Critical Luxury Studies
Art, Design, Media

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Edited by John Armitage and Joanne Roberts

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Chapter 10

Online Luxury: Geographies of Production and Consumption and the Louis Vuitton Website

Agnès Rocamora

In their study of online action, Steven Schneider and Kirsten Foot develop the notion of a 'web sphere', that is, 'a set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple web sites deemed relevant or related to a central event, concept or theme, and often connected by hyperlinks' (2005: 158). The web now abounds with sites devoted to luxury fashion, forming what can be called, drawing on Schneider and Foot, the luxury web sphere. The present chapter is devoted to one of its iterations, the Louis Vuitton website, and interrogates the ways a luxury brand produces, and reproduces, online the logics of distinction and social differentiation that underpin luxury (Bourdieu 1984; Lipovetsky 2003; Michaud 2013). It looks at how exclusivity is built into a site, and, in the process, identifies the actors who are included in, as well as those excluded from, luxury as defined by Louis Vuitton.

In the first section, I situate the brand in the context of the luxury fashion industry. I then discuss the notion of websites as hypertexts to engage with the issue of the problems that might arise from researching such texts, and to briefly reflect on my approach to the Vuitton website. In the second section, I focus on the idea of production, and in the third on consumption, for both discourses on production and consumption inform much of the website; the former by way of the various stories and histories of the making of Louis Vuitton goods that are narrated there, the latter by virtue of the site being largely devoted to the promoting and selling of goods. A commercial website is a 'space of consumption' (Currah 2003: 5). Interrogating such a space, I look at its social make-up to ask: who are its imagined consumers? Which also means: who are its absent 'others'?

The Vuitton website, however, is also a space of production, both in the sense that it devotes many words and images to the topic of the production of Louis Vuitton goods, but also in the sense that this putting into discourse is itself an act of production, a 'symbolic

production' (Bourdieu 1993a). As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, a whole system of words and images is interposed between producers and consumers of fashion. This system acts as a screen which participates in an act of 'collective belief' and 'collective misrecognition' without which fashion cannot thrive (Bourdieu 1993b: 138). Similarly Roland Barthes writes that 'In order to blunt the buyers' calculating consciousness, a veil must be drawn around the object – a veil of images, or reasons, of meanings' (1990: xi). Thus when Zygmunt Bauman notes that 'The culture of consumer society is mostly about forgetting, not learning' (1998: loc. 1285), one could add that it is also about concealing. In this chapter I show how Vuitton use the website to hide certain dimensions of the production of goods – automatisation, outsourcing and marketing – the better to construct themselves as a luxury brand. As Currah also observes, a web store is 'a culturally encoded aesthetic trap: a virtual landscape of consumption that has been constructed and displayed according to the philosophies of executive corporate actors which intend to attract, retain and transact with those surfers who are most likely to become long-term "exchange- partners"' (2003: 9).

If the section on production is about concealing, that on consumption could be said to be about forgetting; forgetting that the world is differentiated along the lines of class, gender and race, and that luxury goods, which are 'distinguished and distinctive, selected and selective' (Bourdieu 1984: 278), are central to this process of differentiation. In that section I comment on the website's implied consumers, looking at the ways distinctions of class, gender and race are articulated to support the construction of Louis Vuitton as a brand reserved for a privileged social group.

Digital Luxury

Christopher J. Berry (1994) identifies clothing as one of the categories of luxury, alongside sustenance, shelter and leisure. High fashion goods in particular, and the related category of accessories, are indeed a very visible part of what is often referred to as the luxury industry. For luxury is an industry, one which shares with capitalism a common history, commercial profit and the good of the nation having, since the nineteenth century, been invoked as a way of 'de-moralising' luxury and justifying its production and consumption (Sombart 1967; Berry 1994). Today luxury is a thriving economic sector, and luxury groups have embraced elaborate strategies of marketing (Michaud 2013: 63). Thus, €217 billion was spent on

luxury in 2013 and 'More than 10m new customers are entering the market each year' (*Economist* 2014). Educational programmes have been developed – such as, in America, NYU's MBA Luxury Marketing Specialization – that train students in the business of luxury; luxury consultancy firms abound; online and offline media titles devote regular columns to the topic (e.g. the *Financial Times*' 'Luxury 360'; *Women's Wear Daily*'s 'Designer/Luxury'), when they are not themselves entirely devoted to it (e.g. *Forbes Life*; *Luxure*; *Luxuriousmagazine.com*; *Uptown*); and vast numbers of business books discuss luxury. For while luxury has received much attention from the fields of marketing and management studies, apart from a few exceptions (see, for instance, Berry 1994; Sekora 1977; Lipovetsky 2003), it has largely been ignored by social sciences and humanities scholars.

Within the luxury industry, one name stands out: Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH), the leading luxury group. In 2013 it generated a record sales figure of 29.15 billion euros, and a profit of 3.4 billion euros (*Challenges* 2014). The group comprises a range of divisions and related brands – 'Wines and spirits'; 'Perfumes and Cosmetics'; 'Watches and Jewelry'; 'Fashion and leather goods', the latter being the most profitable division and 'Louis Vuitton' one of its 'star brands' (Cavender and Kincade 2014; LVMH 2014).

