changed, at the insistence of the new store design experts of the 1920s, into open and brightly-lit floors in which dividing walls were removed to give the customer the impression of limitless space. When David Jones' Elizabeth Street store was opened in 1927 newspapers praised its 'palatial, lofty ceilings, broad aisles (and) glass display fixtures, making possible the inspection of almost every article.'

Retailers used glass display cases and tables instead of drawers and shelves — the aim being to bring the stock out where the customer could see, touch and be tempted. As one magistrate disturbed by an apparent increase in shoplifting grumbled in 1929, 'it is scarcely possible to walk through a shop without dragging something off a table.'

A major theme in the embryonic marketing theory of the 1920s was the need to sell not the goods themselves, but the 'sentiments' attached to them. Retailers were advised by sales experts to sell youth not hats, cleanliness not soap, fashion not gowns, social status not pianos. Or, as Berlie's Advertising Director advised his colleagues also in 1929, 'Never mind about the commodity. 'Sell ideas.'

Berlie's corset pageants of the late 1920s show commodity aesthetics in action. 'Radiant Woman at Beauty's Shrine', for example, placed live models wearing corsets in moonlit gardens of dream, enchanted caves and magic mirrors in which modern womanhood received the 'homage of living jewels in gorgeous raiment.' Physically uncomfortable and restrictive garments, corsets were aesthetically packaged as modernity, beauty and femininity.

Women flocked to these and other live modelling presentations in

Sydney's department stores. They enjoyed the free show — frequently staged during lunchtimes so that working women could attend — as a source of fashion information, aesthetic spectacle and simple entertainment. Some, no doubt, bought the goods. But the presentations also, as Haug suggests, played on and substantially fulfilled women's desire for sensual gratification.

There were perhaps other ways in which women selectively appropriated elements of commodity aesthetics for their own purposes. One working woman told a government inquiry into the cost of living in 1918 that she chose to pay more for a camisole trimmed with lace because only a nun would wear plain underclothes. Others clearly enjoyed the rich carpets of the ladies' showroom, the comfort of the lounges provided for them and the fun of trying on a number of hats with no intention of buying.

Half a dozen pearl buttons, an artificial flower or a few inches of pretty ribbon satisfied many women's desire for beauty and pleasure without making them either the dupes of capital or agents of resistance. They enjoyed the sensations of being in the store, viewed with pleasurable anticipation the prospect of ownership, and appreciated the aesthetic lures deliberately placed in their path by retailers and advertisers.

The decision to buy (and how much to buy) depended on a separate set of material conditions and a different mental process. To extend Haug's theory, we could say that these consumers removed and appropriated the aesthetic wrapping of commodities without necessity buying — literally or metaphorically — the goods.

Haug's critique of 'commodity aesthetics', then, helps us to escape the consumer as victim/agent dichotomy. But it does little to look behind the sexual asymmetry in consumption: that is behind the fact that historically consumers have been predominantly female, and that retailers have since at least the late

nineteenth century been aware of that fact.

If mass marketing has manipulated and met the sensual needs of the consumer, then I would suggest it has done so in a social and historical context in which sensuality has been by definition feminine. Retailers and their allies have constructed their marketing theories around a common perception of women as more irrational, seducible and implusive than men.

Judith Williamson suggests that 'the point about consumerism is that people are getting something out of it — but something which the left must be able to offer in a different form'. If the left is to tackle seriously and appropriate the politics of consumerism, then it must do so not only by providing an alternative

source of control and security but also by recognising that women might be getting something different out of it than men.

NOTES:

1. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions. The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986).

2. W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics. Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, translated by Robert Bock (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

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French Lessons

Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* was a landmark in the feminist movement. It told of the lives of a generation of modern women, and in doing so literally changed the lives of many of the women who read it. Since then, Marilyn French has written *The Bleeding Heart*, *Beyond Power* and, most recently, *Her Mother's Daughter*, published on the tenth anniversary of *The Women's Room*. Nicci Gerrard talked to her about her books and beliefs.

It is now ten years since *The Women's Room* was published. Women who shied away from the word feminism read it and their lives were transformed. Can you say, now, why it had such a powerful effect?

We do not realise the degree to which we are censored in our public speech. *The Women's Room* spelt the truth about how a lot of women felt. I knew because I'd listened to them. I simply told the truth and women knew it wasn't a truth coming to them from outside but a truth they had known and felt and never before

seen reflected in their culture. When they did see it they recognised it instantly and realised that they were not alone and the reason that they were unhappy was not because they were neurotic or bad — but that this was a cultural fact of what happens to women. And it empowered them. Possession of the truth is always empowering. *The Women's Room* legitimated women's work and women's lives in a way that nothing else had done.

The novel was also so important because it was both radical and deliberately popular, which is a difficult tightrope to walk. Did you consciously choose this form?

Very much so. It was one of the reasons that it was so hard to write — the entire problem lay in tying in the right voice. I worked on it for many years. I worked on many versions, and then I thought of splitting the central consciousness between the enlightened and the unenlightened woman. I was very aware of having to translate the