

SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

THE THEATER OF LUXURY

PAPER 1: THE LUXURY BOUTIQUE AS HETEROTOPIC THEATER

PAPER 2: MAKING THINGS PRECIOUS: STUDYING PRODUCT STAGING IN NEW ALTERNATIVE PERFUMERY

PAPER 3: WHAT'S LUXURY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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## SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

### THE THEATER OF LUXURY

Past scholarship has highlighted the import of a dramaturgical frame to understand market exchanges, dynamics and relationships (Arnould and Price, 1993; Deighton, 1992; Giesler, 2008). Deighton (1992, p. 362) argues that marketing “scripts, produces and directs performances for and with consumers”. Marketing scholars have argued that retailing is a specific form of theater in which salespeople perform scripted roles (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Grove and Fisk, 1983). Organizational theorists as well have highlighted that organizations are like theaters (Harvey, 2001) and that the very nature of organizing is dramatic (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997).

Our session uses a theatrical lens to think about the luxury industry. We follow the actors of the luxury industry, especially how salespeople and customers play their parts. We describe the spaces; we examine the objects and the props. In doing so, we follow recent research attempting to ethnographically detail how marketing happens (Zwick and Cayla, 2012), with particular attention to the interactions, spaces, practices and objects that animate the luxury industry.

Hence, the session’s first paper draws from extensive ethnographic fieldwork in several luxury boutiques where two of the authors noted all interactions as participant observers. Based on this fieldwork, the first paper details how the luxury boutique operates as a type of heterotopic theater, i.e., a sort of counter-world world which contrasts with the chaos and the speed of the outside world (Foucault and Miskowiev, 1986). We explore the different spaces of the boutique and how luxury retailers manage the diversity of these spaces. Finally, we showcase the playful dimension of the boutique experience. We demonstrated how the luxury boutique becomes a magical haven where they to play with and experience precious objects. Overall, this first paper goes beyond the description of luxury boutiques as “new urban cathedrals” (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 37) to analyze them as heterotopic and playful theaters.

The second paper focuses on a specific luxury company, the Editions de Parfums, founded by French entrepreneur Frederic Malle in 2000. Specifically, ethnographic work details the staging process through which Malle has established perfume as the star of his boutique. The product, in this case, is made “precious” through a sophisticated retail setup, where the sensory capacities of the consumer are brought forward and heightened. By focusing on the various processes through which a perfume becomes precious, this research goes beyond the idea that luxury is simply a phenomenon of symbolic “transubstantiation” where ordinary objects are rendered valuable through astute semiotic arrangements (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975). Instead, we want to focus on the material culture of the luxury industry, recognizing that luxury cannot be apprehended without the prism of the physical product.

As a second avenue to reflect on the links between theater and luxury, we need to recognize that luxury, like theater, is a cultural form or system that evolves over time. The session’s third paper argues that the luxury industry is experiencing a romantic turn. In the same way that romantic theater broke the codes regulating classical tragedies, the luxury industry is breaking existing codes that define luxury (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). Indeed, luxury companies are experimenting with the mixing of low-brow and high-brow culture, sometimes even taking luxury objects out of the sacred space of the boutique to sell them on the internet, or creating pop-up stores where consumers are able to touch and experience luxury products

in completely new ways (Antoni, 2013). While past research has highlighted the way manufacturers of luxury products have always tried to democratize luxury (cf. Berg and Clifford, 1999), such reflections cannot adequately theorize the current contradictions of luxury brands. These contradictions—the mixing of humor and ceremony—go beyond democratization through pricing, to re-invent the luxury industry as a romantic enterprise, a type of romantic theater.

Overall, our session extends previous work on luxury along three dimensions. Firstly, the nature of our empirical work allows us to detail the experience of luxury boutiques. Recent work on luxury consumption has analyzed purchase intentions (Wang and Griskevicius, 2013) and reactions to various types of luxury branding stimuli (Wilcox, Kim and Sen, 2009) by focusing on the way consumers respond to branding information. A limitation of such research is that luxury retail involves complex interactions that cannot easily be re-created in lab experiments.

In contrast, we derive our analysis from extensive observations in luxury boutiques, including participant observation work. Immersion in the world of luxury, in this case, contributes a unique understanding of the luxury retail experience, including the co-creation of value involving customers and salespeople.

Secondly, we show that the luxury industry needs to be analyzed as an evolving cultural system. Our session is meant to go beyond the managerially oriented literature which conceptualizes luxury as a set of established codes (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). Instead, we show how luxury brands are breaking away from this orthodoxy to re-invent themselves.

Finally, we surface the practices of qualification—the work of classifying, evaluating, judging—that help construct “the precious”. In doing so, our work extends past research focusing on luxury as grounded in the symbolic value of objects (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975) and as an instrument of class domination (Veblen, 1899). Attending to the material culture of luxury, we argue, is an essential empirical step toward a better understanding of value and how it is created.