Specialising in trunks, the Louis Vuitton company was created in 1854, after the name of its French founder. Success grew quickly correlatively to the 'transport revolution' that was taking place at the time, the company finding its customers in the high society of the Second Empire (Pasols 2005: 56). In 1997 the first Louis Vuitton website was launched, signalling the brand's entry into the web sphere. It now comes in different languages, the content being largely the same across all editions.

The luxury web sphere consists in sites that generally fall into three categories: social media; e-commerce; e-magazines. The first category includes platforms such as Facebook, blogs, vlogs, Tumblrs, Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest, where accounts are owned by brands or private individuals. The second category includes both luxury brands' e-commerce sites and multi-brand e-tailers such as Net-a-Porter and Moda Operandi, as well as rental, discount and reuse luxury sites such as eBay, Vestiaire Collective or luxTnT.com. Such sites can be connected through hyperlinks, a key feature of the web sphere (Schneider and Foot 2005). Indeed, on the World Wide Web (WWW), texts are hypertexts, that is texts which by virtue of being related to other texts through hyperlinks are always on the move, making of the web a fluid, borderless, a-centred space

(Landow 1997; Bolter 2001). The Vuitton website, for instance, opens onto a multitude of pages, which users can access by clicking on the site's Instagram, YouTube or Facebook icons, for instance, or on words such as 'here', as in a post 'celebrating Monogram' in the News section (10–20 October 2014).

However, hyperlinking is also a highly controlled and strategic practice (Hindman 2009), and not all hypertexts offer equal unbounded movement across the WWW. The Vuitton site principally links back onto itself, with limited opportunities to leave the site, except perhaps when linking to the brand's Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts. The movement of the user across its pages is largely contained within them, and the flow of texts largely a flow of Louis Vuitton texts. The posts in the 'celebrating Monogram' series, for instance, never link to the site of the artists involved in the celebration, a linking which would be common practice on fashion blogs, for instance.

Manuel Castells opposes the idea that the information age is placeless. He notes:

> The Internet Age has been hailed as the end of geography. In fact, the Internet has a geography of its own, a geography made of networks and nodes that process information flows generated and managed from places . . . New territorial configurations emerge from simultaneous processes of spatial concentration, decentralization, and connection, relentlessly labored by the variable geometry of global information flows. (Castells 2001: 208)

This geography also includes that which covers the path of users across web pages and which companies engineer through their strategy of hyperlinking. Decentralisation may well occur on the WWW, allowing for a broader range of voices to be articulated, as can be the case, for instance, with the fashion blogosphere (Pham 2011; Rocamora 2011, 2012). But processes of re-centring and concentration also take place through hyperlinkings that are creative of specific configurations of flows and movements that enable companies to create a geography of their own, to paraphrase Castells. By controlling its site's architecture of hyperlinks, a company can control the digital trajectory of its users, directing them through a path that serves its interest. Thus, as Cavanagh puts it: 'Against the image of the internet as constantly in flux, a libertarian, anarchic space, we have the relentless accretion of channels which form and modulate discourse. Against the idea of the internet as a smooth space, we have a highly striated one' (2007: 56), an idea I return to later.

Hypertexts bring together a variety of signs and genres of signs:

words, sounds and images. On the Vuitton website, for instance, one finds live-streamed or archived videos of fashion shows, short films, images of the advertising campaigns, news on the latest Vuitton events. This variety and abundance of texts makes of websites rich and dynamic platforms for the interrogation of the ways companies represent themselves online. However, it is also a richness that, by virtue of being synonymous with a vast quantity of data, often transient, can quickly overcome the researcher. Web texts are 'temporal and malleable', features which, however, like their 'hyperlinked and multilevel nature', make them difficult to analyse (Schneider and Foot 2005: 159, 157).

To contain the flow of texts on the Vuitton website, and to capture its dynamic nature, between June and December 2014 I visited it weekly, often daily. By bookmarking sections and pages and taking screen grabs I built a record of its content. By taking notes on my trajectory through its pages, in the manner of ethnographic field notes (see, for instance, Kozinets 2010), I traced some of the paths the website offers, critically exploring one's possible journey through Louis Vuitton online.

Schneider and Foot (2005) make a distinction between three types of approaches to the web sphere: the first they call 'discursive or rhetorical' analysis. It focuses on the texts and images of websites. The second, a 'structural/feature' analysis, focuses 'on the structure of the site, such as the number of pages, hierarchical ordering of pages, etc.' The third concentrates on analysing 'multi-actor, cross-site action on the web' (Schneider and Foot 2005: 164–5). My approach for this chapter is an instance of the first approach, one which aims at unpacking the discursive construction or symbolic production of luxury according to Louis Vuitton.

