

The political significance of patina as materialised time

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With reference to Grant McCracken's seminal work on the eclipse of patina through consumerism, this article investigates the compensatory dynamics of contemporary consumption practices centred on novel items rather than on goods 'with antiquity;' how these dynamics are being resisted through certain forms of 'curatorial consumption;' and how such resistance is potentially political in orientation. After a consideration of the sixteenth-century origins of consumerism as an *elite* cultural practice, the focus of the article shifts both to the subsequent democratisation of this cultural trend, and to the accompanying deeply compensatory function of such popular consumerism. Yet, while many people continue to become inextricably caught up in such consumerism – in the vain hope that it will assuage the alienation endemic to the modern era – in the midst of our contemporary consumer society there also exist alternative forms of curatorial consumption. These manifest people's appreciation for patina rather than the new, precisely because of the ability of patina to connect them to others through the long *durée* of human history. However, while such curatorial consumption evinces the continued presence of patina as an adversarial concept within the context of contemporary consumer society, it is also under siege from corporations that seek to co-opt it into the ambit of mainstream consumerism, by imbuing new goods with the veneer of the old. As will be argued, while the latter corporate move may produce short-term profit, in the long run, it stands to undermine the importance of patina as a potential remedial measure against the excesses of consumer society.

Key words: patina, consumerism, duration, memory, curatorial consumption

Die politieke betekenisvolheid van patina as verwesenliking van tyd

Met verwysing na Grant McCracken se seminale werk oor die oorskaduwing van die patina deur verbruikersdruk, ondersoek hierdie artikel die vergoedende dinamika van eietydse verbruikspraktyke wat ingestel is op nuwe items eerder as op goedere met antikwiteitswaarde; hoe hierdie dinamika weerstaan word deur sekere vorms van kuratoriale verbruik; en in watter mate sulke verzet potensieel polities van aard is. Na 'n beskouing van die sestiende-eeuse oorsake van verbruikersdruk as 'n *elitistiese* kulturele praktyk, verskuif die fokus van die artikel na beide die gevolglike demokratisering van hierdie kulturele verskynsel, asook na die verbandhoudende wesenlike kompenserende funksie van dergelike populêre verbruikersdruk. Alhoewel baie mense toenemend onlosmaaklik deel word van dergelike verbruikersdruk – met die vae hoop dat dit die vervreemding wat eie is aan die modern era gaan verdryf – bestaan daar midde-in ons eietydse verbruikersamelewing alternatiewe vorms van kuratoriale verbruik. Dit manifesteer in mense se waardering van patina eerder as die nuwe; juis vanweë die vermoë van die patina om hulle deur die lang *durée* van die menslike geskiedenis met andere te assosieer. Hoewel sulke kuratoriale verbruik die volgehoue teenwoordigheid van patina openbaar as synde 'n opponerende konsep binne die konteks van die eietydse verbruikersamelewing, word dit terselfdertyd ondermyn weens die druk van korporasies wat daarop uit is om dit deel te maak van die hoofstroomverbruikersdruk, deur nuwe goedere te beleg met 'n skyn van die oue. Soos aangetoon sal word, lei laasgenoemde korporatiewe skuif tot korttermynwinste, maar op die lange duur sal dit die belangrikheid van patina as 'n moontlike herstelmaatreël teen die eksesse van die verbruikersamelewing ondermyn.

Sleutelwoorde: patina, verbruikersdruk, duur, nagedagtenis, kuratoriale verbruik

Up until the late sixteenth century in Europe, proof of a family's status resided in the patina that had developed on their most prized possessions. In other words, the agedness of their material belongings was construed as evidence of the long-standing eminent societal position held not only by themselves, but also by their ancestors. However, transformation was set in motion when the noblemen of Queen Elizabeth I began vying with one another for status through the flaunting of *novel* goods. And with the subsequent democratisation of this trend and

the correlative rise of consumer society, the symbolic power of patina steadily declined. Today, consumers crave novelty, becoming captivated by cyclical fashion trends that constantly and rapidly mutate, in relation to superficial modifications in the design of mass-produced products. While status is immediately conferred upon the owner of new, expensive consumer artefacts, it is also almost immediately threatened because of the process that Grant McCracken refers to as the ‘chase-and-flight’ cycle. As economic subordinates strive relentlessly to emulate their economic superordinates, by acquiring the fashionable artefacts displayed by the latter, these superordinates are in turn compelled to purchase ever more novel and expensive artefacts, in order to retain their ostensibly higher status. In view of this, does patina still have a place in modern consumption?

With a view to exploring this issue, this article begins with a discussion of the role of patina in cultural practice up until the late sixteenth century, after which the birth of consumerism as an elite cultural practice under the auspices of Elizabeth I, and in the century that followed her reign, will be elaborated upon. Next, the democratisation of such consumerism from the eighteenth century onward, especially subsequent to the industrial revolution, will be discussed, with special emphasis placed on individuals’ loss of temporal sovereignty and autonomy in the process. After this, focus will shift to curatorial consumption as a form of resistance to the cult of consumer novelty, to the extent that it involves an eschewal of the new in favour of a reification of artefacts marked by time and indicative of *duration*. And this, in turn, will be followed by a consideration of recent corporate attempts to co-opt such curatorial consumption through the creation and marketing of products with the *vener* of patina. Finally, the ontological and critical political significance of curatorial consumption will be thematised; significance which relates to its emphasis on reconnecting individuals with time and critical thought, in a way that can potentially precipitate autonomous action once more.

The historical role of patina

In his book entitled *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Grant McCracken provides an exemplary analysis of the rise of consumer society, focusing specifically on the radical transformation that took place in the sixteenth century in people’s valuation and conception of goods. Notably, McCracken advances that patina is a frequently neglected element in consumer studies, even though it is of key importance to this field, given the direct correlation between its fall from prominence and the emergence of consumerism as we understand it today. With a view to addressing this deficit, McCracken elaborates on the erstwhile patina-orientated system of consumption, and then proceeds to contrast it with the contemporary consumption of novel objects. He explains that, from at least the medieval period onward, what was of the utmost importance to families was the maintenance of family status – maintaining the image of the family ‘corporation,’ as it were, rather than that of the individual. The gravity of this task was augmented by the understanding that such maintenance constituted “a reciprocal process;” that is, “the success of one generation was seen to reciprocate the efforts of past generations and to indebt future ones” (McCracken 1988: 13). In other words, as a cultural practice, such maintenance obliged the living to work hard at retaining and increasing the family’s honour and prestige, not only in their own interest and for the sake of future generations, but also out of respect for the analogous efforts of their ancestors. And, in turn, they could expect that their successors would follow suit, in what amounted to an implicit contractual scenario.

