Dream Worlds:
Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France
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The second lesson I have relearned is the difficulty of disentangling intellectual from moral support. The two merge to create the confidence that is vitally necessary for anyone embarked on a long writing project. William Johnston, chairman of my dissertation committee, gave me constant encouragement along with scholarly and practical advice. Friends who read the manuscript, or who listened to my efforts to explain some of its themes, bolstered my morale more than they knew. For the same reason, thanking my family is by no means a matter of form. My parents provided enthusiasm, sympathy, and time; my children, amusement and cooperation; and my husband, all of these and infinitely more in the way of ideas, criticism, and encouragement—which is why the book is dedicated to him.

1. The Implications of the Consumer Revolution

The Advent of Mass Consumption—In the 1860s, twenty-year-old Denise Baudu and her two younger brothers, recent orphans, emigrated from a provincial French village to Paris, to live with their uncle. Arriving at daybreak after a sleepless night on the hard benches of a third-class railway car, they set out in search of their uncle's fabric store. The unfamiliar streets opened onto a tumultuous square where they halted abruptly, awestruck by the sight of a building more impressive than any they had ever seen: a department store. "Look," Denise murmured to her brothers. "Now there is a store!" This monument was immeasurably grander than her village's quiet variety shop, in which she had worked. She felt her heart rise within her and forgot her fatigue, her fright, everything except this vision. Directly in front of her, over the central doorway, two allegorical figures of laughing women flaunted a sign proclaiming the store's name, "Au Bonheur des Dames" ("To the Happiness of the Ladies"). Through the door could be seen a landslide of gloves, scarves, and hats tumbling from racks and counters, while in the distance display windows unrolled along the street.

Entranced, the three youngsters walked slowly along, gazing at the displays. In one window an intricate ar-
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Arrangement of umbrellas formed the roof of a rustic cabin, while in another a dazzling rainbow of silks, satins, and velvets arched high above them. At the last display of ready-to-wear clothing, a snowfall of expensive laces cascaded in the background, and before them pirouetted three elegant mannequins, one draped in a velvet coat trimmed with silver fox, another in a white cashmere opera cloak, the third in an overcoat edged with feathers. The heads of the mannequins had been removed and been replaced by large price tags. On either side of the display, mirrors endlessly multiplied the images of these strange and seductive creatures, half-human and half-merchandise, until they seemed to people the street.

Denise awoke from her reverie. She and her brothers still had to locate their uncle. Asking directions, they discovered they were on the very block where he kept his shop. It was housed in a moldering building on the opposite side of the street, where its three dark, empty windows grimly confronted the brilliant displays of Au Bonheur des Dames. Inside Denise glimpsed a dim showroom with a low ceiling, greenish woodwork, and tables cluttered with dusty bolts of cloth. She felt as if she were staring into the dank shadows of a primeval cave.

Denise is the heroine of Émile Zola's novel Au Bonheur des Dames (1884), which opens with this account of her arrival in Paris. Her initial encounter with a department store dramatizes the way nineteenth-century society as a whole suddenly found itself confronting a style of consumption radically different from any previously known. The quantity of consumer goods available to most people had been drastically limited; a few kitchen utensils were prepared to a sparse and monotonous diet, several well-worn pieces of furniture (bed, chest, table, perhaps a stool or bench), bedding, shoes or clogs, a shirt and trousers or a dress (and sometimes one outfit for special occasions), some essential tools. That was all. Moreover, these goods were obtained mainly through barter and self-production, so that the activity of consumption was closely linked with that of production. Money was rarely used by the average person and credit was haphazard and scarce. Only the better-off spent much time in stores; for most, the activity of shopping was restricted to occasional fairs.

In the past century these ancient and universal patterns have been shattered by the advent of mass consumption. Its characteristics are a radical division between the activities of production and of consumption, the prevalence of standardized merchandise sold in large volume, the ceaseless introduction of new products, widespread reliance on money and credit, and ubiquitous publicity. This fabulous prospect of a vast and permanent fair, which transfixed Denise, has since charmed millions of others as it has reached out from the largest cities to ever smaller ones, and from the richest countries to poorer ones. The merchandise itself is by no means available to all, but the vision of a seemingly unlimited profusion of commodities is available, is, indeed, nearly unavoidable. In the wealthier societies the manifestations of mass consumption—department stores, discount houses, supermarkets, chain stores, mail-order houses, and perpetual advertising in newspapers and magazines and on television, radio, and billboards—are so pervasive that we hardly realize how recently and how thoroughly both private and collective life have been transformed into a medium where people habitually interact with merchandise.

The advent of mass consumption represents a pivotal historical moment. Once people enjoy discretionary income and choice of products, once they glimpse the vision of commodities in profusion, they do not easily return to traditional modes of consumption. Having gazed upon the delights of a department store, Denise would never again be satisfied with the plain, unadorned virtues of Uncle Baudet's shop. The hackneyed plot of the young innocent in the big city receives a specifically modern twist, for now the seduction is commercial. We who have tasted the fruits of the consumer revolution have lost our innocence.
The Moral Implications of Mass Consumption—Although such moralistic language is not usually applied to consumer affairs, it is appropriate. The implications of the consumer revolution extend far beyond economic statistics and technological innovations to intensely felt, deeply troubling conflicts in personal and social values. Before the nineteenth century, when only a tiny fraction of the population had any choice in this realm, consumption was dictated for most by natural scarcity and unquestioned social tradition. Where there is no freedom, there is no moral dilemma. But now, for the first time in history, many people have considerable choice—in what to consume, how, and how much—and in addition have the leisure, education, and health to ponder these questions.

The consumer revolution brought both the opportunity and the need to reassess values, but this reassessment has been incomplete and only partly conscious. While the unprecedented expansion of goods and time has obvious blessings, it has also brought a weight of remorse and guilt, craving and envy, anxiety and, above all, uneasy conscience, as we sense that we have too much, yet keep wanting more. We resist our own tendency to judge ourselves and others according to trivial differences in consumption habits.

If mass consumption has altered the patterns of personal and social consciousness, these new attitudes have in turn had profound material effects. The population explosion, the hunger crisis, the energy shortage, the environmental crisis, chronic inflation—all these central concerns of the present originate in our values and habits as consumers. The great hope of the nineteenth century was that production could be expanded indefinitely to meet rising consumption everywhere. We are now coming to terms with the fallacies of that expectation, by recognizing material limits as a permanent condition of human life. While the expansion of production can be regarded primarily as a technical problem, the acceptance of limits on consumption involves not so much technological know-

how as political imagination, personal will, and social morality, with an intellectual understanding of all of these. Such an understanding is now lacking. Decisions are made in response to concrete problems which, pressing as they may be, will only keep accumulating unless our consumer values are clarified.

Such clarification has to begin with a fuller appreciation of just what we mean by consumption. The word is often defined in a vague (and pejorative) sense as "using up something in order to maintain life." Another common view is that consumption is the opposite of production. Hannah Arendt has remarked that these two definitions are contradictory, since consumption cannot be the converse of production when the two together form a reciprocal and interdependent cycle necessary to sustain life. She further suggests that impermanent "consumer goods," having as their purpose the maintenance of life, should be distinguished from "use objects," intended to create a world of durable things serving as a familiar home for man in the midst of non-human nature. According to Arendt, the activities and objects we lump together as involving consumption really include two distinct groups, one related to life sustenance, the other to giving meaning to life.

Something like this distinction may be found by comparing the two Latin expressions that serve as sources for the single word consumption in modern Romance languages. The English word comes from the Latin root consumere—a conjunction of cum and sumere, the latter meaning "to take," so that the expression as a whole signifies "to take away with" or "to use up entirely." With this derivation, it is logical for the English term consumption to refer not only to the use of commodities but also to the wasting away of the body (specifically, in tuberculosis), for in both cases the process involves the destruction of matter. That destruction may be active and rapid, as in the case of consumer goods like food or fuel, or gradual and passive, as in the case of use objects like chairs or
works of art, which are repaired in an attempt to resist the process of deterioration. But in either case consumption is considered equivalent to destruction, waste, decay—in short, to a death-directed process. The unfavorable connotation of the term lingered when, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, it became increasingly used as a specialized term in political economy, a linguistic evolution that accompanied the evolution of an organized capitalist market system.  

The second Latin root suggests a much more positive appreciation of the human relation to material things. This is consummare, from summa, "to make the sum" or "to sum up," as in arithmetic—to carry to completion, to terminate in perfection. The Latin translation of Jesus' last words on the cross is "Consummatus est." The usual English translation of his cry ("It is finished") implies only termination and fails to convey the meaning of a life summed up and perfected in the moment of death. A more adequate and more typical English translation of consummare is "to consummate," which does suggest an understanding of death, and therefore of life, as achievement despite and, indeed, through the inevitable destruction of animate and inanimate matter.  

This second Latin root is the source of the French terms—the verb consommer and its related noun la consommation—which are translated into English as "to consume" and "consumption." The difference in linguistic origins means that the French expressions have implications not conveyed by the English equivalent. For example, the rich broth the French call a consommé is not so named because it is used up as a food but because it represents the distilled essence of bouillon. The French also have a word consumer, from the first Latin root, consumere, which is properly reserved for specific actions of destruction such as those of fire, corrosion, or wasting disease. In popular usage, however, the two French words consommer and consumer have long been confused—an instructive confusion, contravening as it does national pride in lin-

guistic precision. It suggests the ambiguity of consumption itself, its mingled nature as achievement and destruction, as submission to entropy and triumph over it. A part of us craves the rewards of "using up" the good things of life, while another part is aware of moving ever closer to the point of death, which will "sum up" our lives in a way that has nothing to do with transient pleasures. The fundamental ambivalence in values lies not in the words but in ourselves.  

