

6 The missing streetcar named desire

Russell W. Belk, Güliz Ger, and Søren Askegaard

I don't want realism, I want magic.
(Blanch Dubois
in *A Streetcar Named Desire*)

*Whatever lifts the body up—muscles,
sinews, joints; whatever wrestles against
gravity itself—the raised step, the lifted arm—
these form the body's hope. But also hunger,*

*selfishness, desire, all that leads us
to put one foot in front of the other,
these too form the body's hope, whatever
combats that urge to lie down—greed,*

*anger, lust—these feelings keep us going,
while the imagination sketches pictures
of the desired future, how we will look
in that new hat, how we will feel*

*with a belly full of cherries: anything
that shoves us from this moment to the next,
motivation like a flight of stairs, and hope
like a push at the top, not dissatisfaction*

but eagerness to plunge into the next second
(Stephen Dobyns,
The Body's Hope, 1990)

Desire: introductory remarks

Desire has been a taboo word in consumer research. Two legacies of the economic and psychological parentage of the field of consumer research are its slowly disappearing cognitive information processing bias and its rationalization of consumer choice as a process of need fulfillment. The

homeostatic tension-reducing model of consumer motivation that underlies this orientation has occasionally been challenged by pleas to consider hedonic pleasure seeking, variety seeking, or experiential consumption. But even in these cases it is more the object of needs rather than the nature of the motivational process itself that is questioned. In order to begin to envision an alternative to the needs paradigm, consider the descriptors used to characterize states of desire. We say in English that we burn and are aflame with desire; we are pierced by or riddled with desire; we are sick or ache with desire; we are tortured, tormented, and racked by desire; we are possessed, seized, ravished, and overcome by desire; we are mad, crazy, insane, giddy, blinded, or delirious with desire; we are enraptured, enchanted, suffused, and enveloped by desire; our desire is fierce, hot, intense, passionate, incandescent, and irresistible; and we pine, languish, waste away, or die of unfulfilled desire. Try substituting need or want in any of these metaphors and the distinction becomes immediately apparent. Needs are anticipated, controlled, denied, postponed, prioritized, planned for, addressed, satisfied, fulfilled, and gratified through logical instrumental processes. Desires, on the other hand, are overpowering; something we give in to; something that takes control of us and totally dominates our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Desire awakens, seizes, teases, titillates, and arouses. We battle, resist, and struggle with, or succumb, surrender, and indulge our desires. Passionate potential consumers are consumed by desire.

The difference between needs and desires is not simply their intensity or emotionality, but their basic perceived nature. Need is perceived to originate internally; desire externally. Needs push, desires pull. Needs offer a rational explanation of behavior (I bought it because I need it); desires do not. In a culture of abundance we often debate whether we *really* need something, but when we desire something we feel its unequivocal lure. While we might in retrospect question *how* we could have so strongly desired some, now inconsequential, object, we do not question *whether* we desired it. Desire is not an evolution of physical need as Elliott (1997) maintains, but is a categorically and qualitatively different phenomenon.

This is not at all to say that desires are not as compelling as needs; they are usually far more so. The lure of the desired object may cause us to suppress needs in order to pursue it, often rationalizing that we really need what we recognize as an irresistible desire. Desires are specific wishes inflamed by imagination, fantasy, and a longing for transcendent pleasure (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1996, 1997). Even though they are perceived to originate externally in the compelling object, the real locus of desire is the imagination of what it would be like if only we could have the desired object. Advertising, packaging, display, media representations, conversations, and the sight of certain others possessing an object help to fuel these fantasies, but desire exists only within the person or group who participates in creating, nurturing, and pursuing these illusions. No object

– whether a product, person, activity, or place – is inherently desirable. It may or may not be inherently pleasurable, but this does not make it an object of desire. We may even come to desire what is inherently painful as do sadists and masochists. More broadly we may act against our better judgment because of a strong contrary desire – what Aristotle termed *Akrasia* (Stocker 1986). Consider Klein's description of cigarette smoking:

. . . cigarette smoking defies the economy of what Freud calls the pleasure principle. According to that principle, which interprets pleasure on the model of need, the satisfaction of a desire results in the elimination of the desire, the way an infant's demand for milk and desire for the breast are perfectly gratified by the mother's nursing. Cigarettes, however defy that economy of pleasure: they do not satisfy desire, they exasperate it. The more one yields to the excitation of smoking, the more deliciously, voluptuously, cruelly, and sweetly it awakens desire – it inflames what it presumes to extinguish . . . filling a lack hollows out an even greater lack that demands even more urgently to be filled

(Klein 1993: 43, 45)

Even in these cases, however, we cling to the hope that the object will bring sublime transcendent pleasure. Desire is thus very much a social and personal construction. But just as much as we construct desire, desire constructs us. We are what we desire. Sartre (1956) observed that feeling an absence of being, we come to desire states of having and doing that we believe will construct and manifest our being.

Desire and consumption

The Latin *desiderium* meant the grief for the absence or loss of a person or thing. The verb form, *desiderare* is to desire, to long for. This sense of longing was associated with the stars: a yearning for the unreachable stars. *Sidus* means "star" and the verb *desideris* refers to "expecting from the stars." The verb "consider" is closely allied to desire: *con-siderare* translates "to look closely at something, to contemplate," and originally it meant "to observe the stars."