Understandably, certain goods played an immensely important role in such a family enterprise, namely those capable of taking on patina, which “as a visual phenomenon typically designates an incrustation, usually green, on bronze or other kinds of surfaces, as well as the gloss produced by age on woodwork” (Diaconu 2006: 132). To clarify, in order to prove, preserve, and over time augment, family status, it was essential that the goods purchased by the family were capable of lasting for generations, and even more than that, capable of increasing in value through accruing patina the older and more decrepit they became. This was because, during the fifteenth century and for most of the sixteenth century, significant social status was not something that could simply be acquired through wealth. Rather, it was the preserve of those families who had been wealthy for generations, precisely because it was believed that ‘gentility’ could only be attained after at least five generations of acclimatisation to the affluent, refined life (McCracken 1988: 38). Indeed, fine objects that had been “subdued by time” (Wynne 2010: 110) were construed as far more of an effective gatekeeper to status than many other measures, and helped social esteem to circulate within a relatively closed semiotic economy. Sumptuary laws promulgated in the 1530s prohibited those of the lower classes from dressing like their superordinates, and the *nouveaux riche* from “aping” individuals of truly gentle standing (Whitlock 2005: 111-112). Yet these laws could not be, and were not, easily and consistently enforced. Nevertheless, their existence constituted an acute reflection of the “political and social thought about dress” at the time (Kuchta 2002: 37) – thought primarily orientated around the preservation rather than the expansion of elite social cliques. Another measure, far more covert and ‘in-house,’ introduced in an attempt to preserve elite status, was the ‘invisible ink’ strategy. This entailed elite groups harbouring knowledge of, for example, songs or poems, to which the lower classes and the *nouveaux riche* were not privy. Yet this strategy had the weakness of requiring an extremely cohesive social grouping, which moreover had to remain in close contact indefinitely – something that was neither always possible, nor in the long run desirable on account of its incestuously limiting effect (Forgeng 2010: 25).¹

Patina, in contrast to such measures, provided immediate and indisputable visual proof of social status, because its characteristics could not be forged. Through this guarantee, the onlooker could with certainty “read the duration of the family’s status from the amount of the patina on its possessions” (McCracken 1988: 36). And even if a family who had come into new wealth, was able to acquire objects with patina from a noble family who had fallen upon hard times, precisely because the patina belonged to the ‘history’ of this latter family, it remained something prosthetic, which the former could never fully assimilate. Gavin Lucas, in his discussion of the five-generation rule pertaining to a family’s transition from *nouveaux riche* to truly gentle standing, confirms this by pointing out that patina-laden objects constituted incontrovertible proof of genuine status, and hence authentic honour:

Since new wealth, by necessity, was usually signalled by new material goods, patina was pivotal in determining, at a glance, the status of a family. This was not necessarily meant to exclude people from entering the gentry; merely to slow the process down and control it. [While]...this symbolism could be subverted by buying up another family’s heirlooms,...this must have been rare given the shame that would accompany revelation. The whole symbolism of patina was tied up with honour as much as status and its association with family history. (Lucas 2004: 90)

Peter Stromberg also corroborates this in his discussion of the historiography of consumer behaviour, advancing that “attention to patina...yields a relationship to consumer goods that ensures some level of stability to status claims: new silver illustrates your recent achievement of the means to afford silver and thus is distinctly less valued than silver that has obviously been in the family for generations” (Stromberg 2009: 41). In sum, objects that had accrued patina were highly effective both in proving status claims, and in preserving established socio-economic

hierarchies. Not only family portraiture but also artefacts such as silverware and furnishings formed part of the multi-generational ‘status’ arsenal, within a game where “purchases were made by the living but the consumption unit included the dead and the unborn” (McCracken 1988: 13).

The eclipse of patina

However, a dramatic break with such patina-orientated valuation occurred in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, when the nobleman of Elizabeth I began vying with one another for the favour of their queen through the conspicuous consumption of *novel* goods. Elizabeth herself set the bar high in this respect, by employing conspicuous consumption along with conspicuous waste, to manifest her majesty and power (Gottdiener 2000: 12). She not only paid a great deal of attention to embroidery, which was seen as pivotal to the “high fashion and conspicuous consumption” of the day (Davidson and Stevenson 2007: 217) – indulging in gowns so sumptuous that they were in 1604 re-appropriated as costumes for a masque staged by Samuel Daniel at Hampton Court (Kinney 2001: 182). In addition, she also engaged in practices of conspicuous waste, exemplified in the anti-supper. This involved guests sitting down to a splendidly prepared banquet, which existed “only to be looked at;” once it had been “sufficiently admired” it would then be discarded and replaced by an equally decadent meal to be eaten (Lee 1990: 149).

Ultimately, Elizabeth’s successors continued along this trajectory of excessive consumption and waste, with wardrobe expenditure in the first two decades of the seventeenth century alone, increasing from around £10,000 to over £40,000. This augmentation of cost was due not only to an increase in the price of clothing items and in the availability of items fashioned from extremely expensive materials, but also to a steadily increasing tendency to replace clothing with a hitherto unheard of frequency and in relation to the vicissitudes of fashion. James I, for example, would every ten days acquire a new suit, every four to five days new boots, stockings and garters, and each day a new pair of gloves (Jones and Stallybrass 2000: 21). Nobles, in their turn, emulated this culture of consumption, “spend[ing] recklessly... to keep their social position, [and buying]... items that were frivolous and used up quickly, rather than holding to their earlier practice of purchasing high-status goods that could be kept by their family in perpetuity as an inheritance” (Gottdiener 2000: 12).

Mark Gottdiener emphasises, here, the eclipse of patina during this transformation of consumption patterns, and in an echo of McCracken hints at the mutation that this precipitated, both in the motivation of the consumer and in the nature of consumer goods themselves. For one, status competition at the court – centred on the individual’s flaunting of novel, fashionable items – engendered an outward-orientated individualism far removed from the earlier practice of family-orientated purchasing, in the interest of maintaining collective social esteem. And in related vein, focusing on the acquisition of novel goods, which by definition formed part of an endlessly changing cycle of fashion, meant that goods no longer needed to be capable of taking on patina. Consequently, goods “were no longer constructed with the same concern for longevity,” nor were they “valuable only when ancient;” instead, “goods became valuable not for their patina but for their novelty” (McCracken 1988: 14). This focus on novelty also encouraged elite consumers to begin purchasing items dissociated from their locality – in fact, the more exotic the items were, the more they drew favourable attention (Leiss et al. 2005: 43).

In many respects, patina’s fall from prominence paved the way for the emergence of fashion-orientated consumption, and with this, in the long run, the rise of mass consumption society.

A society predicated on the production of (stylistically and physically) short-lived goods from distant countries, for consumption in other territories that have no social or cultural relation whatsoever with the country of manufacture, all in the interest of pandering to the egos of increasingly socially alienated, atomised and infantilised individuals.

The sovereign consumer and the relinquishing of time

To trace the development of contemporary mass consumption society, from the localised roots of late sixteenth-century *elite* consumerism to the form it has assumed in the twenty-first century under the auspices of neoliberal globalisation, is of course beyond the scope of this article. Nor is it likely that any such limited endeavour would be able to add to existing notable studies on the subject by, among others, Benson (1994), Slater (2003) and Miles (2006a).² So for present purposes, it will suffice to briefly revisit some arguments pertaining to key events that precipitated mass consumerism. Thereafter, though, this paper will consider what effect the rise of mass consumption society has had on individual's freedom and their time – and it will be shown that notwithstanding the popularity of the idea of 'consumer sovereignty,' most consumers are merely pawns in the capitalist game and have lost much through their assumption of this status.

While consumerism predominantly remained an elite cultural practice through the seventeenth century and for at least part of the eighteenth century, it was becoming evident that its democratisation was only a matter of time. A more broad-based consumer activity became evident during the industrial revolution, with late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britain witnessing a growing demand for relatively inexpensive yet wildly exotic Indian fabrics (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb 1982: 14). Around the same time, a spreading consciousness of and desire for fashionable items – the standards of which were set in London – led to a commercialisation of these items, so much so that even the wealthier farmers and tradesmen outside of the capital could “adorn...their homes...with clocks, maps and prints, items which had previously only been accessible to the very rich” (Fletcher and Stevenson 1985: 5). What is also significant is that early-eighteenth century Britons had on a vast scale begun to equate the consumption of erstwhile luxuries, such as coffee, sugar and chocolate, with “respectability;” this, for Fletcher and Stevenson, was a clear indication that “the consumer society was on its way” (Fletcher and Stevenson 1985: 5). Incidentally, while the French Revolution was admittedly motivated by numerous discontents, such as the abhorrence of conspicuous consumption (particularly on the part of Marie Antoinette) in the midst of extreme poverty,³ the French people's own demands during this time smacked of luxury consumption. Argues Peter Stearns:

By the eighteenth century, in fact, the list of items that people regarded as necessities was beginning to expand, a key facet of consumerist development. During the French Revolution, for example, Parisian workers insisted that they be provided 'goods of prime necessity,' by which they meant sugar, soap, candles, and coffee. The list included three things (candles were the exception) that would have seemed clear luxuries just a century before...The French Revolution also generated its own consumer items, in the form of new medals, new clothing fashions, and special hats. (Stearns 2006: 22-23)

Rosalind Williams, in her turn, endorses this argument concerning the consumerist trajectory of the liberated France, by explaining how in 1889 and 1900, Paris was transformed into a “pilot plant of mass consumption” (Williams 1982: 11), when it hosted vast consumer expositions that some construe as the forerunners of trade shows and, for that matter, department stores (Williams 1982: 12).