The Relevance of French History—In attempting to understand the implications of mass consumption, Americans today habitually turn to social scientists such as the sociologist Vance Packard or the economist J. K. Galbraith, who are among the best-known writers on the subject. The current prestige of the social sciences is such that this response is a natural, almost an automatic, reflex, but such responses are not always entirely beneficial ones. At the least there is ample room for a variety of approaches to understanding a subject of such import. This book seeks that understanding in the past.  

Consumer society is the product of a long historical evolution, at once material and mental. Its material evolution deserves far more study than it has yet received from economic and social historians. In this book, however, the mental evolution is the primary concern. As much as do our economic and political institutions, our attitudes have a history, and examination of their origins may be equally helpful in assessing contemporary life. To explore the emergence of the consumer mentality requires the techniques of cultural and intellectual history, techniques which are humanistic without being unscientific. They include an alertness to figurative language, to allusions and overtones, to how people express themselves as well as what they express, in order to discern patterns of response that have a collective validity. Such techniques are sometimes frowned upon in the social sciences today, especially in those branches which seek quantifiable evi-
dence. However, as we shall see, one value of the historical approach is that it uncovers alternative modes of social science, advanced at the time the profession was taking shape, which could be more helpful in understanding modern consumption than many of the prevailing modes.

Another reflex impels most Americans to assume that if history can indeed be a powerful aid in understanding the present, our own national history must be the most helpful of all. Again this is a natural response, not only because of national pride, but even more because the United States has become a paradigm of modern consumer society. The idea of studying a paradigmatic national model is basically commendable. It provides a focus for an inquiry which, if viewed on an international scale, would be hopelessly unwieldy, and it still leaves room to suggest how the general phenomenon transcends national boundaries.

In fact, however, the history of France, even more than that of the United States, most illuminates the nature and dilemmas of modern consumption. This is because, in the first place, the French have long prided themselves on furnishing a universally valid model of enlightened consumption. By the eighteenth century the way of life enjoyed by the French aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie had established itself as a prototype admired and imitated by upper classes throughout Europe. Princes and kings constructed miniature versions of Versailles; their courtiers admired paintings by Watteau and danced the ga- votte to the music of Rameau; and rich bourgeois hired French tutors for their children, instructed their chefs to prepare dishes à la française, and bought chairs designed in the style of Louis XV. This prototype was also adopted by the upper classes in the American colonies, who imported from Europe their manners, card games, liquors, fashions in clothing, and furniture.

These consumer habits, together with less tangible patterns of taste and manners, of reason and feeling, comprised civilisation, understood by the French as an absolute standard worthy of emulation by all other peoples. The concept of civilisation provided an authoritative guide for the consumer—in an age when only a small fraction of the population were consumers in the sense of enjoying discretionary spending—by positing a humanistic ideal capable of giving consumption a meaning and purpose. In the nineteenth century, however, the humanistic ideal of civilisation tended to evaporate, leaving behind a residue of material possessions which by themselves claimed prestige for their owners. By the end of that century the model of consumption that had originated in prerevolutionary court life had become degraded to the level of the heavy velour curtains, crystal chandeliers, ornate mirrors, and imitation Louis XV divans in the cramped salons of aspiring tradesmen. They can be seen in living rooms even today; such is the tenacity of the forms of courtly life and, in a far more elusive way, of the ideal of civilisation they were intended to embody.

The development of this ideal and these forms in France is the subject of the next chapter. Chapter III will examine the consequences of the consumer revolution, which opened up the pleasures of discretionary consumption to the masses and challenged the authority of the courtly model of consumption. Although the concept of a consumer revolution is far less familiar than that of the industrial revolution, they are really two facets of a single upheaval that decisively altered the material basis of human life. Mass consumption inevitably accompanied mass production. A transformation of such magnitude cannot be dated precisely, but the tempo of change was at its swiftest in the nineteenth century. In France, the critical period runs from about 1850 to the outbreak of World War I. Between those dates there was for the first time a steady (if not unbroken) increase in purchasing power—the basic economic fact upon which all the rest depended. A Parisian worker who had 100 francs to spend in 1850 had the equivalent of 165 francs by the early years of the twentieth century. This increase in discretionary income meant that he was able to
buy more staples like fuel, fabrics, and, above all, food. Even more significantly, Frenchmen could purchase more nonessentials. For example, they continued to eat about the same amount of potatoes and bread from 1850 to 1914 but consumed far more wine, meat, sugar, coffee, and cheese. Furthermore, the percentage of income spent on all foods kept falling, from an average of nearly 80 percent for a working-class family in 1850 to about 60 percent by 1905. As disposable income rose, banking systems were overhauled to facilitate payment greatly, especially by the introduction of the ordinary bank check. The increasing availability of credit was particularly significant in France, where before 1860 credit and deposit banking for individuals and small businesses was almost nonexistent.4

These economic transformations are one mainspring of the consumer revolution. The second (and the two are wholly interdependent) consists of a torrent of technological changes that simultaneously lowered the cost of existing consumer goods and provided entirely new ones. The enormous gains in productivity made available both more goods and more money with which to buy them. Steam, the productive force in the early days of industrialization, was supplanted by the internal combustion engine and by electricity, forms of power that could be transported more easily and could be reduced in scale for use by individual consumers. The distinctive inventions of early industrialization were machines of production, especially for the production of textiles, which consequently led the way in the revolution of mass-marketed, cheaper goods. After 1850 many notable inventions were consumer products themselves—the bicycle, the automobile, chemical dyes, the telephone, electric lighting, photography, the phonograph. Never before or since has there been such a concentration of technological change affecting the ordinary consumer. What he ate, what he ate with, where he lived, what he wore, how he moved around—all these daily activities and more were being altered simultaneously.

The advent of the consumer revolution in the French provinces was more gradual than in the cities but was still decisive. In the 1860s there were still large regional differences in provincial consumer habits: in Provence a peasant ate wheat bread; in the north he ate potatoes and rye bread; and in the center of the country, he ate chestnuts and potatoes. By 1900, they all ate wheat bread. In the 1860s the dress of peasant and also of working-class women was noticeably darker and cruder than the complicated trains, trailing skirts, laces, and ribbons of wealthier women. By the 1890s everyone wore shorter, simpler, more colorful clothes. Mass consumption means that similar merchandise reaches to all regions and all classes, and by the turn of the century this uniform market was expanding in France.5

The consumer revolution introduced a style of consumption unlike the model that had originated in the courts and had gradually spread among the wealthy bourgeoisie. The upper classes had assumed that the kind of luxuries they preferred would permeate the lower levels of society in time. The future was expected to bring, in the popular phrase, “the democratization of luxury.” The future held a rude surprise. The luxury that was democratized was quite different in character from the upper-class paradigm. And in creating this new style of mass consumption the French were nearly as preeminent in the nineteenth century as they had been in developing the courtly model in earlier times. France pioneered in retailing and advertising, the twin pillars of modern consumer life. Its capital city became a sort of pilot plant of mass consumption. The period of its most rapid change was just beginning when Denise Baudu is supposed to have disembarked there. By the time she reached middle age, a quarter of a century later, she would have seen the transmutation of Paris from the cramped city of Victor Hugo to a modern capital of consumption, a city of boulevards, cafés, electric lights, apartments, advertising posters, the Métro, cinemas, restaurants, and parks, with production largely exiled to an outer belt while the heart of the city
was devoted to commerce. If the North of England is the
landscape that symbolizes the industrial revolution, the Ile
de France can well claim to serve as the emblem of the
consumer revolution.

French initiative in creating the new style of mass
consumption was crowned by the Paris expositions of
1889 and 1900. There was revealed for the first time a
planned environment of mass consumption; there
thoughtful observers realized, in a confused and uneasy
way, that they were immersed in a strange new world of
consumer behavior. They saw crowds milling around dis-
plays of luxurious automobiles and around glass cages
developing couturier-clothed mannequins; taking imagi-
nary voyages via cinematic techniques to the floor of the
sea or the craters of the moon; and, at night, staring at
displays of lighted fountains or at voluptuous belly
dancers wriggling in a reproduction of a Cairo nightspot.
The expositions and similar environments (such as depart-
ment stores and automobile trade shows) displayed a
novel and crucial juxtaposition of imagination and mer-
chandise, of dreams and commerce, of collective con-
sciousness and economic fact. In mass consumption the
needs of the imagination play as large a role as those of the
body. Both are exploited by commerce, which appeals to
consumers by inviting them into a fantasy world of plea-
sure, comfort, and amusement.

The Relevance of French Thought—Now it is possible to
understand why French thinkers around the turn of the
century were peculiarly sensitive to the impact of the
consumer revolution—and this is the final reason why the
French experience is uniquely illuminating. They were
witnessing an historical collision as longstanding cultural
traditions of enlightened consumption slammed into ma-
terial and social changes that directly challenged those
traditions. They sensed that they lived in an age of transi-
tion from which there could be no return to the former
state of things—a situation that aroused both great hopes
and great apprehensions. New combinations of thought
and feeling were ventured and new values enunciated,
since inherited ones were for the most part inadequate to
deal with changing social reality. The generations of the
1880s and, especially, of the 1890s were richly inventive in
what we would now call consumer lifestyles. In those
decades emerged at least two major modes of consump-
tion that provided alternatives to the courtly and mass
models already described. The first alternative, elitist in
spirit and derived from the dandy tradition, attempted to
transcend the supposed vulgarity of ordinary consump-
tion through a uniquely individual arrangement of com-
modities serving lofty spiritual and aesthetic ideals
(Chapter IV). The second lifestyle, inspired by democratic
principles, embodied the ideal of social reform by reform-
ing the design of everyday consumer items (Chapter V).