### **The Luxury Boutique as Heterotopic Theater**

The metaphor of marketing as theater is especially relevant in the luxury industry, since much of the sector’s success rests on the creation of mythological brands and powerful narratives. For instance, Dion and Arnould (2011, p. 509) talk about the founders and creative directors of famous luxury brands as being “mythologized”. From this perspective, the luxury boutique becomes a theater where salespeople enact the brand story through various scripted interactions with customers.

Our work extends this scholarship through an ethnography of luxury boutiques. We draw from extensive ethnographic fieldwork, conducted as part of a consulting project for a major luxury conglomerate, involving several months of participant observation in luxury boutiques in several cities (New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Shanghai, Beijing and Tokyo). Observations spanned a spectrum of brands and boutiques from relatively accessible products in terms of price to the truly exclusive, top-end jewelry products. In the tradition of Erving Goffman’s symbolic interactionism (1959), we paid specific attention to the interactions between salespeople and luxury customers, attending to the way salespeople carry their role

as brand representatives. We complemented our observations with 82 interviews with customers recruited from an existing client database.

Our findings are consistent with Dion and Arnould's (2011) in highlighting the theatrical dimension of luxury retail. Indeed, the luxury boutique is a highly ritualized space, with a ceremonial cadence, and exaggerated theatricality.

Building from our data, we conceptualize the luxury boutique as a "heterotopia" (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986, p. 24), i.e., a kind of counter-world where society is contested and inverted. Indeed, luxury boutiques display outdated rituals, aristocratic courtesy, and the efforts of salespeople to slow everything down, contributing to an impression that time has been suspended. The boutique preserves a world in which myths, legends and history come alive, while the pressures of time are kept outside. In this heterotopia, products are endowed with the sacredness that justifies their price.

Beyond spaces of respectful ceremony, though, we show how luxury boutiques operate as spaces for play and exploration, especially for regular luxury clients. The exclusive space transforms into an intimate one where loyal, high-spending customers feel privileged and comfortable to indulge in their own fantasy world. In addition, the elaborate narratives of luxury items facilitate a sense of discovery that lures the customer into an experience of escapism.

Such findings call into question the relevance of the religious metaphor to describe luxury. Kapferer and Bastien (2012) argue that a luxury brand has all the elements needed to be a religion in itself, including a creator, founding myths and legends, and revered icons. In order to be successful, luxury brand managers have to follow a "very strict set of rules" (Kapferer and Bastien 2009, p. 313) to preserve the sacredness of the brand. From this perspective, luxury is a "cult" that spreads in various parts of the world (Chadha and Husband, 2007) and stores are the "new urban cathedrals" (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 37). Indeed, the world of luxury brands is a world of storytelling—replete with stories about the founders of the brand—and luxury stores are intensely ceremonial and ritualistic spaces designed to create a distinctive consumer experience.

However, the idea of luxury as a cult to be followed does not allow for consumers to partake in the experience of creating the experience—the theater—of luxury, which our findings showcase. In contrast, our work highlights the more playful and improvisational dimensions of luxury retail, adding new insights to the various ways value is co-created in the luxury industry.

### **Making Things Precious: Studying Product Staging in New Alternative Perfumery**

Empirically, this paper is an inquiry into the qualification and valuation of the luxury perfumes developed by an alternative perfume company, namely the Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle (founded in 2000). The theoretical ambition of this paper is to use this case study to reflect on the sociology of luxury.

Luxury is a classic theme in sociology, especially regarding the topic of valuation. From the very beginning of the sociological tradition, luxury was a prime candidate for demonstrating the social reasons of economic values or prices. Thorstein Veblen has done seminal work in

this area: with his theory of “conspicuous consumption”, this economist, breaking with the classical dogma of the “utility”, claimed that rivalry and honor were the primary and powerful reasons of expenditure, and hence of goods valuation. In this approach, the material richness of the objects, produced and bought, matters a lot (Veblen, 1899).

Going beyond the theory of conspicuous consumption developed by Veblen, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociological work has mainly focused on demonstrating that value is symbolic. For example, in their famous article on French haute-couture, Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut encourage analysts to overlook and even actively ignore the materiality of the objects (and of perfumes in particular), so that they can concentrate on the “symbolical work”, meaning the way objects are made socially valuable or “consecrated” (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975). In so doing, sociologists reasserted the social nature of luxury markets: they convinced sociological analysts and, to some extent, by highlighting specific activities, they also persuaded marketers (perfume marketers in particular) of the primary importance of symbolical communication and sociology in their own work. In the end, the idea that luxury has to do with the sign or the “image”, much more than the thing, became a sort of “common knowledge”. Yet, by splitting the symbolic from the material, as they did, and by consequently overlooking the materiality of the objects, these sociologists missed something essential about the building of luxury markets, we argue.