Finally, various authors have commented on the limits of the distinction that is often made between on- and offline spaces, and where the latter are seen as more real than the former, an idea which the expression 'In Real Life' (IRL) captures, to contrast, presumably, with the fake or false life of virtual space. However, 'Life on the screen' (Turkle 1995) is no less or no more real than life off the screen. Rather, the two are complementary (see, for instance, Kendall 1999; Sudweeks and Simoff 1999), an approach that informed my engagement with the Vuitton website. Looking at this platform led me to look into various aspects of the company, and of luxury, offline, and vice versa, the better to reflect on the ways the digital and the bricks and mortar, to borrow an expression from the field of retail, complement each other. In that respect then, hypertexts are also texts in permanent dialogue with offline texts, both being caught up

in a complex network of intertextuality that reaches across on- and offline spaces.

The Production of Louis Vuitton

The 'World of Louis Vuitton', in the site's navigation bar, invites users to find out more about 'La Maison', including its 'Brand protection' policy. The page devoted to this topic opens on to a close-up of (white) hands at work with a hammer on an LV-embossed trunk, suggesting that Louis Vuitton luggage is made by hand (Figure 10.1). It is not mass produced, in contrast, the site implies, to counterfeit goods such as 'a cheap bag [bought] on a street in a faraway city while on holiday', and which the brand warns against, stating that counterfeiting threatens the 'creativity and the rights of designers, artists and brands'. Both the image of the hands and the reference to 'artists' anchor the brand in the realms of craft and the arts, away from mass fashion. Indeed, references to the former abound on the website. The men's fall collection 2014, for instance, is described as 'a unique combination of cutting-edge innovation and traditional craftsmanship' (News section, 1 August). The text captioning the Majestueux tote PM states that it is 'the result of the finest crafts-manship', and a pendant designed after a trunk is said to have been 'recreated with thorough craftsmanship'.

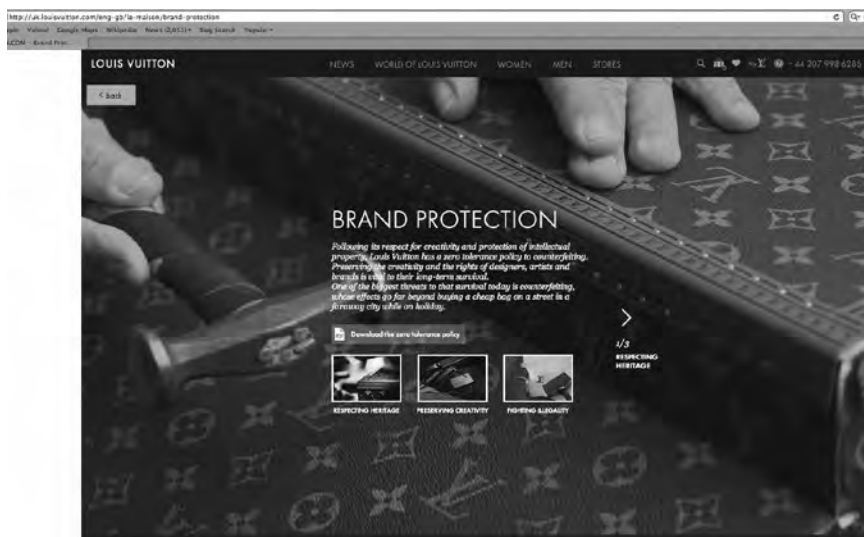However, when in 2010 Louis Vuitton ran a series of 'Savoir

Figure 10.1 Representing Louis Vuitton luggage as handmade

Faire' (Know-how) advertisements depicting workers using artisanal techniques such as needle and thread, suggesting goods were hand-stitched, the Advertising Standards Authority ruled against the company on the grounds that not only did Vuitton also use sewing machines but they declined to reveal the proportion of work that is handmade (Hickman 2010). Thus, reporting on the Asnières-sur-Seine Vuitton workshop, Dana Thomas mentions the thousands of bags that are produced there every year. Some items are handmade but many others are machine-manufactured on assembly lines (Thomas 2007: 20).

An entry on the website is devoted to 'personalisation'. A video features (white) hands at work, once again reinforcing the idea of craftsmanship. The camera focuses on the hands embedding initials in a leather good, presumably those of its owner or future owner. The website specifies that the technique is called 'hot stamping' and the 'complementary service is a stamp of distinction and elegance'. Personalisation singles out objects and their owners, seemingly emphasising the uniqueness of both things and persons. However, as Jean Baudrillard (1996 [1968]: 142) reminds us, serially produced goods can only be modified at a superficial level. Their personalisation creates marginal differences only, a process which nevertheless enables the company to support the idea of uniqueness that its discourse on craftsmanship promotes.

Dallabona (2014: 218, 219) observes that luxury fashion brands are keen to emphasise craftsmanship as a means to add value to the objects they sell. This is a myth, however, that hides the fact that many fashion goods are mass manufactured through automated technologies. Thus in recent years Vuitton have equipped their ateliers – a word they seem to prefer to the less craft-like 'factory' – with advanced techniques of production in order to increase productivity and answer the growing demand coming from countries such as China (*L'Usine Nouvelle* 2012).