Both the elitist and the democratic modes of consump-
tion have proved durable. Their contemporary equivalents
are all around us, and, together with upper-class and mass
consumption, they make up an interdependent system of
lifestyles that still endures. But in France some of the
innovators who helped define these styles of consumption
became acutely aware of the frustrations that result from
placing such emphasis on merchandise as a means of
personal and social self-definition, no matter how idealis-
tic the motives for this emphasis may be. The accumulat-
ing sense that the consumer revolution had caused a
moral crisis which could not be resolved by multiplying
lifestyles led to a reconsideration of the moral implications
of modern consumption.

French thinkers were particularly well prepared to
undertake this reconsideration because they had behind
them the intellectual tradition of the moraliste—an untrans-
latable term suggesting a thinker with a broadly philo-
sophical and historical outlook and a bent toward cultural
criticism and social commentary. The closest exemplars
in the English-speaking world are the great Victorian social
prophets like Thomas Carlyle or John Ruskin. In France
the tradition is especially old and well-established (Michel de Montaigne, who wrote in the sixteenth century, is a famous early example), and it still retains considerable respectability (Albert Camus is a twentieth-century example). Most of the moralistes to be discussed here are less famous than these but were no less molded by an outlook that encourages them to consider social and economic changes with an awareness of their ethical implications. They are well-educated, well-informed, intelligent commentators, not necessarily the central geniuses of their day but hardly representative of mass opinion. In many cases they occupy a strategic middle ground between the world of ideas and that of ongoing political, social, and artistic activities.

In trying to assess the implications of the consumer revolution, some of these thinkers revived the venerable concept of luxury and tried to update traditional arguments about its morality to apply to the new “democratized” luxury. Their debate revealed a profound division between desire to consume and guilt about that desire, and this ambivalence formed a serious fault line in bourgeois culture. The desire was justified by the scientific authority of evolutionary theory, which equated moral and material progress; the guilt derived from religious and philosophical teachings of great antiquity, which upheld the virtues of austerity. Although modern science and traditional ethics were both respected authorities, in regard to consumption they offered conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable advice (Chapter VI).

The late nineteenth-century debate about luxury never got beyond this deadlock. Only when the moral problems of modern consumption were posed in different terms was real progress made in solving them. The concept of solidarity above all others suggested the kinds of values most appropriate to post-consumer revolution society. Charles Gide applied the concept of solidarity to economics, calling for consumers to unite and cast off their subservience to producers. More than this, Gide put his ideas into practice by helping found some of the first important consumer organizations, which eventually joined forces with consumer cooperatives begun by socialists (Chapter VII). Émile Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde applied solidarity to social thought and suggested ways in which mass consumption might give rise to new systems of social values (Chapter VIII). All these thinkers of the 1890s and early 1900s advocated means for consumption to serve social values rather than imposing its own material values upon society.

World War I cut short this era of intellectual experimentation. Not only, did its destruction of productive capacity sharply reduce opportunities to consume but its slaughter made the subject of consumer ethics seem frivolous. Intellectuals who had been concerned with the social effects of technological change instead became preoccupied with the implications of mechanized warfare. Now that production has more than recovered from the effects of two world wars, we have come to realize that, along with our military technologies, our technologies of consumption may pose a threat to world peace and even to human survival.

In coming to terms with that realization, we may be helped by reexamining ideas raised in France during the consumer revolution. French intellectuals of that time were prophetically aware that consumption would have to be restricted at some point, that the endless multiplication of merchandise Denise saw in the department-store window was only a mirage. While no one can solve our dilemmas for us, these social critics raised issues we now confront; they defined problems, pointed out dead ends, and provided a starting point for further inquiry. By examining their contributions, we may arrive at a fuller appreciation of what was unquestionably one of the great creative periods in French culture. Even more importantly, this act of historical recovery may increase our understanding of the social ethics of consumption and enable us to create a viable moral code of our own.
3 The Dream World of Mass Consumption

The School of Trocadéro—The arrival of the twentieth century was celebrated in Paris by a universal exposition spread over 550 acres and visited by 50 million people from around the world. The 1900 exposition was the climax of a series of similar events that began with the Crystal Palace exposition in London in 1851 and continued to be held at regular intervals during the second half of the century (in 1855, 1867, 1878, and 1889) in Paris, the undisputed if unofficial capital of European civilization. The purpose of all expositions was, in the popular phrase of the time, to teach a "lesson of things." "Things" meant, for the most part, the recent products of scientific knowledge and technical innovation that were revolutionizing daily life; the "lesson" was the social benefit of this unprecedented material and intellectual progress. The 1855 exposition featured a Palace of Industry filled with tools, machinery, and sequential exhibits of products in various stages of manufacture. The 1867 fair had an even more elaborately organized Palace of Industry (including the first displays of aluminum and of petroleum distillation), and a History of Labor exhibit showing tools from all eras. At the 1878 exposition the wonders of scientific discovery, especially electricity and photography, were stressed. In 1889, at the exposition commemorating the outbreak of the French Revolution, the "lesson of things" was taught on a grand scale. The two focal points of the 1889 fair were the Gallery of Machines, a long hall with a vault nearly 400 feet across where sightseers could gaze from a suspended walkway at a sea of spinning wheels, clanking hammers, and whirring gears, and the Eiffel Tower, a monument at once scientific, technological, and aesthetic, the architecture of which was derived from that of iron railroad bridges; at its summit was an assortment of apparatus for meteorological, aeronautical, and communications research.

Over the decades, the dominant tone of these expositions altered. The emphasis gradually changed from instructing the visitor in the wonders of modern science and technology to entertaining him. In 1889, for all their serious didactic intent, the Eiffel Tower and Gallery of Machines were popular above all because they provided such thrilling vistas. More and more, consumer merchandise rather than productive tools was displayed. The Crystal Palace exposition had been so innocent of commercial purpose that no selling prices were posted there, but at the Paris exposition in 1855 began the tradition of placing price tags on all objects, as well as of charging admission. From then on the emphasis on selling, prizes, and advertising grew until one booster of the 1900 exposition enthused:

Expositions secure for the manufacturer, for the business man, the most striking publicity. In one day they bring before his machine, his display, his shop windows, more people than he would see in a lifetime in his factory or store. They seek out clients in all parts of the world, bring them at a set time, so that everything is ready to receive them and seduce them. That is why the number of exhibitors increases steadily.

At the 1900 exposition the sensual pleasures of consumption clearly triumphed over the abstract intellectual
enjoyment of contemplating the progress of knowledge. This emphasis was evident the moment a visitor entered the grounds through the Monumental Gateway, which, according to one bemused contemporary, consisted of "two pale-blue, pierced minarets and polychrome statues surmounted by oriflammes and adorned with cabo-
chons," terminating in "an immense flamboyant arch" above which, perched on a golden ball, "stood the flying figure of a siren in a tight skirt, the symbolic ship of the City of Paris on her head, throwing back an evening coat of imitation ermine—La Parisienne." Whatever this chic madonna represented, it was certainly not science nor technology. Inside this gateway the sprawling exposition had no orderly arrangement or focal points such as previous ones had possessed. Machines were scattered throughout the grounds next to their products, an indication that tools of production now seemed hopelessly bori-
ing apart from the things they made. The vault of the Gallery of Machines had been cut up—desecrated like a "secularized temple," complained one admirer of the 1889 version—and overrun by a display of food products:

[Instead of] a universal workshop . . . a festival hall has invaded the center of the structure. The extremities are abandoned to the rustic charms of agriculture and to the fattening joys of eating. No more sharp whistles, trem-
bbling, clacking transmission belts; nothing being released except champagne corks."

Despite this confusion or, rather, because of it, thoughtful observers sensed that the 1900 exposition was particu-
larly prophetic, that it was a microcosm of emerging France, a scale model of future Paris, that something rich and strange was happening there which broke decisively with the past and prefigured twentieth-century society. In 1889 and even more in 1900, the expositions attracted a host of journalists of a philosophical bent who provided not only descriptions of the various exhibits but also reflections on their significance. For the most part their sense of the exposition’s prophetic value remained poorly articulated. While convinced that the fair revealed the shape of things to come, they were unsure of the contours and were vaguely apprehensive without knowing quite why. One exception was Maurice Talmeyr (1850–1933), a journalist who reported regularly on the 1900 exposition in a Catholic periodical. No less apprehensive than many of his colleagues, he was unusual in being able to explain why he found the fair so disturbing. He summarized his conclusions in his article “L’École du Trocadéro” (“The School of Trocadéro”), published in November, 1900, just as the exposition was drawing to a close, in the Revue des deux mondes, the most prestigious biweekly in France at that time. *

The Trocadéro was the section of the exposition on the Right Bank of the Seine, directly across the river from the Eiffel Tower, where all the colonial exhibits were gathered. It was in this “school,” Talmeyr contended, that the true lesson of the exposition could be discerned. Exhibits of exotic places were not a new feature. As far back as 1867 expositions had included reproductions of an Egyptian temple and a Moroccan tent, and in 1889 one of the most popular attractions had been the notorious Rue du Caire (“Street of Cairo”) where dark-eyed belly dancers performed seductive dances before patrons in “Oriental” cafés. In 1900, when imperial adventurism was at its height, the number of colonial exhibits expanded accord-
ingly to become, in Talmeyr’s words, a gaudy and inco-
hherent jumble of “Hindu temples, savage huts, pagodas, souks, Algerian alleys, Chinese, Japanese, Sudanese, Sen-
galese, Siamese, Cambodian quarters . . . a bazaar of climates, architectural styles, smells, colors, cuisine, mu-
sic.” Reproductions of the most disparate places were heaped together to “settle down together, as a Lap and a Moroc-
kan, a Malagasy and a Peruvian go to bed in the same sleeping car . . . the universe in a garden!”