Much of this literature points to the centrality of the industrial revolution, and related to this the ever-increasing accessibility of commodities, in ‘consumerising’ the subjectivity of individuals. However, what has not been sufficiently emphasised is the fact that the industrial and consumer revolutions were anything but a smooth process. Thomas Princen points out in *The Logic of Sufficiency* that “the backward-bending supply curve for labor” (Princen 2005: 125) constituted a formidable obstacle to early efforts at industrialisation. This entailed an incompatibility between workers’ perspective on time – as something over which they had control in virtue of their ability to come and go as they pleased – and industrialists’ perspective on time *as* money predicated on dependable ‘man-hours’ (Princen 2005: 125). With a view to straightening out the supply curve for labour, workers were offered better wages, and when this strategy failed to engender in them the requisite degree of docility and temporal compliance, it was supplemented through coercive measures involving collusion between business and government. The process of land enclosure that took place from the middle of the eighteenth century onward, initiated the destruction of the commons – land held by many but owned by none – which had persisted for centuries, and which had provided the means of subsistence to generations of people. By 1876, about half of all English and Welsh farmland had been appropriated by just over two thousand individuals (Princen 2005: 126). As a consequence of such enclosure, people became far more dependent on employers, and hence far more vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of the latter, than ever before. Now, devoid of land upon which to subsist, they became obliged to work for the duration dictated by factory owners. But even at this point, they remained rebellious, necessitating employers’ invention of various means of making them submit to the new work regime underpinned by “clock time” (Princen 2005: 137). Factory owners, to quell rebellion and render their workers ever more docile, “suppressed wages[,]... installed bells and whistles and clocks[,]... added timesheets and timekeepers, hired informers, and imposed fines and physical punishments” (Princen 2005: 127). Such disciplining reached its apogee in ‘scientific management’ or ‘Taylorism,’ introduced into factories in the early twentieth century. This scientific management of production set out to ensure its optimum efficiency, and in the interest of achieving this it had recourse to such principles as the “differential piece rate” system (Princen 2005: 59). This entailed the identification of the shortest possible time required for the completion of a task, and then the subsequent demand that workers maintain that standard indefinitely, with those achieving the standard being recompensed for their efforts, and those failing to do so being ushered steadily into either poverty or another occupation. The extent to which this principle led to the dehumanisation of workers, is evidenced in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s likening of

scientifically managed workers to ‘trained gorillas’ who could be made as productive as possible through the organization and discipline offered by his system...Taylorism promised industrial capitalists that they could displace self-directing, skilled laborers from production via the division of the production process into a series of micro-tasks,...executable by less-skilled, less-expensive, more readily interchangeable and controlled industrial workers. (Rupert and Scott Solomon 2006: 37)

Taylorism increased productivity at an unprecedented rate, but workers felt that they needed to be compensated for being subjected to what amounted to mundane, roboticised work. Again, a battle over the issue of temporal sovereignty erupted. As Gary Cross indicates, in 1910 – when scientific management was at its height – American workers began to insist on the adoption of an eight-hour day, reasoning that since automation increased labour productivity (with more output produced in a much shorter space of time), this should also spell a reduction in work hours. Many factories became plagued by absenteeism and a high turnover in the workforce, because employees refused to substitute higher earnings for quality time with their loved ones. Owing to these problems and the pressure applied by short-hour agitators, most enterprises in industrial Europe and America implemented the eight-hour day in 1919. And on the coattails

of this victory, blue-collar workers began to insist that they, like their white-collar counterparts, were also owed paid vacations. However, again rebellion against the loss of sovereignty over time was frustrated and eventually annihilated, this time by the Depression and the subsequent years of recession. The economic climate became so dire, and jobs became so scarce, that even unions backed down from their insistence on a fair wage structure and on the enforcement of the eight-hour day (Cross 1993: 76, 78, 80-81, 82-85). Also thrown out was vacation time, without much resistance from workers. In short, within this context, workers faced with potential destitution learned to prioritise money over time. But at this point, their relinquishing of temporal sovereignty was driven by fear and desperation, not by the allure of more earnings and with this, more purchasing power (Cross 1993: 135, 143). World War II and its economic exigencies drove the final nail into the coffin of people's fight to retain sovereignty over their time (Weir and Hanlan 2013: 235).

After the Second World War, though, what became increasingly valorised and indeed mystified was the idea of the 'sovereign consumer' – something which had been bandied about already in the interwar years. The idea was that, no matter how disempowered one is in the workplace, one can enjoy absolute power in the department store or the supermarket aisle (Princen 2005: 63, 75-76). Being able to don the mantle of sovereign consumer, who was armed with consumer choice over the myriad of different products and exciting gadgets available on the market, was understandably attractive to the worker, who was otherwise habitually dumbed down at work, to the point of only being allowed to "decide...which of many levers or switches he should pull" (Horkheimer 1947: 98).⁴ Essentially, implicit in the concept of consumer sovereignty and the related idea of consumer choice, was the understanding that individuals stripped of their humanity and decision-making power on the factory floor, could purchase dignity and regain autonomy in the domain of mass consumption. The engendering of the concept of consumer sovereignty was not, however, motivated by any sort of humanitarian sentiment, involving recognition of the need to compensate workers in some way for their dehumanisation at the hands of their employers. On the contrary, promotion of this concept was underpinned by the belief that the Depression, and other similar moments of economic turmoil, were caused by the saturation of consumer markets. Thus, to avoid such troubles in the future, it was believed imperative to encourage workers to *want* more commodities, and correlatively to consume more of the products generated by the economy. This was all the more urgent in the wake of the Second World War, given America's decisive shift at that time from a productive to a consumer-based economy, reliant on increased consumer demand for the commodities it manufactured.

It is no accident that it was precisely at this point that workers were again afforded paid vacations. Only this time, *how* they were to spend their free time was dictated to them by industrialists and government in the guise of consumer sovereignty. Admittedly, as Cross indicates, throughout the twentieth century, efforts were routinely made to coax workers into spending their free time in particular ways. Companies, from the 1920s onward,⁵ frequently attempted to orchestrate the leisure of their workers to build loyalty and avert the build-up of antagonisms, and Chicago unions did the same to foster solidarity in the late 1930s (Cross 1993: 105). However, in the post-war context, efforts to dictate how leisure time was to be spent became more concerted and intensive than ever before. The point was to reduce work hours and to provide workers with a two-day weekend and longer vacations, so that they could spend this time *spending*. The more workers became construed as (potential) consumers, the more imperative it became that their free time becomes something "usefully consumable" (Walker 1931: 4). Consequently, as already indicated, the concept of consumer sovereignty – in terms

of which it was ‘understood’ that consumers dictate what the market produces, and wields sovereign choice over these products – developed into a “mantra” propagated by government leaders and businessmen (Princen 2005: 76). And it was readily adopted by workers, who could don the mantle of sovereign consumer in a desperate bid to reverse their alienation and subordination at work. Mass consumption during leisure hours was also facilitated by the introduction of instalment credit, which allowed individuals to sustain their dream of consumer sovereignty through artificial means, and in spite of their actual economic limitations. This, in fact, proved so tempting that by the mid-twentieth century, about two-thirds of all American households were indebted in some or other way (Katona 1964: 231). Another factor that fuelled reckless consumption was advertising, which both promoted people’s use of instalment credit (Jentzsch 2006: 81; Hyman 2011: 32), and framed commodities not as wants but as absolutely *indispensable* goods, which would lead to individual fulfilment. Fulfilment deriving not only from the ability to wield sovereign power as a consumer of commodities, but also from the social status and esteem that is afforded one through the *conspicuous* consumption of such commodities. Arguably, it is this promise of regaining status that inspires the alienated worker to consume so ardently, and to so easily forget that time is valuable in itself, rather than merely an occasion to *spend*.