The automatisation of Vuitton manufacturing led the French magazine *L'Usine Nouvelle* (2012) to headline an article on the company 'Louis Vuitton, the industrialist'. For while the website is keen to associate the brand with the world of craftsmanship and handmade production, as Sicard (2010) observes, the luxury business, like any other business, is driven by the pursuit of profit and therefore mobilises all resources to that effect, including automatisation. Thomas puts it thus: 'Vuitton executives may crow about quality, but the company's focus is obviously on productivity' (2007: 194).

This is also why luxury companies, and French brands in

particular, are often eager to underplay business practices such as marketing, preferring instead to fashion themselves as involved in craft and the arts (Sicard 2005, 2010). Marion talks about luxury companies' 'staging of rarity' (2000: 306). Depicting Vuitton goods as made by hand contributes to this staging. Bruno Remaury cites the words of Veblen to insist on companies' desire to hide their mercantile nature: 'the marks of hand labour come to be honorific, and the goods which exhibit these marks take rank as of higher grade than the corresponding machine product' (Veblen 1994 [1899]: 97, cited in Remaury 2005: 380). Hands signify a 'veneration for the archaic', for a time which pre-dates the industrial era (Remaury 2005: 380, citing Veblen 1994 [1899]: 100), the very era during which, thanks to the concurrent transport revolution, the Louis Vuitton company was able to take off.

Regular references to the arts also help Vuitton to obscure the commercial dimension of their activities, thereby elevating their goods to the level of artworks as opposed to mere commodities. Bourdieu (1993a) has discussed the opposition between the field of art for art's sake and that of mass culture, with the former seen as nobler than the latter. This is why, he argues, fields that are lower in the hierarchy of culture mobilise references to the arts: it allows them to ennoble themselves. On the Vuitton website abundant references to the arts participate in the symbolic production of the brand as a luxury brand, as do the many art events the company organises. Where the website includes a section devoted to 'Art', the Paris flagship store, on the Champs Elysées, dedicates a whole floor to art installations and exhibitions – the 'Espace Culturel', which features on the website too. Both digital and bricks-and-mortar spaces fuel the idea of 'creative process' that the company repeatedly invokes on its website, such as in the section on 'Brand protection', for instance, where an entry is devoted to 'Preserving Creativity'.

The practice of discursively producing commodities is also what is called, in marketing terms, branding, capitalism's new take on commodity fetishism whereby layers of myths and symbols distance goods from the social relations involved in their production (Skoggard 1998: 58; Edensor and Kothari cited in Pike 2011: 16). The Vuitton website is key to this practice of imbuing goods with myths, the myth of craftsmanship and the arts, as mentioned earlier, but also the myth of 'made in France' and that of free movement across borders, as I discuss later. As Calefato argues, 'luxury has become "discourse" . . . replete with myths' (2014: 4).

The Vuitton website is a window; one, however, that is not made of a clear transparent pane allowing one to peer inside an enclosed

space and see what is normally hidden from view, but a window similar to that of bricks-and-mortar shops, a highly polished and staged front that places a layer of stylised signs between the viewer and the commodity. Celia Lury (2004) has demonstrated the relevance of Erving Goffman's notion of the frame to branding to argue that a brand can be defined as a frame, that is, following Goffman, in terms of 'principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them' (1986 [1974]: 10–11). A frame is both space and process; it is an interface and boundary in which the particular definition of a situation takes place (Lury 2004: 154). In that respect a website can be seen as a frame too, that is, a space or interface where a brand produces itself in a particular way – as a luxury brand, 'made in France', and by hand, in the case of Louis Vuitton.

The Goffmanian notion of region is also useful for conceptualising the role of websites in the construction of a brand's identity. Goffman (1990 [1959]: 45) argues that social interactions are set in two distinct regions: front and back. The former is a space of 'illusions' where 'idealized performances' take place aimed at impressing on 'the audience' a specific definition of an event or situation. It is where 'something that has been finished, polished, and packaged' is put on display (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 52). Back regions are where the 'dirty work', 'the long, tedious hours of lonely labour' unfold (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 52, 53). Mass production and automatisation are the dirty words, and work, of luxury, hidden from view so as to sustain the myth of handmade fashion. On the Vuitton website, a performance is staged, such as the one captured in the close-up of the hands working on a trunk, that aims at reinforcing the illusion that all luxury goods are the product of a timeless craft. This performance is supported by the 'Louis Vuitton Savoir Faire' videos posted on YouTube, where various Vuitton goods are shown made by hand. A caption reads:

> Seven crafts performed by hands outlined by daylight. They stitch the skin of a Speedy bag with beeswax-coated yarn, hollow a pea jacket at the waist, sheath the trunk case of a Wardrobe with a creaser . . . Gestures speak. Instruments confer . . . Bruno Aveillan brings his artist's eye to the House's know-how. (LV 2014a)

Where in high fashion the making of things, labour, is normally hidden from view, kept backstage, Vuitton move it front-stage on their website. It becomes visible labour as a type of labour that serves the interest of the brand in fashioning itself as precious and luxurious. In contrast, mass production is hidden labour.