To enter the realm of desire cannot help but lead us into a relationship to what is all at once brilliant, attractive, and out of reach . . . Desire introduces us to an impossible situation – impossible of absolute fulfillment.

(Jager 1989: 145–6)

With that distance of the stars, appetite (from *appetere* = to seek for, to strive after) or desire does not refer to physical fullness or emptiness and thus satisfaction is not the physical noticing of emptiness or fullness, not having our so-called "needs" filled. Simmel's views are consistent with Jager's. Simmel considers the distance between the subject and object to represent

desire. He says, "we desire objects only if they are not immediately given to us for our use and enjoyment; that is to the extent that they resist our desire" (Simmel 1978 [1900]: 66).

Desire, in the ordinary and colloquial sense of the word, refers to a strong longing, to something that is strongly wanted or, as a verb, to the process of wanting something strongly. Its critical relevance to consumer behavior seems obvious. But in conceptualizations of consumer behavior similar phenomena are often presented as needs or "mere wants," and subsumed under psychological motivation models, such as the motivational hierarchy of Maslow (1954). Within this model various needs are like empty tanks to be filled sequentially; only when a more basic category of needs is fulfilled do we proceed the next higher-order need category. But such an approach tones down and hides the passion that we experience in connection with certain consumption activities. It also countenances the predominance of rational decision-making models within consumer research – only challenged within the last decade or so by alternative conceptualizations of the consumer's relationship with products and services, such as those of the extended self (Belk 1988), the sacred and profane (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), postmodernism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), symbolic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook 1981), hedonic consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), consumer mythology (Levy 1981), the cultural perspective (Sherry 1986), and existential phenomenology (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). By investigating consumer desires, consumer research may make yet another step in the direction of connecting feelings and personal experiences of the most passionate kind with the realm of consumption.

The saying that "everything good is either forbidden or fattening" bears witness to the fundamental link between desire, on the one hand, and sex(ual transgression) and eating, on the other. Metaphors from these fundamental domains of human existence point to the strong passions – "desires" – and represent an attempt to compare feelings of consumer desire to yearning for other delicious and arousing objects. Besides sex and eating, the other domains of passionate discourse commonly invoked by consumers in discussing their desires are addictive craving for drugs and transcendent religious passion (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1996). The use of such metaphors expresses the profound longing that characterizes desire by invoking a transfer of deep passions from the realms of our most intense emotions. Of these various metaphors we believe that sexual desire is most similar to consumer desire because the underlying state of arousal in both cases is positive rather than negative. As Scruton says of sexual desire:

To see the orgasm as the aim of desire is as misguided as to see the exultation experienced by a player upon scoring a goal as the aim of football, rather than as a pleasurable offshoot of the aim fulfilled.

(Scruton 1986: 91)

So it is with consumer desire in which purchase and use of the desired object is, at its best, only a pleasurable offshoot of the pursuit of desire. Consumer desire is also similar to sex in that it is more dependent on the mind and susceptible to fantasy than is the case with other metaphoric comparisons involving hunger and addiction. Furthermore, like sex at its best, consumer desire is not merely a person–thing relationship, but rather a person–person relationship. The material objects of consumer desires symbolically mediate or represent interpersonal relationships.

In addition to craving desire itself, we desire to be desired by certain others. This is Hegel's dialectics of desire:

The end point of desire is not . . . the sensuous object – that is only a means – but the unity of the I with itself. Self-consciousness is desire, but what it desires . . . is itself: it desires its own desire. And that is why it will be able to attain itself only through finding another desire, another self-consciousness . . . Desire seeks itself in the other: man desires recognition from man.

(Hyppolite 1996: 71)

Miller (1998) argues that normative sociability and relationships are objectified through consumption. Consumption is an expression of love and other relationships. It is a search for a relationship with the beloved, and entails devotion to the beloved. Conceptualizing shopping as a devotional rite, an act of sacrifice, he states that “What the shopper desires above all is for others to want and to appreciate what she brings” (Miller 1998: 149). Objects of desire come to matter as means for constituting people that matter. Consumption, like kinship, can objectify individualism and status competition as well as normative sociability, social relations, and commitment to family.

Desire and the psychoanalytic legacy

Desire has already for some time been a central focus in a number of fields without having had much impact on marketing and consumer research. Postmodernist, poststructuralist, feminist, and Marxist theorists across a wide array of social sciences and humanities have adopted an agenda in which deconstructing consumer desire plays a prominent role (see Hutcheon 1989 and Miller 1995). A brief review of some of these perspectives is a good starting point for envisioning a consumer behavior in which need fulfillment is supplanted by the pursuit of desires.

To the neo-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1970), desire is a feeling of lacking something that is really a repressed and unconscious longing for the Other (our mothers with whom we once were/believed ourselves to be one) who is needed to take possession of the Self.

There is a need in the organism ‘experienced’ as an unpleasant tension, and this tension/need simply disappears when it is satisfied. . . . He hallucinates the satisfaction of his wish/desire. Desire . . . [is] the psychic impulse which is bound to a memory image of satisfaction and which thus orients the infant organism’s quest to reestablish the situation of the original satisfaction.