Keeping up with the Joneses: Status, fashionable consumption and make-believe

Thorstein Veblen explains that today, people automatically make the assumption that the objects others display and the clothes that they wear constitute “good *prima facie* evidence of pecuniary success, and consequently *prima facie* evidence of social worth” (Veblen 2007: 104). The individual’s dress and possessions, especially if these suggest that s/he leads a life of liberty, insofar as s/he is not obliged to engage in productive work (Veblen 2007: 105), operate to heighten the person’s power and prestige in the eyes of others. Whether the individual is noble of character or not, whether they earned their wealth honestly or by deception, or whether or not the individual is pretending to be affluent while actually incurring ever greater debt, is of no consequence whatsoever. Rather, the bottom line is that financial clout, social status, and with this a commodified form of honour, are construed as being directly proportional to the extent to which the individual’s clothes/objects are “*in excess* of what is required for physical comfort” (Veblen 2007: 104). Further, argues Veblen, many people have even come to equate ‘decency’ with the lifestyles of conspicuous consumption and leisure practiced by their economic superordinates; an axiological development which obliges them to steadily incur debt in the pursuit of what amounts to a new ‘ethical’ standard. The tragedy of this, of course, derives from the economic impossibility of attaining such a goal: to the extent that individuals of each economic class equate decency with the lifestyles of people with more disposable income than them, the lifestyle that they *can* afford to maintain will never actually allow them to achieve their desired level of decency. The consequence of this is that they have to face the prospect of being perpetually indecent – a perception which leads to a problematic composite of self-denigration and the correlative compensatory squandering of income by members of almost every economic stratum. That is, the poor too are subject to this vicious circle – Veblen lucidly remarks in this regard that “very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away” (Veblen 2007: 53). Zygmunt Bauman, in his text *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, also treats the issue of the pervasive self-perception of inadequacy among the poor, as something which derives less from the possibility that they might be without work, and more from the reality that, regardless of whether or not they are employed, they are not good consumers (Bauman 2005: 38). And this is not only a socio-economic problem

within the global North. As Wolfgang Sachs indicates, the poor of the global South are also plagued by this sense of inadequacy: while their economic subordination to the North renders

them vulnerable to the whims of the market,...they also live in a situation where money assumes an ever-increasing importance. Their capacity to achieve through their own efforts gradually fades, while at the same time their desires, fuelled by glimpses of high society, spiral towards infinity; this scissor-like effect of want is what characterizes modern poverty. (Sachs 1999: 11)

This dynamic is due to the fact that the contemporary world constitutes a “consumer” rather than a “producer society,” where honour relates to the acquisition of commodities rather than to the execution of good work, and where “symbols of consumption are constantly raising the ante” (Miles 2006b: 77). Like the Elizabethan noblemen, discussed earlier, yet at a far more intensive level than ever before, contemporary individuals are caught up in a frenetic cycle of status competition, in a game whose pieces are the newest items, the latest models, and the most ‘state-of-the-art’ gadgets. Only in the most transient sense, though, do these items accrue an aura of prestige and allow the owner to (temporarily) differentiate themselves from lower classes, while associating themselves with their economic superiors. ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ – an expression popularised in a cartoon satirising consumerist one-upmanship – became a serious socio-economic imperative on a global scale in the twentieth century, and shows no sign of declining in the twenty-first century.⁶ The instrumental role that fashion plays in this ‘chase-and-flight’ cycle of consumerism (McCracken 1988: 94), and the psychological dynamics of fashion itself, are systematically explored by Georg Simmel. He suggests that, insofar as individuals pursue fashion both to mimic the higher classes and to dissociate themselves from lower ones, contemporary consumerism entails both imitation and differentiation. On the one hand, the act of imitation can be construed as furnishing individuals with a sense of ontological security, because by ‘conforming’ they are given “the assurance of not standing alone in [their]...actions,” and are concomitantly able to “transfer not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for the action from [themselves]...to another” (Simmel 1997: 188). Yet, on the other hand, their consumptive acts of imitation allow them, paradoxically, to feel distinct from many other people, whom they proceed to regard as ‘beneath’ them, precisely because the latter cannot afford to keep up with fashion trends (Simmel 1997: 189). There is also an intimate interplay between fashion and contemporary identity in this respect, since identity construction likewise involves both differentiation and imitation. It necessitates seeing oneself as utterly unique, yet also as belonging to or identifying with a certain class or group (Hekman 1999: 5-6).

Identity, self-esteem, decency, honour, prestige, and almost every other desirable human attribute, have through the above processes become hopelessly imbricated with the activity of mass consumption. This is especially because most individuals no longer have recourse to work as a meaning-giving activity, condemned as they are to profoundly alienating labour. In their intense identification with consumption, human beings have arguably become driven by a fundamentally perverted and senseless ontology. McCracken, in his discussion of this issue, advances that the “consumer revolution” signalled a dramatic deviation from the ethnographic history of the human species, insofar as, maybe for “the first time in history, a human community willingly harbored a nonreligious agent of social change, and permitted it to transform on a continual and systematic basis virtually every feature of social life” (McCracken 1988: 29-30). Judging from individuals’ behaviours and from what they prioritise in their lives, it is plain to see that the consumption of goods and the goods themselves exercise a most powerful influence over them.

However, Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang, in their text *The Unmanageable Consumer*, puzzle over the potency of contemporary consumer items in this regard, because when

approached circumspectly, it becomes evident that these products barely have any substance to them (Gabriel and Lang 2006: 86). Previously, certain artefacts were venerated for their rarity and for their associated cultural/symbolic significance (e.g. a headdress worn only by the chief of a tribe); others for their genius (e.g. inspired works such as Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*); and others still for their sentimental or memorial value (e.g. heirlooms). In contrast to all such artefacts stand contemporary consumer goods – virtually identical to one another (Bowbrick 1992: 16, 46, 314; Waters 2002: 197), mass produced, superficial, mundane, and ultimately bound for obsolescence (Smart 2010: 85). Yet, as pointed out by the Frankfurt School many years ago, the advertising industry, using some eye-catching packaging and a great deal of media hype, operates to render these mundane and oftentimes useless commodities intensely alluring and (unfoundedly) profoundly meaningful to the consumer. As Theodor Adorno points out, “advertising turns into terror [when]...nothing is left for the consciousness but to capitulate before the superior power of the advertised stuff and purchase spiritual peace by making the imposed goods literally its own thing” (Adorno 2005: 47-48). Individuals’ drawing close to advertised products in this way, may also stem from the assumption that purchasing and flaunting these products will bring them success. This assumption is understandable, given the contemporary tendency to infer pecuniary success and social worth from people’s appearances alone (Veblen 2007: 104). But even more than this, it is believed that products will *actually* transform the individual in question into someone different and better – that appearances will transform into a new reality for them (Radner 1995: 55; Cross 1993: 96, 170). Sachs argues that the automobile functions in precisely this way: that “far from being a mere means of transport, automobiles crystallize life plans and world images, needs and hopes, which in turn stamp the technical contrivance with a cultural meaning” (Sachs 1992: 91-92). This reminds one of ‘make-believe’ games played as children, in which boys donning capes would fancy themselves invincible. But now, even though the stakes are much higher, many have failed to ‘grow up.’ No wonder Jean Baudrillard describes consumerism as “a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species” (Baudrillard 2001: 32).