Even more disconcerting were the discontinuities and illogicalities found in the details of particular exhibits.
Talmeyr notes, for example, that the Indian exhibit fea-
tured a carefully contrived pantomime acted out by a
group of stuffed animals: an elephant with uplifted trunk,
trumpeted a speech to some hens between his feet, while
next to him a wild boar browsed near a serpent coiled
and ready to strike. In the same neighborhood a couple of
stuffed jaguars were shown feeding their young, while a
rose ibis, "evidently surprised," surveyed the whole table-
au while standing on one foot. The wildlife of an entire
subcontinent was condensed into one scene, an absurdity
which was nonetheless, Talmeyr confesses, highly enter-
taining. "But," he asks, "the lesson? The lesson they are
giving us?" It is by no means the lesson the exhibit intends
to teach, for we learn nothing about the realities of India.
Instead, we learn

that all trickery is childish. They don't want to show us
anything serious, and we have nothing to ask that's seri-
ous. But isn't this precisely the vice of all these exotics
of the exposition? They offer themselves as serious in not
being so, and when they cannot be so.

Talmeyr finds the same vice of inherent and pervasive
trickery in the rest of the Indian exhibit, which consisted
of stacks of merchandise—rugs, cotton balls, plates, sacks
of rice, fabrics, jams—all of which reminded him of a "sort
of Louvre or Bon Marché of Tyre or Baghdad." (The
Louvre and the Bon Marché were two of the largest
department stores in Paris.) The spectacle of India as a
land of overflowing treasure chests was as enticing and
exciting a vision of the exotic as any child could imagine.
But that vision hides what is "serious and adult" about
India, the reality of India as a subdued English colony:

The notion of such an India, of an India-warehouse, so
magnificent and so partially true as it may be, is true only
partially, so partially as to be false, and all these overflow-
ing rooms... speak to me only of an incomplete and
truncated India, that of the cashiers. And the other? That
of the famine? For this land of enormous and sumptuous
trade is equally that of a frightening local degeneracy, of a
horribly indigenous misery. A whole phantom-race dies
there and suffers in famine. India is not only a warehouse,
it is a cemetery.

For the moment, Talmeyr does not dwell on this
somber analysis but continues to cite amusing examples of
the "nullity, buffoonery, gross alteration, or absolute fal-
sity" that abound at the Trocadéro. At an exhibit repre-
senting Andalusian Spain at the time of the Moors he
attends a sort of circus where camels replace the usual
horses—"Camel exercises, camel cavalcades, trained cam-
els that kneel, camels that bow, camels that dance"—
while spectators are sold lemonade and beer by hawkers
in a room lined with rugs for sale, their prices prominently
marked. For two cents the public may also view licentious
scenes through a stereoscope. "Perhaps, after this spec-
tacle, there still remains something for us to learn about
the Moors of Andalusia," Talmeyr comments sarcastically, so
he tells how he went down a staircase to a small court-
yard, "deliciously archaic," full of pretty and curious
items, complete with vaults, columns, an old well, arma-
ments, and so forth:

We are here, it seems, in the most legendary Spain, and
this time there is indeed a well-done reproduction of great
fidelity and delicacy. I feel, in these old walls, in this
broken well, in these small columns which are crumbling,
in a coat of arms that is obliterated, five centuries of
mystery and sunshine... Then I look, I observe more
closely, and I notice, above the door, in the patina of the
stone, the tracing of Gothic letters... I approach, and
what is it I make out?

Simply: Menier Chocolate...

Talmeyr concludes that behind the "ornamental delir-
ium" of the Trocadéro, behind its seemingly mad dis-
order, behind its silly and serious deceptions alike, lies a
strictly logical and consistent ordering principle: the sub-
mission of truth, of coherence, of taste, of all other consid-
An exposition must, above all, be an exposition, which is to say a certain type of didactic banking whose first goal is to attract, to hold, and to attract and to hold by the exclusive means of the bank. A framework is provided for [the exhibitor of exoticism], and he will confine himself within it. Obligations of price, of economy, of placement, of health are imposed on him, and he submits to them. And the quest for success, for attraction, for show, for excitement, for everything that amuses, for all that diverts, will necessarily be his guideline. Truth, history, common sense, will be arranged afterward as best they can. So... why, in English India, do the panther, wild boar, partridge, elephant, monkey, ibis, and serpent present themselves all in a family and form this touching commune? Because this fable gathers them together, and what matters, above all, is to gather them together. And why is starving India incarnated in well-coiffed, well-nourished, well-clothed Indians? Because famine is not and never can be an exposition attraction. And why does Andalusia—in the time of the Moors—recommend Menier Chocolate to us? Because the authentic Moors and the authentic Andalusia do not, according to all appearances, sufficiently allow for advertisements, and an exposition is not going, never has gone, and never will go without advertisements.

The Significance of the Exposition—The exposition of 1900 provides a scale model of the consumer revolution. The cultural changes working gradually and diffusely throughout society were there made visible in a concrete and concentrated way. One change was the sheer emphasis on merchandising. Even more striking and disturbing, at least to observers like Talmeyr, was the change in how this merchandising was accomplished—by appealing to the fantasies of the consumer. The conjunction of banking and dreaming, of sales pitch and seduction, of publicity and pleasure, is far more unsettling than when each element is taken separately. As Talmeyr appreciates, the conjunction is inherently deceptive. Fantasy which openly presents itself as such keeps its integrity and may claim to point to truth beyond everyday experience, what the poet Keats called the “truth of the imagination.” At the Trocadéro, on the contrary, reveries were passed off as reality, thereby losing their independent status to become the alluring handmaidens of commerce. When they assume concrete form and masquerade as objective fact, dreams lose their liberating possibilities as alternatives to daylight reality. What is involved here is not a casual level of fantasy, a kind of mild and transient wishful thinking, but a far more thoroughgoing substitution of subjective images for external reality. Talmeyr stresses the inevitable corruption that results when business exploits dreams. To him all advertising is false advertising. Blatant lies and subtle ones, lies of omission and of commission, lies in detail and in the ensemble, the exhibits claiming to represent the “real Java” or the “real China” or the real anything are not real at all. People are duped. Seeking a pleasurable escape from the workaday world, they find it in a deceptive dream world which is no dream at all but a sales pitch in disguise.

The 1900 exposition incarnates this new and decisive conjunction between imaginative desires and material ones, between dreams and commerce, between events of collective consciousness and of economic fact. It is obvious how economic goods satisfy physical needs such as those for food and shelter; less evident, but of overwhelming significance in understanding modern society, is how merchandise can fill needs of the imagination. The expression “the dream world of the consumer” refers to this non-material dimension. From earliest history we find indications that the human mind has transcended concerns of physical survival to imagine a finer, richer, more satisfying life. Through most of history, however, only a very few people ever thought of trying to approximate such dreams in daily life. Instead, art and religion provided ways to express these desires. But in the late nine-
teeth century, commodities that provided an approximation of these age-old longings began to be widely available. Consumer goods, rather than other facets of culture, became focal points of desire. The seemingly contradictory activities of hard-headed accounting and dreamy-eyed fantasizing merged as business appealed to consumers by inviting them into a fabulous world of pleasure, comfort, and amusement. This was not at all the future that a conservative nationalist like Talmey wished; it was not the vision of a workers’ society that socialists wanted; nor did it conform to traditional bourgeois virtues of sobriety and rationality. But welcome or not, the “lesson of things” taught by the make-believe city of the 1900 exposition was that a dream world of the consumer was emerging in real cities outside its gates.

Exoticism in Department Stores—One obvious confirmation of this lesson was the emergence of department stores (in French grands magasins, “big” or “great” stores) in Paris. The emergence of these stores in late nineteenth-century France depended on the same growth of prosperity and transformation of merchandising techniques that lay behind the international expositions. Talmey was on the mark when he observed that the Indian exhibit at the Trocadéro reminded him of an Oriental Louvre or Bon Marché. The Bon Marché was the first department store, opening in Paris in 1852, the year after the Crystal Palace exposition, and the Louvre appeared just three years later. The objective advantages of somewhat lower prices and larger selection which these stores offered over traditional retail outlets were not the only reasons for their success. Even more significant factors were their practices of marking each item with a fixed price and of encouraging customers to inspect merchandise even if they did not make a purchase. Until then very different customs had prevailed in retail establishments. Prices had generally been subject to negotiation, and the buyer, once haggling began, was more or less obligated to buy.

The department store introduced an entirely new set of social interactions to shopping. In exchange for the freedom to browse, meaning the liberty to indulge in dreams without being obligated to buy in fact, the buyer gave up the freedom to participate actively in establishing prices and instead had to accept the price set by the seller. Active verbal interchange between customer and retailer was replaced by the passive, mute response of consumer to things—a striking example of how the civilizing process tames aggressions and feelings toward people while encouraging desires and feelings directed toward things. Department stores were organized to inflame these material desires and feelings. Even if the consumer was free not to buy at that time, techniques of merchandising pushed him to want to buy sometime. As environments of mass consumption, department stores were, and still are, places where consumers are an audience to be entertained by commodities, where selling is mingled with amusement, where arousal of free-floating desire is as important as immediate purchase of particular items. Other examples of such environments are expositions, trade fairs, amusement parks, and (to cite more contemporary examples) shopping malls and large new airports or even subway stations. The numbed hypnosis induced by these places is a form of sociability as typical of modern mass consumption as the sociability of the salon was typical of prerevolutionary upper-class consumption.

