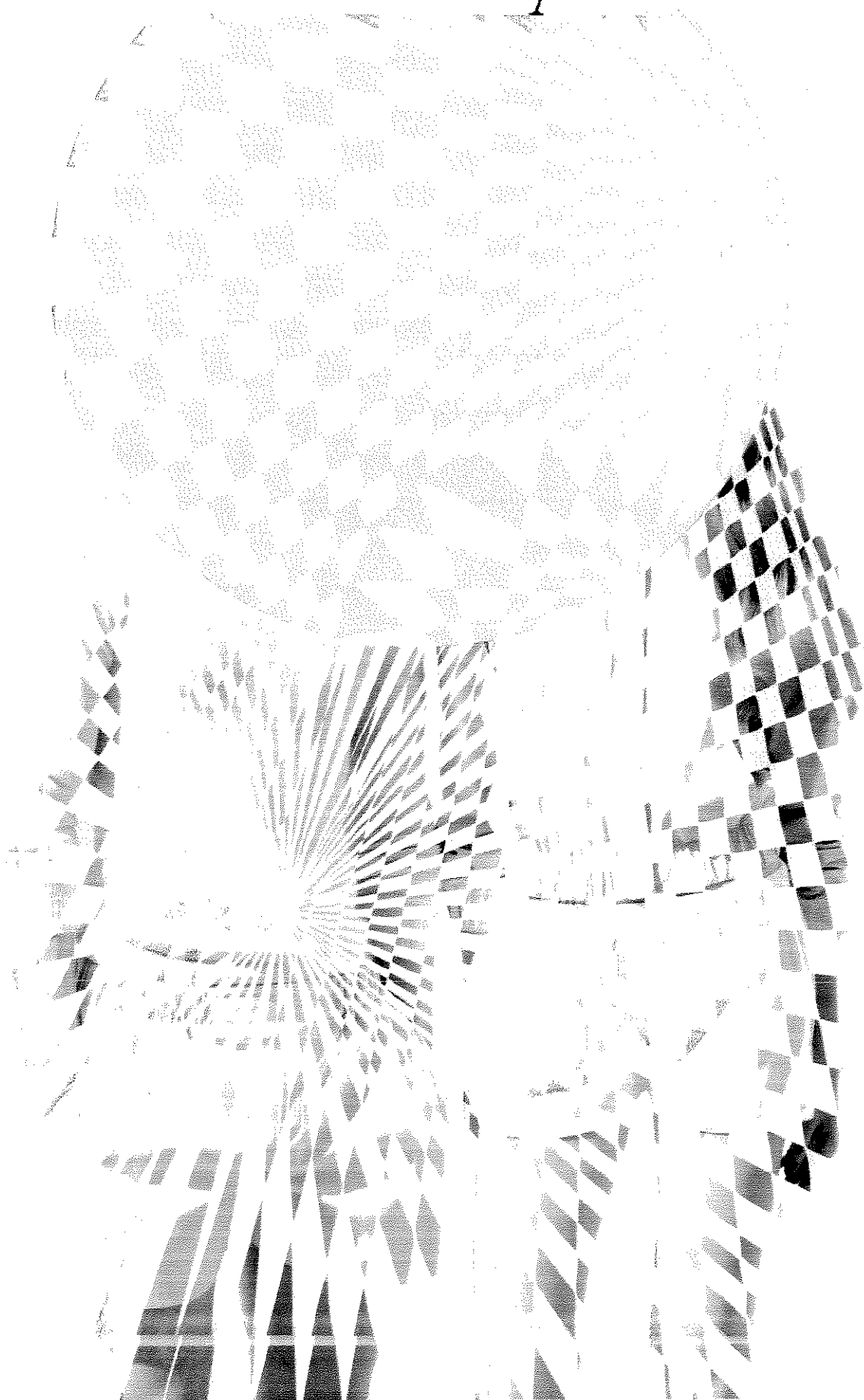


stimulus → *respond*



From democracy to demigod, the dual faces of luxury are unmasked.

The Evolution of Luxury: Massclusivity and Uber-Luxe
Words by Veronica Manlow

Luxury as an idea, and in its material existence, has split into two poles along the spectrum of the hyperreal: "new luxury" which is mass/democratized and uber or premium luxury that is not. Both offer a commodified spin on notions of authenticity, one to the masses the other only to the wealthiest. Today, luxury resides within an all-engulfing turbo-capitalist system of consumption. Developing countries cycle from "massclusivity" up through premium luxury at an accelerated pace. In hypermodern consumer-oriented society this need to satisfy oneself and to set oneself apart through status goods has reached unprecedented levels. The more luxury becomes accessible the greater the desire to raise the bar and to attain new levels of distinction, while simultaneously lowering it to expand its domain.

Berry (1994) defines luxury as widely desired and in the category of things that meet basic needs related to physical satisfaction: sustenance, shelter, clothing and leisure. Luxury, in the sense that Veblen (1899/1994) and later Bourdieu (1984) used it, is first and foremost about class and social status, distinction and distancing. Conspicuous or understated, possessing luxury items displays wealth, privilege, taste and cultural capital.