(Ewens 1987: 305)

What Freud calls “wish,” Lacan calls “desire” (Ewens 1987; Richardson 1987; Stewart 1986). In Freud’s view, desire is an unconscious structure; for Lacan, the lost object is the mother as imaginary fullness (Richardson 1987). As Lacan explains:

Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction [the infant’s need for milk], nor the [underlying] demand for [mother’s] love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second.

(Lacan 1977: 287)

This lack or “want-to-be” is the nature of desire. The subject desires to restore the unity (Richardson 1987). The self that is lacking the object wants union with the object. But not knowing this, the self turns to imaginary fantasies as constructions of concealment. According to Lacan, when the infant begins to speak, a third dimension is introduced, the “symbolic order,” and there is a rupture of the bipolar relationship with its imagined world (Richardson 1987). The symbolic realm of language transforms the fantasizing person into a person verbalizing his/her desires, thus constituting the subject.

Accordingly, Lacan insists that the “desire of man is desire of the Other,” in a double sense: the subject desires to be the *desired* of the Other (at first mother), the object of the Other’s desire; and the desire of the subject is to be the *desire* of the Other, insofar as the Other is the subject of the unconscious (Richardson 1987). In this sense, all consumer desire for things can be seen as a symbolic and ultimately ineffective attempt to complete the self by unconsciously signifying the Other (Leather 1983). To Lacan we are our desire: “desire is the metonymy of our being” (Lacan 1992: 321). But the self can only be known and completed through the Other. For Lacan, as for Freud, sexual desire is not simply a metaphor for other forms of desire, the libido, or the striving for *jouissance*, is the underlying source of all desire. Lacan sees Freud’s pleasure principle as being allied with immediate and emotional primary process thinking while the reality principle instead involves more cognitive and constrained secondary process thinking (Lacan 1992). Freud’s pleasure principle proves inadequate: “Desire does not subside with seeming satiation. Each orgasmic encounter merely whets the appetite in self-perpetuity. Memory as well as deliciousness of pleasure’s ache gnaw at us, making it impossible to rest”

(Kakar and Ross 1987: 212). Although the *jouissance* sought is ultimately an Oedipal reunion with the mother, this unconscious motivation is repressed. We feel only an ill-defined lack resulting in displaced desires. What primary process thinking construes as a strongly felt, if vague, desire, secondary process thinking transforms into a rationalized need. Since it is impossible to obtain and maintain a state of *jouissance* in this way, all our striving to fill the empty feeling of lack is bound to fail. We pursue fantasies of fulfillment by sublimation and repetitive desire-pursuing rituals that cannot succeed. Thus, "we become affixed to repetitions rather than to satisfactions" (Ragland 1995: 152).

One attack on Lacan's extension of Freud's ideas is that it focuses on men as the subjects of desire and on women as the objects of desire (e.g. Doane 1987; Haskell 1999). Women's unspoken lack is the phallus (Silverman 1983). This does not mean that Lacan's conception leaves no room for female desire, but women are seen as desiring consumer goods in order to further turn themselves into objects of male desire. Men are seen to act and women to react in this view (Haskell 1999). Recent feminist criticism has, perhaps somewhat ironically, been directed at recasting women as agentic desiring subjects (e.g. Cixous and Clément 1986; Irigaray 1985; Kristeva 1984). The irony here is that women have long been castigated for being overly susceptible to consumer temptation and desire (e.g. Berry 1994).

Deleuze and Guattari (1972) attack Lacan's principle that desire is felt as a lack. They argue that desire is not a lack of something deep inside us, but a productive force. The underlying goal that our desire seeks to produce is the subject – the self of the person who experiences desire. By this it is not meant that what we desire defines who we are, but rather that the fact that we desire concrete things defines our being. The delusion is that when our desire focuses on a fantasy that we have been convinced we cannot do without, we are falsely made to fear a lack of something essential. The key metaphoric device that Deleuze and Guattari use to characterize desire as a productive process is that of the machine. We are desiring-machines they tell us. Just as "the breast is a machine that produces milk, and the mouth is a machine coupled to it" (1972: 7), the industry of capitalism is a machine that produces goods and the consumer is a machine that produces desire for these goods. As Bock (1994) points out, however, the mechanistic reductionism of viewing consumers as desiring-machines is fundamentally problematic. Computers, robots, or other machines cannot discuss meanings, create religious rituals, yearn for love, or desire anything. They lack abilities to feel, to hope, and to pursue the transcendent. On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari correctly discern that "desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject" (1972: 34). Coupled with the insight that desire keeps on producing itself, this means that desire keeps on attempting to produce the subject – our self. But since in order to do

this there must be new things to desire, the consumer self that is produced is constantly changing as well as constantly eluding us.

Desire, need, and culture

Desires do not exist in a social vacuum however. We lack the self-knowledge and creativity to conjure our desires by ourselves alone. Nor will society condone or allow our pursuit of any peculiar desire. At the same time, we recognize that as consumers we are not mere pawns or machines that can be made to desire anything. Girard (1987) argues that desire is mimetic. We desire things because others desire them. Without other possibilities of knowing what we want, others become our models as we become their rivals. What is seen to be at stake in mimetic desire is prestige (Girard 1987). Mimetic desire is, then, a fundamental way of relating to the Other who becomes simultaneously a model and an obstacle.