The new social psychology created by environments of mass consumption is a major theme of Au Bonheur des Dames. In creating his fictional store Zola did not rely on imagination alone; he filled research notebooks with observations of contemporary department stores before writing his novel. Zola’s fictional creation in turn influenced the design of actual stores. He invited his friend, architect Frantz Jourdain, to draw an imaginary plan for Au Bonheur des Dames, and not many years later Jourdain began to collaborate on an ambitious renovation and building
program for La Samaritaine, a large department store in the heart of Paris. By 1907, when most of the program was completed, the store closely resembled Zola’s descriptions of Au Bonheur des Dames. Ernest Cognacq, founder of La Samaritaine, was an energetic entrepreneur who probably served as a model for Octave Mouret, the imaginative and innovative owner of Au Bonheur des Dames.

In loving detail Zola describes how Mouret employed exotic décor to encourage shoppers to buy his wares. One section of the novel portrays the reaction of the public to a rug exhibit on the day of a big sale:

[The vestibule was changed into an Oriental salon. From the doorway it was a marvel, a surprise that ravished them all. Mouret had just bought in the Near East, in excellent condition, a collection of old and new carpets, those rare carpets which till then only specialty merchants had sold at very high prices, and he was going to flood the market, he gave them away at cut rates, extracting from them a splendid décor which would attract to the store the most elegant clientele. From the middle of Place Gaillon could be seen this Oriental salon made only of rugs and curtains. From the ceiling were suspended rugs from Smyrna with complicated patterns that stood out from the red background. Then, from the four sides, curtains were hung: curtains of Karamanie and Syria, zebra-striped in green, yellow, and vermillion; curtains from Diarbekir, more common, rough to the touch, like shepherds’ tunics; and still more rugs, which could serve as wall hangings, strange flowerings of peonies and palms, fantasy released in a garden of dreams.]

Customers kept drifting into the store, attracted by this décor so similar to that of the Trocadéro, “the décor of a harem,” in Zola’s words. By afternoon the building was overflowing with a crush of excited, eager shoppers. At the end of the day some of them met in the Oriental salon so they could depart together; they were so enchanted by the rug display that they could talk of nothing else:

They were leaving, but it was in the midst of a babbling crisis of admiration. Mme. Guibal herself was ecstatic:

“Oh! delicious! . . .”

“Isn’t it just like a harem? And not expensive!”

“The Smyrnans ones, ah! the Smyrnans ones! What tones, what finesse!”

“And this one from Kurdistan, look! a Delacroix!”

It was the most profitable day in the history of Au Bonheur des Dames.

The department store dominates the novel. The virtuous but pallid Denise, Octave Mouret, the crudely drawn entrepreneur who tries unsuccessfully to seduce Denise, and the female shoppers whom Mouret does seduce commercially, are all subordinate to the store, which seems to overwhelm them and control their destinies. It does this through means essentially the same as those employed at the Trocadéro exhibits. The counters of the department store present a disconnected assortment of “exhibits,” a sort of “universe in a garden” of merchandise. The sheer variety, the assault of dissociated stimuli, is one cause of the numbed fascination of the customers. Furthermore, the décor of the department store repeats the stylistic themes characteristic of the Trocadéro: syncretism, anachronism, illogicality, flamboyance, childlishness. In both cases the décor represents an attempt to express visions of distant places in concrete terms. It is a style which may without undue flippancy be called the chaotic-exotic. But within one exhibit not chaos but repetition is often employed to numb the spectator even further. When rugs are placed on the ceiling, walls, and floor of the vestibule, when the same item is repeated over and over with minor variations—just as the Andalusian exhibit at the Trocadéro had camels here, camels there, camels everywhere—the sheer accumulation becomes awesome in a way that no single item could be. The same effect is achieved when Mouret fills an entire hall with an ocean of umbrellas, top to bottom, along columns and balustrades and staircases; the umbrellas shed their banality and in-
stead become “large Venetian lanterns, illuminated for some colossal festival,” an achievement that makes one shopper exclaim, “It’s a fairyland!”

Mouret’s most stunning coup, however, is his creation of his own exposition, an “exposition of white,” to celebrate the opening of a new building. The description of this event forms the final chapter of Au Bonheur des Dames, where it becomes a climactic hymn of praise to modern commerce. Mouret constructs a dreamland architecture of “white columns . . . white pyramids . . . white castles” made from white handkerchiefs, “a whole city of white bricks . . . standing out in a mirage against an Oriental sky, heated to whiteness.” In this display, exotic fantasies merge with oceanic ones, and dreams of distant places fade into dreams of bathing in passive bliss, surrounded on all sides by comfort, a fantasy of a return to the womb, which has become a womb of merchandise.

The “Aesthetic” of Exoticism—To return to a question already posed: this may be impressive, but is it civilization? Is it even art? Like the displays of Versailles—the silver furniture of the palace, its fountains of gilt, its acres of mirrors and entire rooms swirled with marble, stucco, and frescoes—department-store displays also are designed to impress the spectator. The difference is in the nature of the audience and the motivation behind the display. At Versailles the audience was the restricted one of the court. The courtiers were impressed mainly by the costliness of the décor, costliness due to the fineness of the materials and to the artistic skill used to work them. These qualities, no matter what motivated them, can be incorporated in objects which have enduring value as decorative art. In the department store, on the other hand, the audience is a large and anonymous public. The stylistic traits of repetition, variety, and exoticism used to seduce it into buying usually have little enduring aesthetic value. The motivation behind the décor is to lure people into the store in the first place and then to imbue the store’s merchandise with glamor, romance, and, therefore, consumer appeal. There is no aesthetic connection between this décor and the objects it enhances, objects that generally lack any artistic merit.

To criticize the chaotic-exotic style as “bad taste,” a frequent condemnation even around the turn of the century, misses the point. As a quality of aesthetic judgment, taste does not apply to transient décor whose purpose is “to attract and to hold” the spectator’s attention. Why the reliance on fake mahogany, fake bronze, fake marble? Because the purpose of the materials is not to express their own character but to convey a sense of the lavish and foreign. Why the hodgepodge of visual themes? Because the purpose is not to express internal consistency but to bring together anything that expresses distance from the ordinary. Exotic décor is therefore impervious to objections of taste. It is not ladylike but highly seductive. In this aesthetic demi-monde, exotic décor exists as an intermediate form of life between art and commerce. It resembles art, it has recognizable themes and stylistic traits, its commercial purpose is wrapped in elaborate visual trappings; yet it does not participate in traditional artistic goals of creating beauty, harmony, and spiritual significance. This hybrid form is an illusion of art, a “so-called artistic element” posing as the genuine article.

Zola, for one, was taken in. He praises Mouret as an aesthetic genius as well as a financial one, for in Zola’s mind the two types of genius are indistinguishable. He lauds the exposition of white, the Oriental salon, and the sea of open umbrellas as artistic successes, because they attract so many customers. His judgment reflects a deep-seated confusion of commercial and aesthetic values. Talmeyr, on the other hand, clearly distinguishes the type of decoration used by modern business for its own ends from traditional forms of art. According to Talmeyr, in over fifty years universal exhibitions had not produced any truly artistic constructions at all, but only a “type of frightful plastered and clumsy heaviness, twisting or declamatory,
of all those domes, balconies, pediments, columns," is True architecture involves the construction of monuments, while expositions require only décor, "stage sets" or "scenery." "Why... insist on transferring to that which is ephemeral in intention, to that which is décor by nature, the principles and procedures of that which is durable and permanent in essence, monument by raison d’être?" Exposition buildings are intended to "make... in their fashion a weighty and proud show," the same goal that inspires posters advertising "a new shoe polish or a new brand of champagne in a manner vaguely derived from that of Raphael." The goal is to convey an "industrial image," not an artistic one, and the search for magnitude or lavishness will never bridge the gulf in intention:

You can imagine the [industrial] image as enormous, as ambitious as you wish, it could be stupefying, it will be no less always and necessarily inept. You can even imagine the façade, the frieze, or the columns pushed to the furthest limits of richness, they will be no less equally stupid.

Talmeyr concludes with the suggestion that décor might be able to invent an authentic style if it renounced the attempt to imitate art and instead realized its own nature. He notes that the only modern edifice of the 1900 exposition which he is tempted to praise is the Monumental Gateway surmounted by "La Parisienne." Talmeyr admits that the gateway is heavy, clumsy, bizarre, and gaudy, and that "La Parisienne" is reminiscent of a peasant girl in a cape. Nonetheless, he remarks, they possess a unique merit, that nothing like them has been seen anywhere, that they resemble nothing! They are absurd... This is also true! But their quality is precisely to be absurd, in an order of ideas where it is logical to be so, and where the only true absurdity, as a result, is to wish to be reasonable.

In environments of mass consumption, the logic of art gives way to the logic of fantasy.
length of an enormous circular canvas representing "without solution of continuity, Spain, Athens, Constantinople, Suez, India, China, and Japan," as natives danced or charmed serpents or served tea before the painted picture of their homeland. The visitor was supposed to have the illusion of touring the world as he strolled by, although Corday hardly found it convincing to have "the Acropolis next-door neighbor to the Golden Horn and the Suez Canal almost bathing the Hindu forests"—the chaotic-exotic style, the universe in a garden, only on canvas! On a somewhat more ingenious level, the Trans-Siberian Panorama placed the spectator in a real railroad car that moved eighty meters from the Russian to the Chinese exhibit while a canvas was unrolled outside the window giving the impression of a journey across Siberia. Three separate machines operated at three different speeds, and their relative motion gave a faithful impression of gazing out a train window. A slight rocking motion was originally planned for the car, but the sponsoring railway company vetoed the idea because it advertised that its trains did not rock.