However, not only do Vuitton draw a veil over processes of production such as automatisation, they also put a veil over the geography of production of goods. The 'World of Louis Vuitton' page, for instance, opens onto 'a legendary history' of the company. It tells 'how it all began' in 'a legendary workshop', the Asnières workshop. '[I]t is still where products are crafted today', the site states, neglecting to mention any other places and spaces where they are made. Significantly, this workshop is also a museum, a front region, like the atelier more generally, of the Louis Vuitton brand.

In contrast, the back regions of Vuitton's geography of production are hidden from view, for while much emphasis is placed on the brand's self-discursive construction in French workshops, and in particular the Asnières one, in reality the company's geography of production is much wider. The production of bags and wallets is dispersed throughout the world (Vulser 2014), with various components made in China and Romania and the bags then assembled in France and labelled 'made in France' (Perceval 2013).

The outsourcing of fashion to low-cost countries has been well documented, with many authors also pointing at the near impossibility of identifying the exact origin of a product in a context of accrued international division of labour (Skoggard 1998; Dickerson 1999: 172). When it comes to luxury brands, authors have found it a challenge to document this division. Thomas, for instance, who observes that one of the main ways luxury companies can 'trim' costs is by using cheap labour, notes how few luxury companies admit to having their goods made in China. A 'Made in China' label rarely appears on a bag, and when it does, it is carefully hidden (Thomas 2007: 203). When the journalist Frédéric Béghin (2011) asked Vuitton about their factories in India and Romania, the company replied: 'Let's talk instead about the twelfth French production site that will open in the Drôme in 2011.'

In the world of luxury 'made in France' is added-value, a discourse French luxury companies have been particularly apt at sustaining, not least in presenting luxury as a French invention, obliterating at the same time the many instances of the production of luxury in other countries and at other historical times (Sicard 2005). In the realm of fashion, France and, in particular, 'Paris' are highly loaded signs, synonymous with fashionability, elegance (see Rocamora 2009) and the 'good taste' which grants one the sense of distinction on which luxury thrives (Bourdieu 1984). Thus the Vuitton website repeatedly capitalises on the French identity of the brand, not least through recurring references to the French capital in both words and images. A promotional film for the Autumn–Winter 2014 shoe collection,

for instance, opens onto a photograph of the Eiffel Tower. It is the cover of a look-book whose pages reveal different iconic Parisian places and buildings as backdrops for the staging of the shoes (LV 2014c). In 'The World of Louis Vuitton' section, Asnières, home of the 'legendary workshop', is not referred to as a suburb but as 'just Northeast of the center of Paris'.

Roger Caillois writes that 'Myth belongs by definition to that which is collective. It justifies, supports and inspires the existence and action of a community, of a people, of a profession or a secret society' (2002 [1938]: 154). The Paris myth supports the interest of the fashion profession (Rocamora 2009). Brands such as Louis Vuitton feed on and reproduce it the better to promote their commodities.

The Consumption of Louis Vuitton

Although Louis Vuitton established themselves as a trunk, luggage and handbag brand, in 1998 they opened a ready-to-wear line. It represents only a small percentage of total Vuitton sales but is key to generating media coverage, thereby supporting further sales of bags and luggage (Thomas 2007: 51; Koblin and Schneier 2014).

The website displays 'leather goods', 'ready-to-wear', 'shoes', 'jewellery & timepieces', but not all Vuitton goods are available online and many items can be found in the bricks-and-mortar shops only. This allows the company to maintain control of 'the selected distribution' which is key to the selling of luxury (Marion 2000: 307), and on which the LVMH website insists in a 'selective retailing section'.

The goods available online come in a range of prices albeit in a high bracket: a key pouch is £150; a 'monogram shawl' £335; the 'pégase 55' suitcase costs £2,610 and the men's 'Tambour Volez II' watch £20,800. In some instances, no mention is made of the price, as in the case of the high jewellery collection. Not all the goods can be ordered directly from the website. Instead the site visitor is invited to call a number 'for availability and information'. This is the case, for instance, with the £3,450 'Capucines handbag GM'. The mention of the word 'availability' conjures up the idea of the rarity luxury thrives on by virtue of suggesting that the demand for the good in question may be greater than its supply, for that which is rare but desired by many is key to the logic of luxury (Berry 1994: 32).

Hindman reminds us that 'gates and gatekeepers remain a critical part of the information landscape, even in the Internet age' (2009:

loc. 403). Contra celebratory discourses on the WWW as a land of democracy, a space open to all and a 'digital sublime' (Mosco 2004), gates and boundaries are re-embedded on digital platforms, allowing for the reproduction and maintenance of social hierarchies. In the case of Vuitton, both off- and online, price remains a crucial barrier, with the website reiterating the importance of economic capital in the consumption of luxury goods. Many Internet users may be able to access the site, but fewer will be able to progress past the screen to the goods themselves, in contrast with more affordable e-commerce sites such as Asos or John Lewis where 'add to bag', 'pay now' and 'check out' functions are the norm.