Ultimately, though, consumer items cannot deliver what is expected of them. Consumerism involves not the augmentation of the individual but the reduction of individuality to one or another brand name. And while consumer items may provide the individual with a momentary sense of superiority or power, this feeling is very quickly subverted when the items they have purchased go out of fashion or become obsolete, obliging them to purchase newer ones if they can afford it or if they are willing to incur more debt. As Smart indicates, contemporary consumerism is characterised by and indeed propagated through

planned or organized obsolescence[, which] assumes two principal forms, ‘aesthetic’ and ‘physical,’ both of which serve the corporate objective of promoting repeat consumer purchases of products... In aesthetic modifications, confined to packaging, appearance, style, and design, the ‘new’ product generally performs the same functions as existing comparable products, but the availability and marketing of the new model, charged with symbolic value by virtue of its status as the latest product, effectively renders all the earlier models in use ‘old,’ or unfashionable in appearance...and [hence]... in need of retirement, disposal, and replacement...Physical or technological modifications also promote...repeat purchases by engineering obsolescence...[T]he development of new products bearing new functions and/or containing technical innovations and additional specifications,...lead existing products to be regarded as obsolete...[And through] the production of goods deliberately designed to function for a limited period, or to have limited life spans,...corporations have sought to prevent market saturation. (Smart 2010: 85-86)

J. K. Galbraith is in this respect especially critical of the aesthetic strand of obsolescence detailed by Smart, which he refers to as the “psychic obsolescence of goods,” and which chiefly involves advertisers implanting a false conception of obsolescence in people’s minds, by incessantly

harping on the need to remain ‘in fashion’ in order to be counted (Galbraith 1973: 147). The implication of this is that, in the main, people experience psychological entrapment through consumerism. Subsequent to the consumer revolution, they have become caught up in a hamster wheel of consumption, running fervently to nowhere. Except for the very rich, it is impossible to keep up with fashion cycles unless one buries oneself in debt (Hyman 2011: 38-39). And in addition to this, while advertisers, corporations and even governments promote the idea of the consumer as ‘sovereign’ (Princen 2009: 63, 75-76) – as the one who tells markets what commodities to produce – such sovereignty is a ruse. As Slater powerfully argues, although it is so often claimed that the consumer economy caters for the needs of ‘sovereign consumers,’ these so-called needs

emerge at the end of an impossibly long gauntlet of mediation by inequalities in material and symbolic power, by cultural intermediaries, by the ‘impersonal steering mechanisms’ of the market, by the instrumental rationality of corporate planning – a gauntlet so long that those needs that do emerge from it are battered to a pulp that is virtually unrecognizable by those to whom they putatively belong. (Slater 2003: 211)

Indeed, for the most part, advertisers and corporations frame artificially generated wants as the needs of real people (Galbraith 1969: 147), all in order to keep the consumer economy growing and to generate ever greater profits. And the more people buy into this dynamic, in the vain hope that consumerism will assuage the alienation endemic to the modern era, the more depoliticised they become and the more they lose touch with time. After all, the consumer economy, characterised by cyclical fashion trends, offers neither a definite starting point nor an ultimate goal for individuals; they must constantly adapt themselves to, and constantly modify their goals and expectations in reference to, the fashions of the day – which alone harbour social currency. Through this, they are obliged to exist in a perpetual present with no connection whatsoever to the long *durée* of human history, and with no appreciation of their own limited (life)time as mortal, embodied beings. In effect, time is stolen from them. They are victims of both “a ‘theft’ of labour time from the[ir] bodies as workers” (Salleh 2009: 5), and, when they assume the role of consumers after work hours, a theft of potentially meaningful and meaning-giving social time. In both instances, time has been collapsed into money (Cross 1993: 155). Also, it is of no small importance that this warped ‘non-time’ they inhabit is not sustainable (Shiva 2002: 7). Joan Martinez-Alier thematises the conflict between capitalist/consumerist time and ecological time, and the link between this conflict and different valuations of resources, in the following way:

Capitalism necessarily incorporates new spaces by means of new transport systems in order to extract natural resources. Spatial relations being modified, temporal relations are altered as well, because production in the newly incorporated spaces can no longer be governed by the time of reproduction of Nature...The antagonism...between economic time, which proceeds according to the quick rhythm imposed by capital circulation and the interest rate, and geochemical-biological time controlled by the rhythms of Nature, is expressed in the irreparable destruction of Nature *and* of local cultures which valued its resources differently. [emphasis added] (Martinez-Alier 2002: 215)

In view of the limited lifespan of human beings, time itself should surely be regarded as the most precious of all resources. As something that should not be squandered on futilities, and certainly as something that cannot simply be collapsed into money. Yet, for the most part, this is precisely what has happened insofar as, within the context of mass consumption society, flickers of resistance against the annihilation of temporal sovereignty tend to be rapidly snuffed out. However, as will be discussed next, some embers of longing for connection with the long *durée* of human history continue to glow resiliently.

Alternative forms of consumption: The enduring allure of patina

Given the above state of affairs, one may wonder whether or not there is still a place for patina in contemporary consumer society, radically fixated as it is on the novel, the fashionable and the transient. Yet, the rapacious pursuit of the new and correlative eschewal of the old, by no means constitute a ubiquitous present tendency; rather, it is possible to identify alternative forms of consumption in the midst of, and indeed in spite of, contemporary consumerism. Alternative forms of consumption explicitly orientated around the appreciation of goods with antiquity, with substance, and with the time-tested capacity to endure, all of which point to the continued allure of patina. Moreover, as will be argued in what follows, these alternative forms of consumption operate against the backdrop of an ontology markedly different from that which informs the popular consumerism discussed in the preceding pages. This alternative ontology is informed by reification not of products but of time – or more correctly, *duration* in the Bergsonian sense – and by the pursuit of human connection instead of self-aggrandisement.

For Henri Bergson, much of Western philosophy and culture, from Plato to the present, has operated under the influence of a pervasive prejudice underpinned by “the vision that a systematic intellect obtains of the universal becoming when regarding it by means of snapshots, taken at intervals, of its flowing” (Bergson 1944: 343). This is, of course, not to assert that modern science shares the Platonic sense of time, but rather to argue that, where Plato and the ancients divided time up into a few segments – each of which corresponded to an aspect of the immutable Ideas – modern science divides time up into an infinite number of segments, each equivalent to the next. That is, while “for the ancients, time comprised as many undivided periods as our natural perception...cut out[,]. . .each presenting a kind of individuality” which corresponded to “the Ideas or Forms,” our modern science, “in contrast with ancient science...which stopped at so called essential moments,...is occupied indifferently with any moment whatever” (Bergson 1944: 344, 360, 366). This contrast is neatly illustrated by the following example. On the one hand, “of the gallop of a horse our eye perceives chiefly a characteristic, essential or rather schematic attitude, a form that appears to radiate over a whole period and so fill up a time of gallop,” and “it is this attitude that sculpture has fixed on the frieze of the Parthenon” (Bergson 1944: 361). On the other hand, “the earliest-known scientific photographs of a galloping horse in 1872” comprised a series of many snapshots that, “when flipped through, [operated as]...an early, crude action movie” which ultimately proved how “all four hooves of the galloping horse left the ground” (Gilbert and Fehl 2006: 109). Where the first approach sought out the essence of a gallop, the second sought to break up the gallop into a temporal sequence in which no snapshot was privileged over another. That the popular consumerism discussed earlier operates under the temporal framework of the latter scientific approach is not surprising, considering the authority with which modern science has been imbued as the great arbiter of truth in our time. And in the ease with which the commodities of yesterday are discarded today as anachronistic, and replaced with items that tomorrow will suffer the same fate, the frame by frame succession of scientific time is powerfully reflected.

