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Material Pleasures: The Solace of Lockdown Retail Therapy

‘Objects […]become happiness pointers’ (Ahmed 2010: 34)

Beyond the critical risk and consequences of infection itself, the impact of the Covid 19 global pandemic has been felt on a range of infrastructural, intersocial and personal levels. I was lucky to relocate temporarily from London to a rural setting where I became a carer, while continuing to work online as a university lecturer; however, in line with tens of millions of others, the pandemic triggered feelings of stasis, uncertainty and vulnerability. This led to high levels of anxiety, to which was added a sense of physical and mental deterioration due to invasive surgery in the form of three major retinal-related operations.

Toward the end of 2020, after finishing work online, I found myself trawling the internet for premium brands on sale. Although, pre-Covid, I had occasionally shopped in store in central London, I seldom bought online. Given the circumstances of the second and third lockdowns, this was the only retail option; however, two factors are noteworthy: firstly, I was undertaking this far more intensively than before; secondly, I was only concerned with fashion items that provided a sensorial and aesthetic counterbalance to my actual circumstances; the only criteria was the ability to project me into a promissory future, and to provide an alternative to the mundane realities of life in lockdown.

This review offers an account of my engagement with this hedonic fashion consumption. Through a ‘sensual reflexivity’ (Vannini et al 2011: 19), I consider this practice as a retort to gloom, providing both solace and pleasure, and one that drew on, and also activated, the imagination through sensorial and emotional engagement.

In total, I purchased 22 items online and around these I constructed private narratives of potential, future use as they were tried on, repeatedly, in the privacy of an operational space, three small rooms, before certain items were worn out for the only permissible external activities on offer: going for a walk or essential shopping. Only one item was returned.

Although ‘retail therapy’ is widely dismissed as ‘ineffective, wasteful, and a “dark side” of consumer behavior’ (Kasser and Sheldon, 2000 in Rick el al 2014: 37), this personal reflection attests to the potential ‘psychological benefits’ (Rick et al. 2014: 373) of fashion consumption, which became an exploratory, experimental, anticipatory and material practice that offered a pleasurable counterpoint to bleak reality. I interpret this as ‘gift-giving’, a hedonic strategy of reassurance associated with ‘identity-affirmation’ (Koles et al. 2018: 114) that was experienced and expressed as embodied practice on sensory, emotional and cognitive levels. I conceptualise gift-giving as a form of ‘compensatory consumption’, defined by Mandel et al as the ‘consumption…motivated by a desire to offset or reduce a self-discrepancy’ (2016: 134), a position defined by Higgins as ‘an incongruity between how one currently perceives oneself and how one desires to view oneself’ (1987 in Mandel et al. 2016; 134).

Boddice and Smith’s nascent ‘history of experience’ (2020) incorporates studies of the senses and of emotions, two discrete fields, to allow an exploration of experience that allows us ‘to capture the lived, meaningful reality of historical actors (2020: 16-17). While clearly impacted by shared socio-cultural circumstances, the singularity of experience should be emphasised; each lockdown story recounts specifics of perception, emotional response and its unique content.

Returning to the solace of materiality, as Hsu explains, the senses mediate with material culture, and ‘[S]ensory experiences are produced, enacted and perceived in combination with each other, intertwined with emotion, meaning and memory’ (2008:440). This resonates on a personal level, as does the proposition by Bull et al that the senses ‘mediate the relationship between self and society, mind and body, idea and object’(2006:5), highlighting an embodied engagement, which both drives and is driven by emotions that stimulate complex cognitive responses.

Within the setting of lockdown, clothing consumption offered me solitary pleasure, with both exteroceptive and interoceptive senses activated: proprioception, an awareness of muscle movement, and the kinaesthetic awareness of the dressed body in motion, merged with haptic and visual engagement. The gratification drawn from this intersensorial engagement was heightened by that blending and also what Pink refers to as the ‘sensory imagination’(45: 2015), which she proposes as ‘the fuel for action’ (Appadurai 1996: 7 in Pink 2015: 45). Through my engagement with the materials of fashion, suitable occasions and potential combinations of dress were created within my imagination, and through this experience I plotted a sartorial path to a more optimistic horizon.