Moreover, in the same way that bricks-and-mortar Vuitton shops have doors that, in theory, are open to all passers-by but, in practice, are akin to barriers accessible to a few only – those confident enough not to self-exclude from the luxurious spaces they enclose and pass by the intimidating doormen that keep them – the Vuitton website too has doors akin to barriers. They are the virtual gates of the 'add to shopping bags' tab that feature next to hefty prices and that one cannot move beyond without a high economic capital. They are also the gates signalled by the 'for availability and information call +44 207 998 6286', a number users need to access if they want to go through with their shopping or simply to find out more about an object, as with the Capucine bag mentioned above. Jones notes that 'In the realm of what we might term "virtual estate", what we now find via the internet are "Gates-ed" communities, ones cordoned off in other ways, by interest and by access' (1999: 16). Similarly, in the realm of online luxury shopping one finds areas that are cordoned off, here by high prices, resulting in the establishment of what Jones calls 'limited-access "electronic communities"' (1999: 16), such as the community of the financially privileged whose high economic capital allows them to navigate freely through all the pages of a luxury website and pass through the price boundary towards check-out. It is a myth that by virtue of being accessible to a wide audience online platforms are democratising, for barriers are constantly reinstated that reaffirm status and distinction (see also Jones 1999). Among them are the economic barriers signalled in the high prices featured on a website such as Vuitton's, and which, as in bricks-and-mortar shops, feed on the logic of exclusion that supports luxury. In the first instance, access to these barriers presumes passage across the 'digital divide' itself, since access to the Internet at all is highly differentiated (see, for instance, Castells 2001; Green 2010).

Louis Vuitton started as a trunk company, and travel is a recurring theme on the website, with a section devoted to it in the 'World

of Louis Vuitton'. As mentioned earlier, Berry (1994) singles out travel as 'a subset' of shelter, one of four categories of luxury goods. Similarly Calefato (2014) identifies 'leisure and travel' as luxuries. On the Vuitton website, travel clearly is a luxury. It is constructed as experiential, a 'journey' towards introspection and beauty. It 'is not a trip', as 'The Spirit of Travel' video states, 'It's a process. A discovery' of the self (LV 2014b). Lavish images of dreamlike landscapes, lit-up urban spaces, and individuals in a seemingly meditative spirit are shown interspersed with close-ups of LV-embossed luggage. The consumption of luxury commodities is placed on a higher plane of experience, as a noble, pleasurable and almost necessary pursuit.

However, all travel is not equal and, for many travellers, a journey across space is not a luxury. Indeed, there is, as Bauman notes, a 'global hierarchy of mobility' (1998: loc. 1095; see also Lash and Urry 1994); 'the freedom to move' is 'a scarce and unequally distributed commodity' and a 'stratifying factor' (Bauman 1998: loc. 60). Thus, Bauman makes a distinction between two types of travellers: the tourist and the vagabond. Where the tourist's movement is light, free and unencumbered, that of the vagabond takes place under constraints and the weight of political, economic and social tensions. The tourist, whether on holiday or business, moves freely across boundaries, and is extra-territorialised. The vagabond is under pressure to cross boundaries.

The idea of the disappearance of time and space is one of the myths of globalisation (Ferguson 1992: 74). For most of the population, 'forced territoriality' (Bauman 1998: loc. 393) is the norm. Freedom and ease of movement tend to be the preserve of a 'mobile elite', such as the owners of Vuitton luggage, whose economic capital and privileged social situation allow them to experience, in style, 'the new weightlessness of power' (Bauman 1998: loc. 313). In that respect the doormen at the Vuitton shops I mentioned earlier are also there to ensure that the desirable tourist is let in and the unwanted vagabond is kept out; they are there to enforce, but also to signify, distinction.

LV-signed luggage is both a mark of socio-economic privilege and a testament to the aesthetics of consumption, which, Bauman argues, guides tourism. What matters for the logoed tourist 'is the display of extravagant, even frivolous aesthetic taste' (Bauman 1998: loc. 1501). Witness a staple of celebrity gossip pages: photographs of stars arriving at an airport followed by a heap of LV-embossed luggage, often handled by airport staff. It is easier, it seems, to experience the 'weightlessness of power' (Bauman 1998) when labour is at hand, most likely local, territorialised or deterritorialised, to use
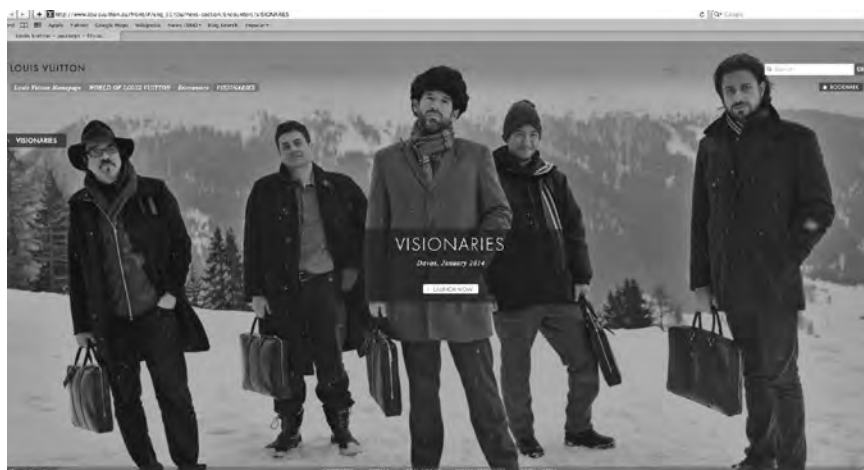
Figure 10.2 The 'Visionaries' as male global elite