However, for the same reason “that real time, regarded as a flux, or, in other words, as the very mobility of being, escapes the hold of scientific knowledge” (Bergson 1944: 366), it also escapes the conceptual confines of consumerism. What Bergson refers to as ‘real time’ is defined not in terms of a series of passing presents, but rather in terms of a present which passes *into* a past that remains present. A moment of consideration is enough to validate his assertion. We regularly perform tasks in the present on the basis of learning which took place a long time ago, while even the ability to hold a conversation with someone is predicated on the recent past

remaining sufficiently present, to contextualise the present discussion as it passes. In this regard, as Bergson explains in *Matter and Memory*, time involves a continuous interfacing between an *actual* present which passes, and a *virtual* past which always remains present – albeit in various states of obtuse relaxation or acute contraction, depending on the stimuli which we encounter around us. And “the normal self never stays in either of the...extreme positions” of the *actual* present or *virtual* past, but rather “moves between them [and]...adopts in turn the positions corresponding to the intermediate sections” (Bergson 1962: 128, 210-212). Yet, it is erroneous to think of one’s own virtual past as an entirely private or separate affair. This is because, as Bergson indicates in *Duration and Simultaneity*, “the universe seems to...form a single whole; and if that part that is around us endures in our manner, the same must hold...for that part by which it, in turn, is surrounded, and so on indefinitely.” Consequently, to be aware of duration is to be that part of the universe which is aware of itself; in short, for Bergson,

there is no doubt that our consciousness feels itself enduring, that our perception plays a part in our consciousness, and that something of our body and environing matter enters into our perception. Thus our duration and a certain felt, lived participation of our physical surroundings in this inner duration are facts of experience. (Bergson 1965: 45-46)

Admittedly, to maintain such awareness in perpetuity would be to raise oneself up to the status of the “mystics and saints,” of whom Bergson speaks in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, who “have broken down natural resistance and raised humanity to a new destiny” (Bergson 1935: 148). A destiny informed by a new understanding of time *as* duration – rather than as something divisible – and predicated on the overcoming of our habitual resistance to the dissolution of those prejudices through which we distinguish our time from the time of others, in ways that distance us from them.⁷ However, it is doubtful that by this Bergson wished to condemn us to a new, cruel and puritanical struggle against our tendencies to ignore duration, within a cosmology where such ignorance replaces sin, and awareness of duration replaces moral remembrance of God. Rather, “Bergson correctly...distinguished between habitual, utilitarian perception, necessary for life, and the detached, disinterested perception of the artist or philosopher” (Hadot 1995: 258), and he did not seek to negate the former and exclusively valorise the latter. Instead, he simply sought to open up discursive space for the latter, in a world where it was increasingly being marginalised.

The salutary nature of such an ambition notwithstanding, it does beg the question of exactly *how* such discursive space for duration might be opened up in the contemporary era. In this regard, it must be remembered that the neglect of duration is by no means a recent phenomenon; after all, as Hadot points out, in the Stoic and Epicurean literature of the first and second centuries, one encounters analogous concern. Although “people in antiquity were unfamiliar with modern science, and did not live in an industrial, technological society[,]...the ancients [still] didn’t *look* at the world any more than we usually do.” And it is precisely for this reason that Seneca and Lucretius, among others, offered various meditative practices to generate something akin to the awareness of duration advocated by Bergson (Hadot 1995: 254). Yet, while the philosophical connection between the Stoics and Bergson is quite apparent (Lacey 1993: viii; Vernon 2005: 166), Bergson did not explicitly valorise their meditative practices as pathways toward awareness of duration. Nor is it clear that Hadot’s own attempt to do so – albeit through rearticulating such practices in contemporary terms⁸ – comprises the most appropriate, ‘grassroots’ method for modern people to achieve such an end. This is not least because, despite Hadot’s assertions to the contrary, the frenetic pace of modern life *has* in many powerful ways rendered the sort of patient, detached, spiritual practices of which he speaks, exceptionally difficult if not impossible to undertake *and* maintain.

A possible way forward – which avoids the above pitfalls of being either too vaguely philosophical or too practically specific – is to consider what ‘organic’ developments have taken place in this regard, and how they might reflect aspects of the above theorisation. That these organic developments – what we may collectively call ‘curatorial consumption’ – sometimes have about them a commercial aspect, is only to be expected in a world dominated by commerce, but they should arguably not be dismissed out of hand on this account. This is because a more circumspect approach to them reveals their primary orientation to be around cultivating awareness of duration, access to which is afforded by certain material artefacts.

As Briann Greenfield indicates, at the turn of the century, those outside of the antiques mainstream, who could not or would not partake in the top-dollar games of “pedigreed antiques” and high-end antique auctions, not only overtly opposed the growing elitist tendency in antique collecting, but also by way of response “created alternative visions of the American past that favored the ordinary over the exceptional and work over aesthetic display” (Greenfield 2009: 10-12). In particular, Greenfield discusses how, from 1876 onward, many Americans did not plunge into the antiques mainstream but rather turned their attentions toward heritage and the retention of a real link to their history, harassed and destabilised as they had increasingly become by immigration, industrialisation, automation, and escalating urbanisation. Their purchase of historic items, he suggests, was motivated by their perception of the latter “as a concrete connection to the past, a bridge across time...as memory markers, [and as] tangible representations of the past” (Greenfield 2009: 5). Appreciation for antiques was also articulated as deriving from the association of these artefacts with a better time, before the avarice and vice that was perceived as plaguing the new, urbanised and industrialised American nation (Greenfield 2009: 42-43). This same bifurcation pertaining to people’s approach to and conception of antiques was evident in early twentieth-century Britain, where ordinary people, expressing interest in affordable old furnishings, emphasised how these artefacts were, in contrast to new items, “serviceable” and linked to “a feeling of ‘completeness,’ of ‘comfort,’ [and] even...a ‘sort of companionship’” (Muthesius 1988: 234, 243, 245). What would today be construed as an anti-consumerist attitude was also evident: old furniture and other aged items were praised for being long-lasting and timeless, in contrast to the new items of the day, which were flimsy and which cleaved to fashion and the corresponding “absurd love of change” (Muthesius 1988: 234-235).

Arguably, something akin to Bergson’s contention that durational “remembrance...can come up in two ways, voluntary or involuntary” (Bartsch 2005: 66), informed the ontology underpinning the above forms of curatorial consumption. This is because, while such consumption involves a constant *voluntary* endeavour to be aware of duration, through the accumulation and preservation of objects with patina, this practice in turn lays the foundation for *involuntary* remembrance of duration, insofar as it establishes the potential for chance encounters with such old objects, because they are allowed to constantly surround one in one’s place of dwelling. McCracken offers as a case study of such curatorial consumption, Lois Roget’s mode of dwelling. Having lived in a farmhouse owned by her family for seven generations, Lois acts as curator of her ancestors’ belongings. She harbours a deep sense of place, not only in terms of her temporal position in a clearly traceable family lineage, but also in terms of her spatial situatedness in the Gresham region. A situatedness that, in turn, derives not only from her growing up in the area, but also from the fact that many items of her inherited furniture are made of wood from local forests, and were crafted by local people. Lois also shows little inclination toward modern consumption, purchasing new household items only when she absolutely has to – out of necessity rather than desire – and all the while making sure that the new items are “quite bland in appearance,” so that they neither clash with nor challenge the presence of her existing heirloom furniture. So

seriously does she take her approach to duration, that she even refrains from purchasing other antiques; for her, old items are only valuable because of their link to her family and community, such that they are valued for their memorial significance rather than for their appearance alone (McCracken 1988: 44, 47-49). According to McCracken,

the material culture of a home like Lois's gives the past a certain presence...Her home is a place of astonishing 'placeness.' It is richly worked and deeply rooted...The special historical and memorial significance of these furnishings constantly impresses itself upon their curator. Lois often looks up from a book to gaze at a table or a chair and recalls the ancestor who owned it. The individual returns as an image and a memory that can be glimpsed and let slip, or explored in exhaustive detail...The constant presence of this visual archive make[s] the family history ever present and ubiquitous. Lois can return to it as she will return to her book, picking up the narrative at her leisure. (McCracken 1988: 45, 53)