This paper conversely proposes to implement a pragmatist turn in luxury studies and to take the objects seriously by building on the new anthropology of markets initiated by Michel Callon (Callon et al., 2002; 2007) and on the sociology of taste and attachments developed by Antoine Hennion (Hennion, 2007; 2010); in particular, in the STS tradition.

The Editions de Parfums is particular in that it is an auteur’s perfume house, where the “noses”, or perfumers, sign the fragrances they compose. The company immediately drew attention when, in 2000, it opened a small Parisian boutique that attracted specialized journalists as well as leading distributors. Following the actors, such as salespeople and consumers, the paper focuses on the quite original sampling techniques implemented in the brand’s shops (complemented by insight into the *éditeur*’s and perfumer’s work in producing the perfumes). Specifically, through an ethnographic inquiry and analysis, the paper shows a retail setup that gives prominence to an olfactory sampling device, which thus promotes a highly individualized bodily experience. We will see the equipment through which smell is, quite literally, displayed and a salesman who is not exactly introducing a perfume to a consumer, but who is rather skillfully provoking an encounter between the consumer and the product.

By attending to this encounter between the salesman, the consumer and the product, we detail how the perfume’s valuation develops, how the consumer’s taste emerges, evolves, and is possibly transformed; and finally, how a consumer who is individualized, gradually morphs into a perfume amateur. The device as a whole seems to be used in order for this valuation to take place. Interestingly, this involves valuing both consumers and perfumes, which the retail setup takes very seriously; and consequently, this results in making the products valuable, since taste and attachment—“value”, in a word (possibly measured by high prices)—is constituted in the valuation exercise itself. A peep into the *éditeur*’s and perfumer’s work in developing a tuberose perfume will clearly illustrate that the producers’ valuing work is itself based on a valuation-valuing continuum, just like the one evidenced during the selling process. The perfumes are thus made valuable, or “precious” (a word that better fits the context of luxury), through a market dynamic of “evaluation-valuation-valuing” that was first highlighted by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in his *Theory of Valuation* (1939).

Without disregarding the sociological inheritance mentioned earlier, we hold that the approach implemented in this paper provides us with a richer account of the valuing mechanisms at stake in luxury; and that, most importantly, it better grasps certain contemporary forms of luxury.

### **What's Luxury Got to Do with it?**

Theater has often been used to account for the retail experience, especially in the luxury world. But it is always the classical theatrical frame—with its respect for the notions of consistency in setting, characters and actions—that is implicitly associated with the world of luxury. Hence it is important of detail and codification for luxury brands which are often managed and analyzed as if they would only express a specific narrative, a specific brand contract and spread their brand codes through different vehicles (products, merchandising, advertising, web sites, etc.). This classical approach to luxury is closely related to a cultural vision of luxury which is clearly based on such principles as wealth, verticality, symbolic distance, domination, exclusivity, power demonstration, profusion, scarcity.

At the same time, the romantic ethic -defined as a search for variety, novelty and excitement- has been outlined by Campbell as being the main driver of consumer society (Campbell, 1987). Luxury consumers are not only searching for order, hierarchy and consistency but are also chasing emotions, sensorial excitement, unknown sensorial pleasures and surprises. How can these two apparently opposite views be reconciled in a luxury brand?

To do so, luxury brands constantly have to play with the ambiguous notion of “aura” that implies, according to Walter Benjamin, the atmosphere of transcendent beauty and power supporting cultic societies (Benjamin, 1968).

Consistent with Antoni's analysis (Antoni, 2013), the idea that will be developed here is that a romantic revolution seems to affect many luxury brands in the same way it revolutionized literature and theater in the 19th century. If one accepts the idea that luxury is closely linked to the idea of sacrifice and therefore of sacredness —because luxury takes merchandise away from the profane that characterizes self-service goods— luxury brands such as Hermès, Vuitton and Dior are currently transgressing the main principles which implicitly ground the very idea of luxury.

Using a grid of analysis based on Giorgio Agamben's work on profanation (Agamben, 2007), this presentation will outline the way luxury brands are experiencing a romantic turn which is in some way comparable to the twist initiated by the romantic movement in literature. Through various examples, this presentation will demonstrate that luxury brands constantly play with ideological and symbolic frontiers and therefore have to manage a permanent system of tension. In what some describe as an horizontal society (Friedman, 1999), where people are freer to choose their own identity, where symbolic verticality loses some of its power, luxury develops itself as a process that constantly articulates contradictory positions between visibility and invisibility, scarcity and profusion, sacralization and profanation.

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