Bauman's terminology, to carry the loads of what he calls the exterritorialised tourist. Thus, as Elliott and Urry observe, 'through styling and stylization' and the display of luxury brands such as Bentley, Louis Vuitton or Prada, the global elite 'has become an increasingly well-identified social figure'; 'mobile forms of life', such as the ability 'to be elsewhere', they argue, have become desirable and a key means of accruing prestige and symbolic power (2010: 80).

The mobile elite of Vuitton customers are the professionals the brand features, for instance, in a video entitled 'Visionaries' (LV 2014d). In the opening page five men are shown outdoors at the top of a mountain during the January 2014 Davos Summit (Figure 10.2). All carry a Vuitton porte-documents in an image captioned by 'the art of travel', 'dare to move frontiers' and 'spirit of elegance'. The visionaries are Tom Reiss, the site states, 'an American historian, author and journalist at the New York Times'; Atiq Rahimi, 'a French-Afghan author and movie director' and Prix Goncourt winner; Félix Marquardt, 'Former Director of Communications of the International Herald Tribune' and founder of 'the strategic communications firm Marquardt & Marquardt'; Lourenço Bustani, 'one of Brazil's star entrepreneurs'; and finally Gino Yu, 'Associate Professor and Director of Digital Entertainment and Game Development in the School of Design at PolyU', in Hong Kong. All are part of 'the professional-managerial classes of the advanced societies', which, as Lash and Urry observe, 'are the most footloose' (1994: 29).

In the video they are interviewed, their words reinforcing the myth that time and space have disappeared. The world they describe is free

of frontiers, desirable as such or made up of connected individuals. It largely consists of tourists, in Bauman's sense of the term, and seems oblivious to the many for whom movement can only happen under constraints: Reiss argues that 'the books that are being written now . . . connect human experiences . . . throughout the word but also throughout time'; Marquardt that 'The frontiers of the nation state are disappearing slowly'; Rahimi that 'it's through these waves of immigration, globalization, etc., that little by little frontiers disappear'; Bustani that 'we're part of one global community'; and Yu that 'what entrepreneurship and innovation is really about . . . stepping beyond your frontier'.

Significantly all the Vuitton visionaries are men, and most are white, which reproduces existing visions of elite travelling as masculine and gendered, and mostly directed at the 'new bourgeoisie of private sector executives', as Thurlow and Jaworski have shown in their research on airline companies (2006: 207). Thus, to quote Cavanagh again, 'Against the idea of the internet as a smooth space, we have a highly striated one' (2007: 56), striated, in the case of the Vuitton website, along the lines of gender, class and race. To this list can be added body shape and size as well as age, since young, white, tall and thin bodies dominate the brand's digital platform as they do the fashion media landscape more generally. As Heilbrunn reminds us, 'the luxury model derives from a hierarchical model of society and rests on the strength of authority and thus on the implicit idea of a certain form of power of one group over another' (2005: 355). On their website Vuitton do not part from this model. Quite to the contrary, they reproduce it the better to position their goods as luxury goods, excluding from their field of vision and representation figures that do not fit in with the fashion industry's normative gaze. Marion (2000: 300) notes that luxury feeds on exclusion, and this is a logic at play on the Vuitton website.

This is why one cannot but see the inclusion of a Chinese 'visionary' as a strategic move on the part of Louis Vuitton. Until the beginning of the 1980s China was one of the poorest countries in the world along with India, and it remains a very divided nation with a rich minority of very wealthy consumers and a large proportion of poor people (Das 2009). In recent years it has emerged as the leading luxury market. *The Economist* noted in 2014 that 'The number of luxury consumers has more than tripled in under 20 years, to around 330m people. Spending has risen at a similar rate, to an estimated €217 billion ($300 billion) in 2013. Around 130m of these consumers are in emerging markets, and 50m of those in China' (*Economist* 2014). Online media platforms have started documenting this rise, in