Corday was even more intrigued by an attraction where not canvases but photographs moved:

This is Cinéorama, the application—it is surprising that it did not appear sooner—of cinematography to the panorama. This ingenious apparatus...is placed in the center of the spectacle to be reproduced...[T]he projector is composed of ten cameras which work in unison and divide the horizon into ten sections, like ten slices of cake.

The Cinéorama could convey the impression of ascending from the earth in a balloon, by a series of panoramic photographs showing things below growing smaller and smaller. To make the illusion even more persuasive, spectators stood in the basket of a balloon to watch the show. Finally, Corday describes some exhibits appealing to many senses at the same time. The Maréorama reproduced a sea voyage from France to Constantinople, complete with canvas panorama, the smell of salt air, a gentle swaying motion (unlike trains, boats were expected to rock), and phonograph music "which takes on the color of the country at which the ship is calling: melancholy at departure, it...becomes Arabic in Africa, and ends up Turkish after having been Venetian."

Even sailing to Byzantium was not enough: the surface of the earth was too small to contain human imagination armed with such gadgetry. Corday marvels that new devices allow the masses to realize the "extraordinary voyages" of Jules Verne, to travel not only where few have ventured but also where none have. The Cinéorama balloon trip was only the first step in flight from earthbound reality. At another exhibit a diorama took the tourist far beneath the earth to dramatize its formation by showing vast subterranean and prehistoric landscapes strikingly lit by electricity. In the Optical Palace photographic plates were pieced together to give the impression of viewing the moon from a distance of only four kilometers. Then, according to Corday,

the diorama makes its appearance; at first prudent, it reproduces with exactitude the lunar landscape: then, fantastically, it paints an imaginary voyage to a star; finally, leaping across centuries as easily as space, it narrates the genesis of the earth in twenty tableaux.

So convincing was this illusion that the spectator was hardly aware of crossing the line between reality and fantasy, of moving from a painstaking reproduction of the moon's surface to a wholly imaginary simulation of a journey beyond the galaxy. Real and fantastic voyages, present and future and prehistoric ones, earthbound and cosmic ones became indistinguishable when all were presented as triumphs of technical ingenuity.

Corday was considerably younger and further to the left politically than Talmey, and because of his democratic sentiments he saw another aspect of these exhibits besides their obvious profitability. He took seriously the educa-
tional purpose, which Talmeyr rejected as a sham. Corday
lauded “the sum of ingenuity, of research and invention,
spent there to amuse the masses usefully, to enrich them
with new visions in all directions of the universe.” Be-
tween 1889 and 1908 the masses rapidly developed “curi-
osity about new horizons, a confused desire to widen a
little, if only in appearance, the framework of life.” Be-
cause modern technology makes it possible to satisfy the
curiosity of those who could never afford to travel in
reality, these exhibits are part of a “great current of de-

cratization that offers to the masses the precious joys
until now reserved for a few.” Even if far from perfected,
technological stratagems such as these constitute “an ex-
traordinary movement of vulgarization, an enormous sci-

centific toy placed in the hands of the masses.”

While expressing forcefully his belief in the educa-
tional and democratic benefits of the “distant visions”
exhibits, Corday fails to question the reliability of what
they teach. He is clearly an intelligent and thoughtful
observer, but his interest in gadgetry tends to make him
neglect the deeper question of veracity. In his mind the
matter of truthfulness becomes transformed to a matter of
mechanical ingenuity. This is how Corday invites his
reader to tour the exposition with him: “Let us go to
attend a veritable concourse of evocations, a sort of agree-
able race where each one exerts himself to press closer to
the Truth.” In this context “Truth” means a mechanically
faithful rendering of external sensations, the sights,
smells, and sounds of travel or of a place. Corday is so
intrigued by the cleverness of the means that he never
stops to ask, as Talmeyr does, whether the mechanical
illusion is faithful to the total social reality or only to
selected external appearances. Talmeyr contends that edu-
cation cannot be made into amusement without being
falsified, while Corday sees no such inevitability. The
façades of the Trocadéro, which Talmeyr finds so elo-
quently expressive of a fundamental mendacity, are dis-
missed by Corday as lacking in technical sophistication

and therefore in crowd appeal: “Certainly, these façades

speak to the eyes, teach them about distant architectural
styles, but do not really constitute attractions, which is to
say efforts combined for an illusion.” In contrast, the
“distant visions” do attract and hold the crowd precisely
because the illusion they create is so convincing.

As Zola confuses aesthetic and commercial standards
in evaluating department-store displays, so Corday con-
fuses technical and commercial standards in judging the
success of the “distant visions” exhibits. The extent of that
confusion is evident at the end of Corday’s article, when
he marvels at the intoxication the exhibits can induce:
“Thanks to them, one can live a long time in a few hours;
travel across vast distances in a few steps; they are like
liqueurs sparkling to the eyes, pleasing to the palate, which
concentrate power and life in a small volume.” This drug-
induced dreaming, this magical escape from ordinary con-
straints—what harm can there be in this confusion of
reality and fantasy so long as it provides the masses with a
taste of “power and life”? Some of the dangers are sug-
gested in the concluding paragraph, which immediately
follows the one just quoted. Corday proposes that

without injuring the interests involved, without trans-
gressing on past contracts, the doors of these attractions
might be generally opened to the people. For a few
months, for two hundred days, from all points of the
continent, trains are going to converge on just one point:
Paris. They are like so many miniature societies in motion,
which money brutally and frankly divides into three
classes. Well, one has to wish that this harsh hierarchy
might disappear at the doorway of the Exposition: that
those who suffer from it might find in this promised land a
short and charming respite from life.

Has Corday himself become unable to distinguish real-
ity from dream? The real world of real train trips was one
of first, second, and third classes, corresponding to high,
middle, and low incomes. The same business world that
ran these trains had invested large amounts of capital in the exposition to advertise their services by operating imaginary train rides at a profit. But Corday seems to imagine that because the voyages at the exposition are illusory, the whole event might become an illusion, a “promised land” of dreams set apart from waking reality. In his muddle he hopes the exposition will not only market fantasies but also become a fantasy. Corday unwittingly testifies to the danger of the intoxication he praises when his delight in a dream world blinds him to its origins in a real social world of classes, profits, and capital.

Cinematic Voyages—The motion picture is the commercial and technological successor to the “distant visions” exhibits. Between the close of the 1900 exposition and the outbreak of World War I, films became a popular attraction in urban France. In 1907 there were two cinemas in Paris; six years later there were one hundred and sixty, and by 1914 cinema receipts in France were 16 million francs a year. Large, well-financed organizations were established to prepare the décors, costumes, and special effects; to devise the script and hire actors, to shoot the film and edit it, to publicize and distribute the product.

“It is a new, and important, and very modern branch of business,” wrote Louis Haugmard in 1913. “This development, extraordinary in its rapidity and extent, this swarming, this ‘invasion’ of cinematography is a fact which deserves to attract the attention of the casual observer who likes to meditate on things.” Haugmard was such an observer. Like Corday, like many other young men in literary circles around the turn of the century, he published a considerable body of creative and critical writings without achieving lasting fame—such is the richness of French letters in that era. Haugmard’s report on the movies, titled “L’Esthétique du cinématographe” (“The ‘Aesthetic’ of Cinematography”), appeared in Le Correspondant, the Catholic journal in which Talmeyr had reported on the 1900 exposition thirteen years earlier. In that interval the marketing of dreams in cinematic form had been transformed from a temporary fairground curiosity into a decisive and established fact of urban life, a phenomenon, to quote Haugmard, “as immense as it is disquieting.”

The jumbled chaos of the exposition had been transferred to the silver screen. Haugmard begins his article by remarking upon the way all forms of entertainment—fantastic, sentimental, comic, dramatic, scientific, historical, moralizing—are shown one after the other in the movie house, so that a Western is juxtaposed with a drawing-room comedy, a social documentary with a travelogue, a comic chase sequence with the fall of Troy. “[There is] nothing that cannot be used... for the confection of a film.” Distinctions of significance and even of realism are obliterated when all levels of experience are reduced to the same level of technically ingenious entertainment. Haugmard further suggests that this cinematic syncretism is a result of the need to appeal to a large public with varying tastes. “In fact, the public of cinematographic spectacles is not coherent. Many ‘milieux’ are represented there, and all sorts of minds.” Because the mass audience is incoherent rather than homogeneous, film programs are also incoherent, for they include something for everyone, just as newspapers and tourist attractions do.

In defining the cinema as a phenomenon of “the people, in the largest meaning of this term,” Haugmard agrees with Corday that modern technology widens the horizons of the masses. Not only does film take people to far-off places, “reproduced in their photographic truth, luminous and trembling”; it also allows them to enter hitherto inaccessible reaches of society through “elegant and worldly dramas which introduce them to milieux where they cannot otherwise penetrate.” Whether the distance is geographic or social, film allows the pleasures of mobility.

Haugmard is, however, inclined to side with Talmeyr.
in condemning these imaginary excursions as childish escapism. A film advertisement promises “an hour of intense emotion”: who could resist this appeal, Haugmard asks? People crave concentrated doses of intense emotion (what Corday called “liquors . . . which concentrate power and life”) to get away from “their sorry and monotonous existence, from which they love to escape.” Haugmard notes that moviegoers much prefer fantasies to portrayals of ordinary life:

“The masses” are like a grown-up child who demands a picture album to leaf through in order to forget his miseries . . . The “cinema,” which is a “circus” for adults, offers to the popular imagination and sensibility, deprived and fatigued, the “beau voyage.”

People want to evade reality, not to learn about it. Certainly the technical dexterity of the medium permits convincing reproductions of visual appearances, “in their photographic truth, luminous and trembling,” but “photographic truth” is not truth. Film can give “the exact reproduction of natural reality” while still being

a factor of artifice and of falsification . . . If it is the realm of fraud, of counterfeit, of trickery, how will a naïve public know how to make the indispensable distinctions and the necessary selection, under pain of inevitable misunderstandings and multiple errors?