On the one hand, to a certain extent, Lois's relationship to the artefacts surrounding her resembles the medieval/renaissance attitude toward patina, aspects of which are moreover reflected in her concern over engendering her children's interest in continuing in her curatorial role. For her it is absolutely imperative that at least one of her children be willing to assume responsibility for these artefacts upon her demise. However, on the other hand, significant differences exist between the attitude which animates her related endeavours, and the medieval/renaissance veneration of patina. The latter comprised a means of establishing class barriers to *separate* people from those that surrounded them, in a practice where one's ancestral heritage constituted the currency which afforded one the right to discriminate against one's less-established contemporaries. In contrast, Lois's care for and approach to her ancestral heritage is informed by a desire to *connect* to both her family's past and the past of her community; a past understood as the silent durational substrate beneath the lives of everyone in her locale – whether or not they recognise it. A substrate which cannot function as the source of an elite attitude on Lois's part, or anyone else's part for that matter, because of the largely ordinary nature of the inherited artefacts and the humble erstwhile lives to which they bear testimony. In this way, Lois's artefacts function not as weapons for class-based discrimination, but rather as objects that occasion remembrance of duration, as part of a meditative practice orientated around memorial effort and ritualistic care for the patina-laden objects which link the curator to time. The importance of such curatorial effort should not be underestimated; as Charles Scott advances in *The Lives of Things*, it is only through the act of remembering or recalling that we become aware of time in any substantial way. He contends that because human beings' experience of time is grounded in memory, with our memories in their turn dependent on time, "when memories happen, time happens. In memorial events time is re-membered," and this entails "a departure from an idea of time as something in which we participate or which flows through us[,] or is in any sense something present. Time composes memorial occurrences and memorial occurrences compose time" (Scott 2002: 89). The implication, in other words, is that if we do not engage in memorial practice, we cannot ever really grasp what it means to live in time.

All of this diverges markedly from the perception of time prevalent among contemporary consumers, who live in new apartments with new furniture, mostly in areas where they were not raised, and without distinct family lineage – ravaged as the latter is often nowadays, either through neglect or through erasure by migration, the legacy of colonialism, or the dynamics of globalisation. Yet, while for many the kind of memorial practice to which Lois has devoted herself is practically unattainable, this does not mean that it is not desired, or that they are prevented from trying to approximate something akin to it, albeit in the most tentative and incremental of ways. A growing disdain for consumer society, with its fleeting fashions and 'chase-and-flight' cycle, in which most people are caught, animates at least some ordinary individuals' interest in

antiques today. Outside of the high-end antiques mainstream (exemplified by Christie's auctions and the like), many individuals are drawn toward more parochial antiques, not because of their value – which is often quite negligible – but because such objects allow them memorial access to the long *durée* of human history. A history greater than that of their own isolated individuality, in an avowedly superficial, throw-away society. This ontological yearning is arguably not simply a utilitarian 'knee-jerk' reaction against "the planned or organized obsolescence" of things (Smart 2010: 85), discussed earlier. Rather, insofar as it echoes one of the most poignant fictional accounts of political protest in the twentieth century, it also bears testimony to a growing critical stance, or at least to a felt need for such a stance, in relation to the *mores* of the contemporary consumer era. In George Orwell's anti-utopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the link between awareness of duration and critical thought comprises a major theme. While the narrative details a dystopian world dominated by three totalitarian regimes, which all maintain hegemony over their respective populations either through their erasure of indicting history, or through their re-articulation of it to reify the ruling party in question (Orwell 2003: 213-247), the critical resistance of the protagonist, Winston Smith, is indissociable from the antiques he buys. That is, in a domain dominated by mechanical forerunners of computer technology, it is by means of patina-laden purchases – namely an old blank book with pages yellowed by time, and an archaic fountain pen – that Winston manages to situate himself *in* time through his first journal entry. And this act, in turn, not only precipitates his reflection upon the problematic dynamics of his present, but also leads him to become increasingly critical of the ruling party's tyrannical hold over its citizens (Orwell 2003: 8-22). A critical stance which pushes him less into acts of terrorism, and more into the adoption of an adversarial way of life. In this regard, he rents the upstairs room of the antique store where he bought the artefacts – which itself houses, among other aged things, a dilapidated bed and an old clock – so that he can on occasion live *differently* there with his lover, Julia, in a manner informed by growing awareness of duration. Indeed, even the fragile piece of coral in the centre of the antique crystal paperweight, which Winston acquires quite early in the narrative, becomes for him a symbol of his resistance against the overarching temporal imperatives of his society – an isomorphic representation of the critically reflexive dwelling space he creates for himself and Julia, through patina-laden objects (Orwell 2003: 158-169).

To be sure, things end badly for Winston and Julia, but this is generally the fate of the tragic characters in anti-utopian literature, which, at least for the moment, mercifully remains only a genre of fiction. Although Naomi Klein in her *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, makes a worryingly convincing case for the parallels between the above Orwellian dystopia and the contemporary neoliberal juggernaut (Klein 2008: 23-57) – which has driven commoditisation to unprecedented heights – opposition to consumerism is still conceivable and possible. And curatorial consumption arguably stands to play a role in such opposition. This role will, however, not be one of scale, on account of the relatively limited number of antiques in circulation, and the current immense and growing demand for household items – the inconsistency of which precludes most people from establishing a memorial space akin to Lois Roget's home. Yet, this deficit notwithstanding, the symbolic value of curatorial consumption remains significant, because – as in the case of Winston Smith – it is not the quality or number of antique artefacts with which one surrounds oneself that matter, but rather the critical thought which they precipitate that counts. Thought of the long *durée* of human history, of the place within it that we share with others, and of our responsibility not only to each other, but also to the generations of people who will succeed us, and inherit the legacy of the errors we make today.

The struggle over patina

Admittedly, Greenfield has succinctly demonstrated how – curatorial consumption notwithstanding – antiques can become as much part and parcel of the capitalist/consumerist economy as new goods. This occurs when dealers and certain collectors focus exclusively on the aesthetics, and correlatively, the economic value, of these artefacts. In short, he explains that the early twentieth century saw the near-concomitant emergence in America of the consumer-orientated economy *and* the ‘antique shop’ – clearly marking the point at which antiques began to be perceived less as pieces of history, and more as highly lucrative commodities. Around this time, museums began to focus on the display of antiques, thus ‘proving’ their significance and ‘pricelessness,’ and Jewish immigrants began to set up antique dealerships, further instigating the culture of antique collecting by providing a ready supply of these artefacts (Greenfield 2009: 4, 11-12, 14). Moreover, because of the need to put a price on the antique, increasing emphasis was placed on its physical attributes, and on the degree to which it was in keeping with the style of a particular period. This also contributed to the ‘cult of the craftsman’ around this time, because better prices could be had if it could be proven that a piece was turned out by some or other celebrated artisan (Greenfield 2009: 31-33). But what is perhaps of even greater importance to the present discussion, is Greenfield’s argument that the more antiques began to be perceived as essentially aesthetic, fungible items, the more their historical value became eclipsed. Indeed, such commodification occurred to the extent that it “profoundly disrupted the way Americans experienced the past,” rendering extinct “the traditional associational meanings that had linked historic objects to local heroes, honored ancestors, and respected statesmen” (Greenfield 2009: 10). This transformation of the status of antiques is corroborated by Lucas, who advances that antiques have over time often become so commodified that their link to any family history harbours no importance whatsoever to the dealer and to many collectors (Lucas 2004: 90). Accordingly, once associational value is replaced with economic value tied to aesthetic qualities, the durational link of the antique to history is severed. This is neatly reflected in certain popular contemporary television series, such as *Antiques Roadshow*, *Family Guns* and *Lords of War*. In these programs, the antique items and their individual histories are supposed to be the centre of attention, yet their reflections of duration are always ultimately displaced by focus on the prices they fetch and the profits the dealers make through them – which end up being the source of narrative excitement and effectively steal the show, so to speak.