the process representing China as a land of opportunities for luxury brands. *The Business of Fashion* (BoF), for instance, features a section entitled 'The China Edit', which, the platform states, 'is a weekly curation of the most important fashion business news and analysis from and about the world's largest luxury market'. In November 2014 it launched BoF China, in both English and Chinese. An email was sent to the site's subscribers announcing that 'Today, we are pleased to unveil BoF China, bringing our authoritative, analytical, award-winning journalism to the \$300 billion Chinese fashion and apparel market.' Similarly, *China Internet Watch* (2014) headlined a November 2014 entry 'China the Biggest Luxury Goods Buyer Worldwide', while *Jing Daily* (2014), a site devoted to 'The Business of Luxury and Culture in China', tells the reader 'How to get China's Rich to Take up Skiing: Sell the Lifestyle'. Similarly numerous are the business books whose titles sell the idea of China as a nation to capitalise on: *Luxury China: Market Opportunities and Potential*, *Elite China: Luxury Consumer Behavior in China* and *Luxury Brand Marketing in China* are a just few of the many texts that present China as capitalism's new El Dorado.

In the same way that the inclusion of Gino Yu in the Vuitton 'Visionaries' video can be read as a sign of the company's interest in capitalising on the Chinese market, so can its occasional featuring of Chinese models on its website and social media platforms. On 24 November 2014, for instance, of the seventy-four pins included in the 'Louis Vuitton Friends' section of the brand's Pinterest platform, other than the fifty-one white Western friends (well-known models, actresses and other celebrities), one finds black American singer Pharrell Williams, Japanese actress Rinko Kikuchi, Japanese model Ai Tominaga, retired Japanese football player Hidetoshi Nakata, Japanese-Australian actress Shiori Kutsuna, model Lily Kwong, who is of Chinese, Irish and German origins, and Chinese actresses Fan Bing Bing and Sun Li. The brand's interest in both the Japanese and the Chinese markets is clearly articulated.

In July 2012 Vuitton opened their biggest shop in China in Shanghai, and the city features on a map the website shows of Vuitton stores across the world. On this map, the name of each city is taken over by the LV logo, as if the city's name was that of the luxury brand. Persson notes the importance, in digital spaces such as websites, of 'abstracted and highly symbolic objects, such as icons, menus and buttons' (2001: 44). As displayed on the Vuitton digital platform, the LV logo becomes icon at the service of the company's branding of cities as Louis Vuitton cities (Figure 10.3), of travel destinations as places whose value resides in their quality

Figure 10.3 Louis Vuitton cities

as luxury shopping destinations, a dimension the brand also empha-
sises in their recently launched Shanghai travel guide, one of the
guides the brand devotes to cities across the world. There, as in
many tourist guides, shopping is placed alongside activities such
as visiting museums, in a process of commodification of tourism
many authors have documented (see, for instance, Urry 2002). The
promoting and selling of LV monogram luggage also participates in
this commodification.

The map also indicates that Louis Vuitton clusters around cer-
tain parts of the world only. The agglomeration of LV signs clearly
displays a centralised core of Louis Vuitton cities located in an axis
spanning North America, Western Europe and East Asia. Similarly,
the 'Choose your location' section of the website lists the follow-
ing areas: Europe; Americas; Asia; Oceania; Middle East (English);
International (English).

Lash and Urry (1994: 28) make a distinction between core and
periphery whereby the core consists in 'the heavily networked more
or less global cities' and the periphery in 'isolated areas in the same
countries, in the former Eastern Europe or in the Third World'. The
core-periphery distinction reminds us that globalisation does not
follow a symmetrical pattern (Lash and Urry 1994: 28). Although
it has been argued that this distinction no longer holds true (see,
for instance, Das 2009), the geography of consumption of Vuitton
goods, as presented on their website map, intimates that urban hubs
still dominate the geography of luxury consumption, and that when
it comes to luxury goods globalisation certainly is not a symmetrical

process. There are, as Dicken argues, 'persistent peripheries': 'most of the continent of Africa, parts of Asia and parts of Latin America', where poverty and deprivation reigns (2011: 606). These peripheries have not been included in the trajectory of globalisation, with its 'progressive spatial segregation, separation and exclusion' (Bauman 1998: loc. 71), reminding us once again that 'Luxury divides' (Calefato 2014: 36), and it does so in terms of both social and geographical spaces.

Conclusion

The process of inclusion which informs luxury is concurrent with a process of exclusion, for 'the diffusion [of luxury goods] to the whole of the social body would abolish the very notion of luxury' (Marion 2000: 300). In this chapter, I have interrogated the role a brand's website plays in the articulation of the logic of exclusion that fuels luxury, to look at the ways luxury online can obscure dimensions of experience and of the social world that do not serve the interests of commerce and profit. In doing so, I have also drawn attention to some limits of theories of globalisation and digital culture. Internet technology is not inherently all welcoming and inclusive. The technological is social too and as such is only as democratising as its producers and users can allow it to be. David Harvey exhorts us to 'get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market and the commodity, in order to tell the full story of social reproduction' (1990: 423). This process includes paying attention to spaces of articulation of brand identities such as the web sphere, for, like print media, digital media are key to the building of collective imaginaries, to the 'ideoscapes' 'electronic capitalism' creates and feeds on (Appadurai 1998: 8), and in which the luxury industry has carved itself a place.

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