The concept of desire, involving the passion with which we engage in many consumption activities, may be used to cast new light on the cultural embeddedness of our production and consumption system. Social philosophy, under the guidance of economics, has been concerned with freeing human societies from the constant fight to fulfill the needs of society. But the concept of need is not as illuminating as the concept of desire to explain the specific features of human society. According to Radkowski (1980), we can distinguish between desire, in the general sense, the human *ontological imagination*, and desires in their concrete expressions, experienced desire. The basis for the ontological imagination is the *power of otherness*, the fact that the human species can only perceive the reality of the world through the interpretation and *signification* attached to it – what Bouchet (1988) called "filling the void." This "power of Otherness" expresses the ability to see things not as they are ontologically (the extra-human world that Radkowski calls *the Same* because it only has one form of existence and cannot be otherwise), but rather as they can or could be: the ability and will to change natural objects into tools and other consumption objects, to form landscapes and habitat, to create a personal future by acting with a long-term perspective, to imagine life without illness and misery, to anticipate life after death, to communicate with the Gods, to form mythologies. Thus the power of otherness is also the power of *poesis*, of poetry, of human creation (Radkowski 1980).

The concept of need is hereby degraded to a secondary role in the explanation of cultures, in opposition to the axiom that all societies are (economically) organized in order to fulfill their needs. The necessary is always decided from above, on the basis of the surplus, never from below on the basis of survival (Baudrillard 1972). "Need," from one perspective, might be considered something that belongs to the realm of "the Same" (biophysical survival conditions) and as such would tell us very little about societies. When we import need in this sense to the social world we are

mixing up logics and we imply "the Same" where, in fact, the power of Otherness rules. Alternatively "need" might be considered as a term that refers to domesticated desire, i.e. desires that have become socially instituted as necessities and placed in a social hierarchy. Need, in this sense, would refer to a set of norms attached to a system of social roles and not to a necessity that implies itself independently from culture. In contrast to such static needs, "desire always plays the mimetic game" (Radkowski 1989: 201). This mimesis helps to show how changes in society can create different desires. For example, in a Girardian triangulation of desire, the rarity of certain objects coupled with social stratification leads to competition, just as this competition in turn leads to the social construction and creation of rarity and scarcity.

As Girard (1987) specifies, the imagined pleasure of possessing an object depends upon the existence of others who desire it. It is this condition, "and not any intrinsic qualities of the object or even its context of origin, [that] determines its fetishistic value" (Stewart 1984: 163-4). The price of objects tells little about the objects and much about our collective appraisal of their worth as objects of desire. Colloquial terms evoke the existence of this domesticated desire in society. The terms *utilitarian*, *necessity* (obviously a pretended necessity since necessities strictly speaking are always biological, never cultural), *commodity* (indicating a so-called use and exchange value) or even *interesting*, *beautiful*, *good*, and *truthful* are all reflections of institutionalizations of desire. All are to a certain degree regarded as needs in our society, and suggest the basic cleavage between economic material philosophy and idealistic philosophy in our relative ranking of importance of these needs.

Desire, transgression, and control

There is another important sense in which desires are a social phenomenon rather than an individual phenomenon. Because desire is such a powerful emotional condition and in opposition to the socially desirable qualities of reason and rationality, it is also feared by many. Because the fervor of desire seems to be self-focused, and the longing most recognized is for things culturally defined as luxuries, desire is often regarded, especially in the West, as being a sinful transgression. While the transgression in desire is generally framed as sin and guilt – especially in Western cultures, it can also be framed as a matter of imbalance and loss of control – especially in Eastern cultures (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1997). Giving in to desire is seen as a loss of control – another socially valued quality. Attempts to control the exercise of desire take many forms at both an individual level (e.g. diets, exercise, savings) and societal levels (e.g. prohibition, drug laws, pornography laws). One argument against such controls, especially at the societal level, is that forbidden fruit seems much sweeter. That is, prohibiting something may make it all the more desirable. Bataille (1967 [1949]) is

foremost among those who argue that transgression is a primary source of dangerous pleasure. The danger of desire emerges in battles between control and indulgence or rationality and animality. In Freudian terms, this is the battle between the id and the pleasure principle versus the ego and the reality principle. In terms of the sacred and profane, this tension is kratophany (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Danger, whether felt in the form of guilt, sin, imbalance or loss of control, is thus a constitutive aspect of desire.

Desiring something unusual, extraordinary, beyond the normal, involves a desire to experience exciting differences and uncertainties. Pleasure comes from breaking taboos, engaging in the exotic, and satisfying the suppressed desire for disorder. The transgressive nature of desire is the desire to go beyond order – to break the prevailing boundaries (Bataille 1967 [1949]). The possibility of transgression is provided by the order, as in the object of temptation, the forbidden fruit, which is there to satisfy the order (Falk 1994). Thus, there is no lack in terms of needs, but a lack in terms of desire. The order or the boundary defines the object of desire. The forbidden element creates and articulates the lack. Hence, the pleasure is not only opposed by pain, but also by order, work, and duty (see also Mercer 1983). The political and cultural definition of desirability also involves what constitutes and is experienced as order and disorder.