The existence of luxury pointed to the inevitable order of things, to the existence of fixed binary oppositions. At various points in history it served to differentiate sacred from secular, aristocrat from bourgeois, rich from poor. Custom, tradition, one's relation to production, and sumptuary laws served to maintain boundaries.

At the heart of a democratization of luxury are two processes: the demoralization of luxury - the progressive move from Stoic ideals favoring a rejection of desire and its pursuit in favor of vigilance and discipline to a vindication of commerce in modernity, decoupling luxury not only from negative associations but its traditional link to the highest stratum of society (Berry 1994); and the disengagement of fundamental organizing principles of society - production and affiliated systems of stratification resulting in a new social order based on simulation (Baudrillard 1993).

Luxury has been stripped of political and moral content. Luxury is no longer by definition out of

reach for the average consumer, rather it is normal to desire luxury. No longer grounded in a system of production, and in a hierarchical class system, material signs of dominance are liberated. In the middle of the 19th century the 'shopping experience' is transformed and pleasure in consumption begins to be extended to the middle classes and beyond. The world of art and architecture that in the past served to elevate humanity because of associations with the sacred, with high culture and intellectual life, are pressed into the service of commerce that before occupied the lower rung of society. While the "court aristocracy made the whole of life a continuous spectacle" (Bourdieu 1984: 55) the new religion of triumphant capitalism introduced an aesthetic logic of beauty, theatricality, and luxury to what before was the cold logic of commerce. Marketing, the production of images and experiences, is infused in products and in stores which become palaces of desire presenting consumers with magnificent architecture, display windows, interior décor, display of merchandise, and spectacle.

In today's hypermodern context there is a global multiplication of luxury flagship stores, each one competing to be grander. Places of sale are transformed through their connection to contemporary art, architecture and design. The work of contemporary artists is showcased and presented, fashion shows are projected on huge screens, music plays in a mélange of high and pop culture that creates a fun shopping environment. These stores, should they represent the larger brands and conglomerates (e.g. Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Armani, Burberry), become sites of a total branded experience for a diverse public who find goods at accessible prices (Lipovetsky and Manlow, 2009). While these stores seek a wider audience they present in microcosm the binary logic of luxury: in the front of stores are entry-level goods - sunglasses, small leather goods (such as key chains), perfume, cosmetics and costume jewelry. As one progresses through the store, displays of various collections are found, as are spaces for private shopping.

Democratization of luxury forces a binary configuration. When signs are diffused widely and lose their meaning there is a counter-reaction.

“The Cartier lighter in 1968 finds its full expression in cheap Pierre Cardin pens and nail clippers.”

The Cartier lighter in 1968 finds its full expression in cheap Pierre Cardin pens and nail clippers. Lagerfeld designs for H&M. In a process of reification products are taken out of their original context of fine craftsmanship and are stripped down to logos and branded markers. New luxury goods encompass such mundane categories as beer, pet food, and household products. The existence of mass luxury spanning high end brands and basic ones that tout themselves as luxury, create a sense of confusion and a need not only for an elite pole with a return to some measure of authenticity, but for exaggerated forms of luxury that are clearly and decisively set apart from all other appropriated and/or illegitimate forms. A former affiliation with the “eternal” or at least the “enduring” has moved in the direction of luxury linked to the ephemeral world of fashion and trends, whether on the high or low end of the spectrum.

Status and experience seekers, at both ends of this spectrum, are engaged in a race to acquire markers of distinction: a counterfeit Louis Vuitton purse, a Coach keychain, or the most expensive watch in the world, a 25 million dollar diamond encrusted Chopard timepiece. The uber luxe consumer is in no way spared from simulation. Chad Rogers who sells some of the most expensive homes in the world defines uber luxury in real estate: “Wait a sec, I thought I was in Beverly Hills, but everything I am seeing tells me that I’m in the South of France.” Indeed one might wake up in the South of France. One can vacation for a lifetime, circling the world (from which one has managed to escape) every 2 or 3 years on the Utopia, which in 2013 offers residents the possibility of visits to the most important cultural and sporting events: the Cannes Film Festival, the Grand Prix, the Olympics, the World Cup.

Marat’s dire quote on luxury offers pause: “*En amollissant et en corrompant les peuples, le luxe les soumet sans résistance aux volontés d’un maître impérieux, et les force de payer du sacrifice de leur liberté le repos et les plaisirs dont il les laisse jouir.*” Today it is the simulation of luxury: the trinket, a pair of sunglasses or a counterfeit Louis Vuitton purse to which people sacrifice freedom. In a world where signs and codes proliferate, and perhaps the real substance of luxury is rather shallow, hollow, illusory

and superficial, even at the highest levels, how can one resist invisible chains that cleverly hide an economic logic which leads one to experience self-determination and indeed resistance though things? Activists in green, ecological, voluntary simplicity and other movements call for a “remoralization.” One plunges in or resists, that resistance being absorbed and reappropriated in an infinite process of invention of new branding models: eco-luxe, sustainable luxury, etc ...

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