Just because of its photographic realism, film offers a nearly irresistible temptation not only to inculcate political propaganda but also “to vulgarize, which is to say, to deform” the noblest novels, plays, and poems; “to romanticize or falsify” history by giving a partial view; and, on current subjects, “to nourish vanities and launch imitations, for the image excites naïve souls.”

Because film speaks in the language of imagery, it is at once emotionally exciting and intellectually deceptive. The rapid succession of “realistic” images captivates the imagination of the viewer without engaging his mind. As an example, Haugmard describes the way a robbery is portrayed on the screen in a series of scenes of violence, beginning with the hold-up of a delivery van,

even down to the mark of the bullet on the wheel; then the judge is shown . . . interrogating the policemen. Imagine the influence on children’s minds of the burglary scenes and the ingenious methods used to throw the pursuers off the track. The prefect of police in Berlin thought it appropriate to forbid children under fifteen to enter movie theatres.

Movies excite because they communicate through powerful, concrete, realistic images. They lie because they communicate only through images:

Why does an evening at the movies, however crammed with the most diverse films, despite everything leave in the mind an impression of emptiness, of nothingness? . . . Hardly is the spectacle over and it is forgotten.

It is because only facts are photographed. All the rest is sacrificed, all that which is intellectual and interior life, and in the human order, only intelligence and soul really count! This exclusive capacity to reproduce only the fact entails its consequences. Action, only action, which is rapid and brutal. From this the suppression, almost absolute, of all psychology. Cinematography is a notation by image, as arithmetic and algebra are notations by figures and letters; now, it is convenient to limit as much as possible in the statement or the exposition all that which is not the sign itself. It is the triumph of simplification.

These remarks apply most directly to the silent films of that era, but even when the image is accompanied by a soundtrack its dominance is maintained. The cinema and its descendant, television, remain positivistic mediums, excluding all that is not fact, visually speaking. By excluding so much, by passing off simplification as totality, they are, to borrow Talmey’s description of the Indian exhibit, true only partially, and so partially as to be false. Haugmard points out that movie actors become “‘types,’"
which is to say that their immediately recognizable personal images come to convey a constellation of values and feelings, down to the child actor who incarnates "Baby." In the same way, the images of the exotic—the colorful rug, the belly dancer, the domed palace—are decorative "types" that incarnate exciting feelings of adventure, romance, and luxury but have little to do with Oriental reality. The language of imagery is also the language of the dream world of the consumer.

Haugmard's final condemnation of the language of imagery is that it goes in one direction only, from screen to spectator. The moviegoer has no need to make a response to be communicated to others, for in the theatre "everything takes place in the domain of silence." The screen does all the work for the viewer, who needs to put forth only the most minimal intellectual effort. "The mental tension required is feeble; fatigue, if there be fatigue at the end of the spectacle, will be purely nervous and wholly passive." Because all the details of the film are explained by a program or narrator, "mental work is already accomplished in advance to suppress the active effort of the spectators." The passive solitude of the moviegoer therefore resembles the behavior of department-store shoppers, who also submit to the reign of imagery with a strange combination of intellectual and physical passivity and emotional hyperactivity. In both cases shared social experience is replaced by uniformity of experience based on response to potent images. In the moviehouse the characteristic sociability of environments of mass consumption is taken to its limit in ordered rows of silent, hypnotized spectators.

Haugmard finds the implications of this behavior so distressing that he evaluates it not in his own words but in the words of an imaginary "man of taste, of a skepticism sometimes morose, sometimes indulgent." In an indulgent mood, the "man of taste" muses that the movies provide tolerable and even delightful illusions, views of lovely landscapes, of strange lands, even of fairylands, for cinematography can realize any dream. What good are Hoffmann, Andersen, and creators of fantasy, what good are poets who invent, when cinematography is there to record scientifically, for the incredulous masses, the wilderest phantasmagorias of ancestral myths?

But in the actual world (and here the "man of taste" turns morose) life will become distorted when the behavior induced by the movies becomes habitual. When movies provide the miracle of "an unlimited posthumous life, there will be no more written archives, only films, catalogued and classified, and the 'pressings' of public life, the 'preserves' of the past, often not exempt from falsification." Not only will our view of the past be altered, but action in the present will alter with an eye to how it will look on film. "Alas! in the future, notorious personalities will instinctively 'pose' for cinematographic popularity, and historical events will tend to be concocted for its sake." Already film is becoming, if not exactly the "religion of the masses," then (borrowing the title of a well-known contemporary book)" the "irreligion of the future":

Through it the charmed masses will learn not to think anymore, to resist all desire to reason and to construct, which will atrophy little by little; they will know only how to open their large and empty eyes, only to look, look, look. . . . Will cinematography comprise, perhaps, the elegant solution to the social question, if the modern cry is formulated: "Bread and cinemas"? . . .

And we shall progressively draw near to those menacing days when universal illusion in universal mummery will reign.

Haugmard's meditation beautifully illustrates a type of culture criticism that deserves to be rehabilitated, a type that originates in aesthetic thought but extends to far more encompassing social and moral issues. When Haugmard places "aesthetic" in quotations in his title, he registers his awareness that the term is only approximate, that no
pristinely aesthetic response is possible, that, as in the case of exposition décor, appraisal of the visual phenomenon must take into account the commercial motivation behind it. Haugmard experiments with a variety of vocabularies—aesthetic, moral, sociological, psychological—in attempting to deal with a cultural phenomenon as immense as it is disquieting, too immense, certainly, to be reduced to any one terminology. In this respect he is an experimentalist, like such other French moralistes of his day as Talmeyr and Corday. They are trying to devise a language appropriate for events at once significant and unbounded by traditional disciplinary categories. Like the experiences they treat, their vocabulary is hybrid and innovative: new forms of consumption demand new modes of criticism.

The Electrical Fairyland—By now it is becoming clear how momentous were the effects of nineteenth-century technological progress in altering the social universe of consumption. Besides being responsible for an increase in productivity which made possible a rise in real income; besides creating many new products and lowering the prices of traditional ones; besides all this, technology made possible the material realization of fantasies which had hitherto existed only in the realm of imagination. More than any other technological innovation of the late nineteenth century, even more than the development of cinematography, the advent of electrical power invested everyday life with fabulous qualities. The importance of an electrical power grid in transforming and diversifying production is obvious, as is its eventual effect in putting a whole new range of goods on the market. What is less appreciated, but what amounts to a cultural revolution, is the way electricity created a fairyland environment, the sense of being, not in a distant place, but in a make-believe place where obedient genies leap to their master’s command, where miracles of speed and motion are wrought by the slightest gesture, where a landscape of glowing pleasure domes and twinkling lights stretches into infinity.

Above all, the advent of large-scale city lighting by electrical power nurtured a collective sense of life in a dream world. In the 1890s nocturnal lighting in urban areas was by no means novel, since gas had been used for this purpose for decades; however, gas illumination was pale and flickering compared to the powerful incandescent and arc lights which began to brighten the night sky in that decade. The expositions provided a preview of the transformation of nighttime Paris from somber semidarkness to a celestial landscape. At the 1878 exposition an electric light at a café near but not actually on the fairgrounds caused a sensation. In 1889 a nightly show of illuminated fountains entranced crowds with a spectacle of falling rainbows, cascading jewels, and flaming liquids, while spotlights placed on the top of the Eiffel Tower swept the darkening sky as the lights of the city were being turned on. At the 1900 exposition electrical lighting was used for the first time on a massive scale, to keep the fair open well into the night. Furthermore, the special lighting effects were stunning. In one of his articles for the Revue de Paris, Corday describes the nightly performance:

A simple touch of the finger on a lever, and a wire as thick as a pencil throws upon the Monumental Gateway...the brilliance of three thousand incandescent lights which, under uncut gems of colored glass, become the sparkling soul of enormous jewels.

Another touch of the finger: the banks of the Seine and the bridges are lighted with fires whose reflection prolongs the splendor...The façade of the Palace of Electricity is embraced, a stained-glass window of light, where all these diverse splendors are assembled in apotheosis.19

Like the technological marvels already mentioned, this one was at once exploited for commercial purposes. As early as 1873 the writer Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (1838–1889) predicted in a short story, “L’Affichage céleste” (which might be loosely translated as “The Heavenly Billboard”),

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that the “seeming miracles” of electrical lights could be used to generate “an absolute Publicity” when advertising messages were projected upward to shine among the stars:

Wouldn’t it be something to surprise the Great Bear himself if, suddenly, between his sublime paws, this disturbing message were to appear: Are corsets necessary, yes or no? . . . What emotion concerning dessert liqueurs . . . if one were to perceive, in the south of Regulus, this heart of the Lion, on the very tip of the ear of corn of the Virgin, an Angel holding a flask in hand, while from his mouth comes a small paper on which could be read these words: My, it’s good!20

Thanks to this wonderful invention, concluded Villiers, the “sterile spaces” of heaven could be converted “into truly and fruitfully instructive spectacles . . . It is not a question here of feelings. Business is business. . . . Heaven will finally make something of itself and acquire an intrinsic value.” As with so many other writers of that era, Villiers’s admiration of technological wonders is tempered by the ironic consideration of the banal commercial ends to which the marvelous means were directed. Unlike the wonders of nature, the wonders of technology could not give rise to unambiguous enthusiasm or unmixed awe, for they were obviously manipulated to arouse consumers’ enthusiasm and awe.