Pursuing (apparently) "selfish" desires was also historically feared as opposing the social good. However, in the West, starting in the eighteenth century with Bernard Mandeville (1970 [1714]) and Adam Smith (1970 [1776]), selfishness in pursuit of desires began to be recast as potentially good. Not coincidentally, it was at about this time that Campbell detects a rise of contemporary imaginative hedonism which regards desire as "a state of enjoyable discomfort and . . . wanting rather than having is the main focus of pleasure-seeking" (1988: 86). Whether desire is more or less favorably evaluated at a specific time and place, it is accompanied by the concern that it is dangerous and must be controlled for the sake of the individual, social order, and the future of the planet. If danger and social order are so critical to the construction of desire, what is considered to be dangerous and disorderly in different cultures is key to the understanding of the social construction of desire.

Coping with desire in Western and Eastern moral philosophy

What is deemed desirable, what is pleasurable, is politically and historically defined. The appetite for consumer goods involves politics of the formation of pleasure (Jameson 1983), or definitions and judgments of desirability, with different implications for man and woman, for less versus more affluent societies and individuals, and for marketers and designers versus consumers. Desire, as well as the societal control or sanction of desire, differ over historic periods as well as cultures. Eastern and Western

religious and philosophical histories shape the imagination about desires as well as objects of desire. All major world religions preach that desires should be controlled or given up. However, Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Islam, in spite of the fact that they exist in more ascetic versions as well, also demonstrate a certain acceptance of desires. This is in contrast to the condemning Christian approach to desire predominant in the West.

As hinted above, a key reason that desire has been overlooked is that it is too close to the "lower order" of the body and too distant from the "higher order" of the mind which has been deemed supreme, at least since the Enlightenment tore the two asunder. But the cause of the exclusion of desire goes farther back in Western history than the Enlightenment. Sahlin (1996) points to the Judeo-Christian concept of original sin and the Fall as being the reason we seem ashamed of our desires. The majority of the seven deadly sins of medieval Christianity have their basis in bodily desires. The program of Christianity can be seen as one of attempting to control and inhibit the presumably destructive effects of enacting these desires (Foucault 1985). This is accomplished both socially (via the external control of behavioral norms) and especially psychologically (via internalized self-control). While the Christian idea of asceticism has foundations in ancient Greek and Roman philosophies (Synott 1993), Christianity attached the notion of sinfulness to giving in to our bodily desires. Feelings of sin and guilt provide internal inhibitions and facilitate self-control of our inclinations to pursue what is pleasurable.

While he was primarily concerned with sexual desire, Foucault (1985) reveals the social processes of control whereby society inhibits the range and expression of our desires. This is done in such a way, however, that we become our own inhibitors. Desire and self-control are notions of Western culture, notions that produce us in their own image as desiring subjects (Alasuutari 1992). Self-control or restraint is made a virtue and we are made to feel noble and civilized by exercising it. Such control was especially evident in the Victorian era and later suppression of women's desires through the valorization of "purity" (Freedman 1987). What Foucault does with sexual desire, Berry (1994) does with more general desires for luxuries. Berry shows how societies at least from ancient Greek City States until the late eighteenth century constructed the quest for luxuries as decadent, feminine, and debilitating. Where we differ with Berry is in his stipulation that luxuries are not objects of fervent desire, but rather objects that, while they would be nice to have, we can do without. Berry nevertheless provides an insightful analysis of the social control of the exercise of desires, whether through sumptuary laws, luxury taxes, moral condemnation, or welfare restrictions of food stamp purchases to "necessities."

One societal basis for the condemnation of freely exercised desires is the charge that such indulgence is animalistic and gives in to lower-order feelings rather than higher-order thought (Berry 1994; Falk 1994).

However, Christian history left space for desire during carnivals, festivals, and holidays. Traditionally institutionalized rituals of inversion giving temporary free reign to normally taboo desires included medieval fairs, carnivals, and liminal holiday periods like contemporary Mardi Gras (Bahktin 1968). While hedonism was ostensibly against European morals, society also affirmed hedonism in other ways (Corbin 1995). Sensory hedonism became "civilized": placing more importance on sight and hearing (the "noble and social" senses) than the senses of proximity, of touch, taste and smell, which govern in depth the affective mechanisms. The discourse on the senses helped to establish and mark social order. Touch was a sign of the general populace's closeness to nature, to the animal, and taste and smell were the senses of survival; whereas among the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, seduction required distance and the use of the senses (sight and hearing) required an assumed delicacy. Moreover, since the Enlightenment, the quest for satisfaction has become a more and more private quest, especially in the West. That is, Western consumers seek to define their desires without recourse to any collective cosmology or teleology. With the aid of psychoanalysis (also a very individualistic tool) they seek to find themselves "in the logic of childhood, dreams, and desires" (Soper 1990: 83).