However, despite this caveat, corporate success in the above regard is by no means a *fait accompli*, but rather an on-going struggle to encompass and contain a constantly emerging popular desire for the marks of duration. A struggle evinced by the many marketing attempts both to co-opt the idiosyncratic creation of patina, and to market objects with the veneer of patina to customers desperate to reconnect with time. As Quail and her colleagues indicate, when rebellious young people began to buy jeans and to disfigure them before wearing them, leading jeans manufacturers responded by producing already-ripped jeans, stained jeans, and so on, thus neutralising this rebellion while at the same time capitalising upon it (Quail, Razzano and Skalli 2007: 354). And this tactic followed in the wake of similar earlier measures; for example, the *Lee* jeans company brought out bleached jeans in 1969 (Vejlgaard 2008: 124), after the marketing department realised how popular faded denim had been rendered by the counterculture movement, ironically as a mark of authenticity and non-consumerism. More recent examples of how individuals’ yearning for patina has been annexed by the manufacturers of old-looking new commodities also abound. The 2010 *Fossil* range, entitled “Long Live Vintage,” is highly illustrative in this regard. The text of one advertisement commences with the bold heading, “For love of vintage,” and a clear attempt is made to persuade readers/consumers to purchase *Fossil*’s “latest accessory collection,” which replicates the “iconic styles, details and trends”

of timeless vintage fashion. The image, in its turn, operates to evoke nostalgia for the old, as a couple dressed in vintage-inspired clothing – the woman in a floral print dress and a military-style overcoat, wearing a chunky necklace, the man in a military-style jacket and faded jeans – walk down an aisle in an antique bookshop, replete with dusty and stained old books, warping wooden bookracks, and an antique ladder in the foreground. In turn, *Old Khaki*, a manufacturer that caters specifically for a niche market of consumers longing for patina, produced a resonant advertisement for its winter range of 2013. In this advertisement, two men and a woman who are wearing old-looking, faded clothing and vintage-inspired boots and shoes, are shown lounging on an aged, cracked leather couch in a rustic log cabin, furnished with antiques. Two antique bronze candleholders stand on the table in front of them, some weathered walking sticks are positioned to their left, and in the background (yet in the absolute centre of the image) there is an antique table on which rest, among other items, very old black-and-white photographs of a family, and a rusty oil lantern. A further good example is that of a recent advertisement by *Caterpillar*; in it, a scuffed, light brown lace-up suede ankle boot is displayed, front and centre, with the faded remains of a rusty old door as its backdrop. What is most notable about this advertisement is its text, which simply declares that “everything old is new again.” That such a simple appeal, lacking any further explanation or legitimisation, is deemed sufficient to inspire those viewing the advertisement to go out and purchase the item displayed, powerfully indicates the extent to which patina remains deeply appealing in our time.

Conclusion

On the one hand, all of the above products still fall squarely within the status-orientated chase-and-flight cycle of modern consumerism, and thus they cannot fulfil their implicit promise of providing people with any real re-connection to history, memory, or time. Indeed, they tend instead to hide the fact that mass consumer choice involves “relative trivialities, compared to matters of life and death, political and civil rights, or the future of the planet.” And through this they augment that terrible “blind spot in Western cultural values,” which eclipses the fact “that choice is not only a matter of which product or service to select, but also *whether to* and *how to* consume” [emphasis added] (Gabriel and Lang 2006: 42). In a world where time has collapsed into making and spending money, and where there are few mnemonic objects because goods have no longevity anymore, memory is accordingly reduced in substance and in meaning, and duration dwindles into obscurity. Fredric Jameson, commenting specifically on the related virtual obliteration of the politically radical past of the United States, from its people’s collective consciousness, remarked that “consumer society...is characterized by a historical amnesia, a repression both of the past and of any imaginable future.” For him, this is nothing less than “a pathological feature of contemporary society” (Jameson 2007: 15). However, on the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the existence of such a strong market for objects with the veneer of patina, evidenced in the above advertising campaigns, speaks volumes about people’s deep longing for reconnection to the long *durée* of human history. If this longing were to be channelled, even incrementally, away from palliative consumer items and toward curatorial consumption, then at least the space for radical thought would potentially open up again. This is because curatorial consumption constitutes not an exercise in mass acquisition, but rather an *ethos* indissociable from critical thought in relation to time. Thought which relinquishes the intoxicating myopia of consumerism for the sobering perspective of duration.

Notes

- 1 Jeffrey Forgeng emphasises the inefficacy of the ‘invisible ink’ strategy to prove longstanding status, when he argues that by Elizabethan times, England had become a highly “mobile society where people met strangers on a regular basis[. Consequently,]...it was possible to garner credit, at least in the short term, through outward appearances [such as]...displaying skills or knowledge that *suggested* a creditable person” [emphasis added] (Forgeng 2010: 25).
- 2 See Benson, J. 1994. *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980*. London: Longman; Slater, D. 2003. *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity; and Miles, S. 2006. *Consumerism – As a Way of Life*. London: Sage.
- 3 As Julie Hardwick indicates, within the context of the revolution, “the archetype of the dangerous consumer became the French Queen, Marie Antoinette, whose extravagant spending and expensive obsessions with the latest fashions were pilloried in the popular press of the 1780s.” Further, the convoluted relations between herself and her Parisian fashion merchandiser, caused the populace to “conflate conspicuous consumption and political liability” (Hardwick 2012: 190).
- 4 A common objection to this type of argument is that only blue-collar workers experience severe alienation in the workplace. However, white-collar workers are also subject to alienating treatment, and often have to willingly become alien to themselves to ‘get ahead.’ Slater makes this point very clear when he asserts that, to climb the career ladder, white-collar workers have to adopt ‘personalities’ that do not reflect any “inner sense of authenticity.” In effect, they are obliged to sell themselves out, so much so that their persona consists in “a calculable condition of social survival and success” (Slater 2003: 85).
- 5 In fact, James Gilbert indicates that the benefits of organising workers’ leisure time were recognised as early as the late nineteenth century. George Pullman, one of the founders of the ‘company town,’ went to great lengths to orchestrate his employees’ leisure – convinced that it enabled him to create apolitical, compliant and exceedingly exploitable workers (Gilbert 1993: 152-153).
- 6 Arthur Momand, motivated by disdain for his own erstwhile attempts at keeping up with the living standards and related conspicuous consumption of his neighbours, in 1913 created a cartoon entitled *Keeping Up with the Joneses*, which was published in American newspapers for twenty-eight years, and which “chronicled the comedy of American striving” (McPhee 2010: 65).
- 7 This natural or habitual resistance is cellular in orientation, insofar as the individual in more primitive societies lives like a cell in the body, which “lives for itself and also for the organism, imparting to it vitality and borrowing vitality from it.” However, the “open soul,” which Bergson valorises, involves an evolutionary step beyond such natural survival instinct, toward a realisation of our deep mystical link with one another, through the duration which connects us inextricably (Bergson 1935: 145).
- 8 Hadot is quite unequivocal on this point, when he maintains: “I think modern man can practice the spiritual exercises of antiquity, at the same time separating them from the philosophical or mythic discourse which came along with them” (Hadot 1995: 212).

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