To explore the significance of this engagement in situ, Howes’ notion of ‘emplacement…the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment’ (2005: 7), captures the lived experience of handling and experimenting with the items bought. Environment here refers to the social as well as the physical location, and this emplacement involved a dialogue with myself and also friends, via various internet platforms, who were brought into the confines of the operational space. With mind an integral part of the body, my engagement was directed by the corporeal, with perception operating on various levels. I consider this a form of ‘attunement’, defined by Harris and Sorensen as ‘the phenomenological basis of being-in-the-world’ (2010: 151). Taken from Heidegger, this concept is central to how we interpret our worlds, and how we ‘perceive and recognise moods and emotions’ (2010: 15) in others and in ourselves. Crucially, ‘attunement always involves material things’ (2010: 151). Returning to emplacement, the items within the operational space in which this sensorial engagement was undertaken provided emotional triggers into which I fed my own aesthetic ambitions, as a form of imagined ideal self, to develop chains of feeling that themselves drew on my past.

Turning to certain items, I consider my experience: Online, the elevated aesthetic of a Dries van Noten shirt, with a somewhat roughly drawn print channelling art nouveau through late sixties retromania, offered an intriguing challenge. While undeniably visually stimulating, the print was compromised by a palette that combined Pantone 448C, described by Grebey in Insider.com as officially ‘the ugliest colour in the world’ (2016: n.p.), purple and mauve, a tone I usually find connotative of an overly restrained, depressing respectability. Still, I took a chance, based on the fall of the shirt and the clever playfulness of the design in images online. Unwrapped, the balance of cut, fabric, print and palette worked in a joyful synergy that induced positive emotions that led to a feeling of glamour, which then built projected scenarios of post-Lockdown social events.

* Figure 1 – Dries van Noten shirt <

As with the shirt, a Paloma Wool jumper in a cashmere/mohair mix exemplifies how joy stimulated through engagement with materiality allows a ‘haptic way of seeing’ (Riegl 1985 in Le Breton et al 2020: 34), and this ardent, intersensorial scrutiny reflects Pallasmaa’s evocation that ‘the hands want to see, the eyes want to caress’ (2005: 14). When worn with nothing underneath, or with short sleeves, the jumper, in blue, green, yellow and brown stripes, rests softly on the body, inducing contentment through the material encounter of skin and wool. When first worn, my mind turned to social summer evenings on which it would replace a jacket. For work online, it offered an ideal balance of informality and aesthetically attuned effort; its reassuring texture and the positive reception it received transformed it into a kind of downy armour to approach student cohorts. A womenswear item, it has none of the cumbersome bulk of men’s knitwear and this lightness conveys a gender fluidity that, as with the shirt, is deeply satisfying and comforting on a personal level.

* Figure 2 – Paloma Wool jumper <

The box-fresh, smooth leather of the Paul Smith boots was exhilarating to touch, but painful to wear. Although my size, they felt too tight. However, as I was enamoured by the navy blue, and curvature of the toe, as seen from above, I decided to keep them. This necessitated stretching them gradually for eventual use outside, which involved wearing them for half-hour periods, and engaging with the resultant pain through nociception. This emplaced engagement included rotating my feet slowing, working carefully with the muscles and tendons while seated, and also walking within the operational space. The boots possessed an agency with which I willingly engaged and by using a hairdryer to soften the leather in a determined kinaesthetic endeavour, the material resistance was gradually overcome and future use assured.

* Figure 3 – Paul Smith boots <

An example of privileging the decorative over the functional is a translucent pale blue raincoat from the Swedish brand Stutterheim. As Pink states, ‘imagination is…not simply about the future – it might concern imagining a past’ (2009: 40). On encountering the raincoat online, I was immediately transported back to the late 1970s, and to a see-through plastic raincoat I *believe* I tried on several times in Fiorucci while on teenage trips to London. Though I have researched this item, I have found no evidence of its existence; however, for over four decades, the deeply sensorial memory of engaging with what I considered the height of punk-infused disco chic has lingered; In my mind it encapsulates the intentional, ludic kitsch of the brand in the late seventies and wearing it triggers recollections of the experience of embodied glamour when visually and haptically engaging with Fiorucci merchandise and branding in store. As Seremetakis suggests ‘sensory memory or the mediation on the historical substance of experience is not mere repetition but transformation that brings the past into the present’ (1994: 7).

* Figure 4 – Stutterheim raincoat <

When reflecting on my emotionally charged engagement with materiality I acknowledge contradictions that hover over my experience: happiness delivered in fashion packages versus alarm activated by the ideological and socio-cultural ramifications of consumption and materialism. However, despite conceding some conflict between my ideological position and my hedonic engagement, I value the experience of this engagement and how, through their substance and the potential they deliver, these ‘happiness pointers’ (Ahmed 2010: 34) have activated my senses, emotions and feelings in ways that have sustained me through difficult times.

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