Eastern religions that tell us we must overcome desire merely underline the seductive power of our desires and the still stronger power of our desire for desire. In various forms of both Hinduism and Islam, there is a simultaneity of the religious and the erotic or passionate, the body and the mind. In their more mystic forms, desire is seen to be an attachment that prevents freedom and joy if one remains attached to it and cannot move on. But desire, or pleasure, is not condemned as evil. There is also a situationalism in the Eastern sanction of desire: in some situations, for some men, some pleasures can be appropriate.

Hinduism accepts that all human beings have desires. It acknowledges four categories of essential aims that motivate individuals as they go through stages of life (Littleton 1996; Smith 1958): *dharma* (virtuous fulfillment of responsibilities, duty to community), *artha* (success, wealth), *kama* (pleasure), and *moksha* (spiritual fulfillment, liberation, "being" with awareness and bliss, achieved by release from attachment to worldly aims). The notion is that, although the highest ideal is *moksha*, repressing *artha* and *kama* will not work – if we think we want pleasure and success we should pursue them, with prudence and fair play. Rather than suppressed, desire should be fulfilled as richly and aesthetically as possible, and with good sense, before a person can advance to *moksha*. The Bhagavadgita expresses the paradox that things are created by desire and destroyed by desire. It also shows how to resolve paradoxes: act without acting for the sake of acting and don't be committed to action (Lipner 1997). If purified by *dharma*, the fruits of desire can be enjoyed. The lesson is to pursue the fruits of desiring, but to remain moral without greed, hypocrisy, cruelty, or

arrogance, until one begins to seek eternal liberation, which is the ultimate fruit of desire. Thus, Indian cultural ethos swings from "bhogin" (the enjoyer or the sensualist) to "yogin" (the renouncer, the wise person) and the running theme is to be both at the same time (Venkatesh and Swamy 1994). In Indian thought, the body and the mind are not antagonistic to each other, the contemplation of the human form is as important as contemplating spiritual forms, and hence, there is room for joviality and desires as well as asceticism.

Islam also accepts that material things are important in life (e.g. Abdalati 1975; Smith 1958). If a person wants material things, he should work hard for such rewards, because unless he does, he cannot progress to more divine concerns. But acquisitiveness and competition must be balanced by fair play, compassion, generosity, and sharing wealth. Muslims must give *zekat* (poor due – a spiritual duty to society), by distributing 1/40 of the value of all possessions and property annually, to the have-nots. Thus, *zekat*, which purifies both the property of the owner and his/her heart from selfishness and greed, is a means of legitimation of desires for wealth and possessions. Moderation and balance are the guarantees of integrity and morality. Islam preaches unselfishness, moderation, and willpower (disciplining passion) in the pursuit of desires. Reason is seen to be supreme, but not to the exclusion of appetitive desire. As Kahlil Gibran suggests,

Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul.

If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, or else be held at a standstill in mid-seas.

For reason, ruling alone, is a force confining; and passion, unattended, is a flame that burns to its own destruction.

Therefore let your soul exalt your reason to the height of passion, that it may sing;

And let it direct your passion with reason, that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection, and like the phoenix rise above its own ashes.

(Gibran 1988: 50–1)

Hence, both Hindu and Muslim ethos seems to be one of realistic, honest, open, and ethical pursuit and enjoyment of desires, not a condemnation of desires. This is the Golden (or Harmonic) Mean once praised by Greek philosophers, but now largely lost in the West. The value of reconciliation and balancing of opposites based on the belief in the unity of the mind-body and acknowledgement of situationalism seem to underlie the Eastern acceptance of purified, moderate, and legitimate desires. Although desire is

seen to be an attachment that prevents freedom and joy, it is to be experienced richly and aesthetically in order to be able to achieve detachment or self-control and move on along the path to the joyful bliss. Desires are to be pursued without becoming enslaved by passionate attachment and integrated with moral principles such as Hindu social responsibilities and caste duties or Muslim generosity and fairness. Such a pursuit is deemed to be moral and good, until one begins to seek eternal liberation.

In contrast to the more accepting and balanced beliefs about desire in Hinduism and Islam, Western Christianity can be seen as inhibiting and suppressing. It is also more individualistic. In the market economy of the Western societies where an individual is constructed to be individualistic, legitimization rests on transforming desire into an individualistic need or a "good" desire. Desires are naturalized into needs for essential decencies, as in the appetitive metaphors of eating, addiction, and lust, or rationalized to be the same as needs based on the notions of utility or benefit. Alternatively, desires are legitimized or purified by making a distinction between good (moral or aesthetic) and bad desires. However, in other societies where the individual is defined more by his or her public self, desires must be balanced according to interpersonal shame and honor, and purified and legitimized by fairness, generosity, preferring others' desires to one's own, moderation (e.g. in Islam) or by social responsibility, being virtuous and dutiful (e.g. in Hinduism). The point is not that one view of desire is more enlightened, effective, or correct. Rather, there are cultural differences in the experience, control, release, or cultivation of desire that need to be recognized in characterizing desire and analyzing its role in consumer behavior. These cultural contexts help to shape the nature of consumer desire and how this desire affects our behavior.

Objects of desire

Having looked at how the sacred realm of religion has tried to control desire in Eastern and Western societies, we now turn the problem around, and discuss how the desire for mass marketed consumer objects has taken on sacred dimensions in modern consumer society. Sacred and profane objects serve to link the community through its "collective reality." Radkowski (1980) refers to the distinction between the economy of everyday life and the economy of the feast, a dichotomy found in all societies. The first, he says, reflects the "masked desire" of profane consumption whereas sacred consumption is linked to the feast and is expressive of "unmasked desire."

The bane of abundance is the blurring of the sacred and profane, of masked and unmasked desire. What has been called "the waste of capitalism," the advertising junk pile, "superfluous" consumption and acquisitions, and accelerated obsolescence (Radkowski 1980) is, seen from the point of view of an economy of desires, both a cause and a logical consequence of

this blurring. This process could be described as a crisis of legitimacy in the domestication of desires. If there is no longer any consensus as to which consumption goals are the most legitimate, and the society of abundance instead sets everyone free to pursue his or her own ends, this corresponds to the impetus for consumer research during the 1980s into what has been labeled "hedonic consumption" (cf. Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). On the surface, it looks like a shift in social focus from need to desire. But, seen from the perspective of the economy of desires, what is actually revealed is the initial primacy of desire, a primacy hidden by the technological and economical ideology under the more rational and reassuring concept of needs. Thus, the outburst of the interest in hedonic consumption reflects an epistemological breakthrough, hidden from its proselytes, that fundamentally challenges economic assumptions about human society. Our intent in this project has been to enlighten the key element for an alternative understanding of contemporary consumption: that of consumer desire.

Hedonism is not purely liberatory, though, as certain theorists highlighting the negative aspects of abundance have pointed out. In present consumer society, because we believe that we are what we desire (Fuery 1995) coupled with our social valorizing of self-actualization, we feel we *should* feel desire in order to be alive and like others. We attempt to fill our empty self (Cushman 1990) through mimetically aroused desire and through the auto-arousal of watching movies, reading catalogs, browsing the Internet, and window shopping. We do this because in a culture of abundance we have become alienated from our experienced desires (Alasuutari 1992) and feel only an objectless desire (Falk 1994). This endless desiring turns into a chronic deficiency (Falk 1994). The frustration of deficiency, having lost its enjoyable nature, becomes the permanent state. Falk argues that desire is constituted by the reciprocal effects of two movements of self-construction: pursuit of separateness and distinction, and pursuit of introjective self-fulfillment. The individual cannot achieve completeness, because she has to maintain her boundaries or separateness. This creates a state of lack that acts as an impetus for further pursuit of completion, identified by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) as symbolic self-completion. Desire can thus be regarded as a quest for self-completion (Kakar and Ross 1987). The pursuit of completion is the core around which desire is constituted. "Self-building is simultaneously an act of separation or an articulation of self boundaries in relation to the outside, being thus both an 'addition' (complement) and a 'subtraction' with an effect of lack" (Falk 1994: 144). Just as Zeus split humans in half so that we must forever search for our other half, we seem doomed to wander in search of our lost desires.

While desire is experienced as an emotion focused on a certain object, it is also seen as a process during which emotions change, especially with the realization of desires. The process of desire tends to be seen as a cyclic

process involving imagination, cultivation, and sacrifice. But when desire is realized, desire is quelled, if only until another focal object of longing is found. Often the joy of realizing a desire is short-lived and transforms itself into boredom or even negative feelings about the once beloved object. Disillusioned consumers seldom seem to learn however, and instead desire is commonly focused on some new desideratum. This is Campbell's (1987) "spirit of modern consumerism," that dooms us to a perpetual, but ultimately fruitless, quest for consumption euphoria.

But the reinitiation of desire focused on another object is not solely due to disappointment in the once longed for consumer good. It also appears to involve a more basic desire to desire. Thus the state of desire is simultaneously positive and negative for many consumers. While being out of control and feeling guilty about desires that seem compellingly self-indulgent is negative, desire is also a strongly positive feeling. This positive feeling seems to come from the excitement of desire and the anticipation of realizing a desire. Desire differs in this respect from idle wishful thinking for things we know cannot come true and planning for things that we can obtain without sacrifice and effort. The distance specified by Simmel cannot be too great. For the ultimate pleasure provided by the state of desire is hope. At the same time, actual realization of desires is sometimes anticlimactic or results in an elation that quickly fades. In either case, desire for desire is likely to lead to reinitiating the cycle of desire by focusing on a new object. Hope is reborn.

When this hope is linked not to beliefs in luck or magic, but rather is at least imperfectly linked to effort or beliefs that the desired object will be realized if we are just worthy enough to deserve it, the result is motivation. This process is seen to involve more than just hard work and planning; the sacrificial nature and feelings of worthiness or deservingness suggest elements of a religious pilgrimage or a chivalrous quest. Besides worthiness, accounts of deservingness also reveal that a sense of social justice may result in frustration when someone believes they deserve more than they have. In such cases the motivational consequences of desire may give way to questioning whether the world is a just place and to feelings of resignation and despondency.

More commonly, however, the frustration may be compensated by substituting a desire for something more likely to be achieved (even if it is unable to entirely ameliorate the underlying feeling of frustrated desire). However, the notion of surrogate versus "true" objects of desire seems to us to involve a misreading of the nature of desire. When probed deeply enough, despite the intense focus on the desired object, what is really desired is some symbolic value that this object is thought to be able to represent or provide. The desire may be conceived and expressed in concrete terms, but it is essentially a longing for symbolic benefits that might be obtained in alternative ways or might not be obtained in any manner. The objects that we focus on are desired for what they represent –

their value inheres less in the object than in the culture, including such meaning-making cultural institutions as advertising.

Concluding remarks

Desire represents the reintroduction of the body in consumer research in two ways: by the reference to a human nature which is cultural and by the reference to bodily pleasures and sensations. Bodily sensations are, developmentally, the first building blocks of a symbolic order; in this sense, the most highly elaborated symbolic structures ultimately derive from bodily sensations (Brooks 1993). But we have already pointed out the linkage between the neglect of desire and the legacy of Enlightenment scientism and its primacy of (rational) mind over body, leading to an insensitivity to the intense feelings attached with desire. Consequently, whenever desire has been dealt with by Western scholars, they have given precedence to the imaginary theory or the idea (in the mind of the human being) of desire rather than the bodily rooted experience of it. Although symbolic and positional structural systems (class, status groups, ethnicity, gender) construct and limit desires (e.g. Bourdieu 1979), people neither are solely rationally utilitarian nor intellectually symbolizing creatures, they are also emotional and sensual creatures.

Consumers' somewhat misleading focus on the concrete rather than the symbolic as the object of their desires is likely one factor that leads to the cycle of desire and to our amazingly inexhaustible succession of intense desires. The other major factor seems to be our desire for desire, our hope for hope:

Being happy is at the same time being able to desire, capable of feeling pleasure at the satisfaction of desire and well-being while satisfied, while waiting for desire to return to start over again. Nobody can be happy if they do not desire anything.

(Laborit 1976: 96)

Here we have the most fundamental formulation of the role of desire in human well-being: to be happy is to be able to desire. Just as we are in love with love, we desire to desire.

A telling indication of what we experience as desire comes from our projective exercise asking people for desire antonyms (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1997). While one category of antonyms that emerged involved strong negatives (e.g. hate, loathing, disgust, fear), the dominant category was instead neutral (e.g. blandness, passivity, routine, boredom, dullness, nothingness, emptiness). Another antonym that emerged was that of death; to be without desire is to be dead to the world. All of these antonyms paint a portrait of bleakness, hopelessness, and joylessness. To desire is to live, to hope, to enjoy life and its promises. In short, to live a life beyond social

orders and routines. But breaking the order is simultaneously to play with fire and to entertain the temptation to neglect the boundaries and duties of social life. Desire as a way of relating to the Other involves a dynamic interplay between the imaginary/symbolic and the deeply sensuous, between violent aggression and affectionate devotion, between activities which are at the same time dangerous and vitalizing or energizing. Hence, much in line with Kakar and Ross' (1987) notions of appetitive craving (sensory/destructive) and romantic affectionate longing (imaginary) as constitutive of desire, we can say that desire is embodied culture.

This approach to the human species' cultural and motivational capacities seems much closer to the empirical evidence found in ethnographic and anthropological research than *Homo oeconomicus*. Behind the reassuring name of *sapiens*, the true face of the human being appears, Morin (1973) writes. It is an animal of *hubris*, of strong and unstable feelings, an animal that invents demons and chimera, is ecstatic, violent, and loving, who knows death without being able to believe in it, an animal of pleasure and delirium, myth, magic and illusions. Consequently, Morin concludes, our more correct designation would be *Homo demens*.

Here, we may find the roots of the neglect of the concept of desire: it runs counter to the prevailing Western conceptualization of *Homo sapiens* during the total period of modern history since the Enlightenment. It threatens rationality as the basis of the social order. The reluctance to deal with desire is similar to the neglect of material culture within the social sciences (Miller 1995). Both have suffered from a general consensus that the topic is inherently morally "bad," whether this badness is labeled materialism, commodity fetishism, greed, or something else. Indeed, the word "desire" itself in its colloquial use evokes feelings of uncontrollable (and therefore potentially dangerous) acts and intentions. However, as we have seen, this can be regarded as denying culture: a symbolic system of socially instituted differences which individuals and groups use as a scheme for interpreting their life world, their possibilities of action, their past and future, and for establishing the relative importance of their needs. But all of these significations – life world, action, time, needs – are already manifestations of the ontological imagination, of the distance between human beings and their environment. Thus, according to Radkowski (1980), culture can be regarded as socially instituted desire, i.e. not individual images but imaginations pertaining to shared social reality.

Thus, on the theoretical level, we conclude that just as desire seems to be the embodiment of culture so can culture be seen as instituted desire. On the more phenomenological note of experienced desire, we find desire to be an overwhelmingly positive emotion, despite our occasional feelings of immorality and ambivalent feelings about our desires. It is an intense emotion that opposes what is ordinary and utilitarian. In order to provide us hope, desire focuses on something better; something that transcends the everyday; something magical. This is what Blanch means in saying "I don't

want realism, I want magic." That these feelings depend upon the social imagination to construct objects that are sufficiently powerful symbols to become objects of obsessive desires, should neither be disillusioning nor a cause for rationalizing our existence. Perhaps the greatest miracle is that we collectively and individually find imaginative ways to re-enchant our world through desire.

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