The prophetic value of Villiers’s story lies less in his descriptions of the physical appearance of the nocturnal sky with its stars obscured by neon lights, than in his forebodings of the moral consequences when commerce seizes all visions, even heavenly ones, to hawk its wares. Villiers’s prophecies were borne out by the rapid application of electrical lighting to advertising. As he foresaw, electricity was used to spell out trade names, slogans, and movie titles. Even without being shaped into words, the unrelenting glare of the lights elevated ordinary merchandise to the level of the marvelous. Department-store windows were illuminated with spotlights bounced off mirrors. At the 1900 exposition, wax figurines modeling the latest fashions were displayed in glass cages under brilliant lights, a sight which attracted hordes of female spectators.

When electrical lighting was used to publicize another technical novelty, the automobile, the conjunction attracted mammoth crowds of both sexes. Beginning in 1898, an annual Salon de l’Automobile was held in Paris to introduce the latest models to the public. It was one of the first trade shows; the French were pioneers in advertising the automobile as well as in developing the product itself. This innovation in merchandising—like the universal expositions the Salon de l’Automobile resembles so closely—claimed the educational function of acquainting the public with recent technological advances, a goal, however, which was strictly subordinate to that of attracting present and future customers. The opening of the 1904 Salon de l’Automobile was attended by 40,000 people (compared to 10,000 who went to the opening of the annual painting salon), and 30,000 came each day for the first week. Each afternoon during the Salon de l’Automobile, the Champs-Élysées was thronged with crowds making their way to the show, which was held in the Grand Palais, an imposing building constructed for the 1900 universal exposition. During the Salon the glass and steel domes of the Grand Palais were illuminated at dusk with 200,000 lights; the top of the building glowed in the gathering darkness like a stupendous lantern. People were enchanted: “a radiant jewel,” they raved, “a colossal industrial fairyland,” “a fairytail spectacle.”21

Inside, lights transformed the automobiles themselves into glittering objects of fantasy:

You must come at nightfall. Coming out into the world from the entrance to the Métro, you stand stupefied by so much noise, movement, and light. A rotating spotlight, with its quadruple blue ray, sweeps the sky and dazzles you; two hundred automobiles in battle formation look at you with their large fiery eyes. . . . Inside, the spectacle is
of a rare and undeniable beauty. The large nave has become a prodigious temple of fire; each of its iron arches is outlined with orange flames; its cupola is carpeted with white flames, with those fixed and as it were solid flames of incandescent lamps: fire is made matter, and they have built from it. The air is charged with a golden haze, which the moving rays of the projectors cross with their iridescent pencils. . . 22

Again this is an aesthetic of the exaggerated and showy, of simple but powerful imagery repeated to overwhelm the viewer (what could be more repetitious than two hundred thousand lights?). As with exotic décor, the purpose behind such a display is to win attention and to raise merchandise above the level of the everyday by associating it with exciting imagery.

Unlike images of far-off places, however, a fairyland cannot be accused of falsity because it never pretends to be a real place. Or can it? Electric lighting covers up unpleasant sights which might be revealed in the cold light of day. The illumination of the Grand Palais disguised the building itself. In the words of one visitor:

The Grand Palais itself is almost beautiful because you hardly see it anymore: the confused scrap-iron and copperwork . . . is lost in the shadow; the luminous scallop decorations and chandeliers and . . . allegories, drowned in the irradiation . . . The roof itself, that monstrous skin of a leviathan washed up there on the bank of the river, borrows a sort of beauty from the light which emanates from it. 23

Through the obscuring glare the same visitor noted that the poles supporting the light fixtures were ridiculously ornamented with nautical motifs and garlands which were coming unstuffed. Others who viewed the décor of the Salon de l’Automobile were appalled when in the daylight they saw booths with doorways plastered to resemble those of Persian mosques, Gothic churches, or Egyptian temples, other booths constructed like bamboo huts hung

with Japanese lanterns, and still others rigged with ship’s masts complete with ropes, sails, and flags. The visitor quoted above, horrified by this “so-called artistic element” of the Salon, said that the exhibits showed “an incoherent heap of the most laughable imaginings” which the French should be thoroughly ashamed to display to the rest of the world, except that the displays of foreigners were equally ridiculous. 24 But all that junk miraculously disappeared when the lights came on.

Through fantasy, business provides alternatives to itself. If the world of work is unimaginative and dull, then exoticism allows an escape to a dream world. If exotic décor is heavy, unconvincing, and shabby, then another level of deception is furnished by a nightly fairyland spectacle that waves away the exotic with the magic wand of electricity. Robert de La Sizeranne, art critic for the Revue des deux mondes, compared the Salons de l’Automobile to fairy tale princesses fought over by “perversion and benevolent powers” so that they were “nightfully ugly all day long [and] at night [became] beauties adorned with dazzling jewels.” According to La Sizeranne, this diurnal schizophrenia was being repeated all over Paris. In the day the city displayed “superfluous, ignoble, lamentable ornaments,” while at nightfall “these trifling or irritating profiles are melted in a conflagration of apotheosis . . . Everything takes on another appearance,” the ugly details are lost, and diamonds, rubies, and sapphires spill over the city. 25 Instead of correcting its mistakes, the city buries them under another level of technology. In this respect the whole city is assuming the character of an environment of mass consumption. In the day as well as at night, the illusions of these environments divert attention to merchandise of all kinds and away from other things, like colonialism, class structure, and visual disasters.

How much of the history of consumption is revealed in comparing Mme. de Rambouillet’s salon of witty conversation and candlelight with the twentieth-century Salon
Dreams of Love and Wealth—It is neither necessary nor possible to catalog all the dreams exploited by modern business. Although their range is as boundless as that of the human imagination, the concepts already discussed should apply to them also, in a general way. One fantasy, however, is so powerful and pervasive that it deserves special mention—the desire for sexual pleasure. If dreams of distant places are materialized in exotic imagery and fairyland ones in electric-light displays, erotic dreams are incarnated in the female image. Once again, the expositions provided a prophecy of the commercial exploitation of imagery. The belly dancers of the Rue du Caire at the 1889 fair and the glass-caged wax mannequins at the 1900 exposition attracted large crowds. Both female images had a compelling effect, but the dancer and mannequin were enticing in different ways to different audiences. Men gathered to see the sinuous, half-naked entertainer perform in the shadows of a cabaret, while women were held spellbound by the motionless, elegantly clothed models poised under electric lights. The charm of the dancer is closely related to the appeal of the exotic, for both invite liberation from ordinary conventions and attainment of a more romantic, exciting existence. The appeal of the wax mannequin, on the contrary, is that of a fairytale princess, who is coldly beautiful and proudly remote. The images imply a startling contrast between male and female fantasies, between what men want women to be like and what women want to be like. Can these contrary images be reconciled, in a woman at once exotic and ethereal, once sensual and remote, at once harem slave and princess?

"La Parisienne" suggests that they can be. This penultimate female, the symbol of the 1900 exposition, was perched atop the Monumental Gateway, an icon both sexy and remote, goddess and slut, and she resembles the women who were portrayed on advertising posters all over Paris in that era when these posters became a significant art form. Indeed, the triumph of French poster art, according to Georges d'Avenel (of whom more will be said shortly), is its mating of contradictory female images in its ceaseless repetition of "the representation of a female being with teasing features, half fairy princess and half 'streetwalker.' " The preferred model of the Chéret brothers, masters of poster art, is "this Parisienne, of a desirable height, with a hieratic smile, pagan goddess intoxicated with her own apotheosis." This "illusory type" always wears the same expression whether she is shown on horseback, at the beach, smoking, writing to advertise an ink or carrying a lamp to publicize mineral oil, always "lending the charm of her petite person to all the offerings of business."25

If this creation is not exactly a triumph of art, it is surely a triumph of décor. This "type" (which also appeared in all the movie houses) appeals to the fantasies of both sexes at the same time. Just as cinema programs include something for everyone, business wants to deploy images that appeal to as many consumers as possible. The aim of mass publicity is to make the dream world as uniform as possible in order to entice as many people as possible. The creation of a hybrid streetwalker-princess is one way to achieve this goal.

Another is to reduce fantasies to their lowest common denominator. This is why the idea of wealth is of such importance in the symbiosis of commerce and dream. Desire for wealth is infinitely malleable. People have diverse ideas about how they would indulge themselves if they were rich, but their daydreams depend on the basic fantasy of possession of great wealth. With wealth other dreams can come true. In appealing to this fantasy, commerce can achieve a feat of reductionism and secure the broadest possible audience.

Environments of mass consumption are places where consumers can indulge temporarily in the fantasy of wealth. These environments are Versailles open to all, at
least during business hours. Without having to buy, the department-store shopper can handle and try on merchandise. For the relatively low price of admission, the exposition tourist can enjoy palaces and dancing girls, gaze on luxurious goods, travel in style, and otherwise taste pleasures normally reserved for the fortunate few. In the "picture palace," the moviegoer can be transported to high society to mingle with the rich. At the Salon de l'Automobile young couples can lounge in the crushed velvet seats of luxury vehicles before taking the Métro back home to cramped and drab apartments. Perhaps the consumer revolution intensified the pain of envy by bringing within the realm of possibility the acquisition of a degree of wealth that had formerly been considered out of reach. This point is stressed by Balzac, chronicler of that pain. But the consumer revolution also brought an ana
dyne in the form of environments of mass consumption, where envy is transformed into pleasure by producing a temporary but highly intense satisfaction of the dream of wealth.

The satisfaction of this dream on a less intense but more lasting basis was another long-term accomplishment of the consumer revolution. The outpouring of new commodities in the late nineteenth century created a world where a consumer could possess images of wealth without actually having a large income. This magic was wrought, in the first place, through the alchemy of scientific and technological advances that permitted hitherto expensive articles to be made much more cheaply or to be imitated convincingly and inexpensively. The other major advance making possible a widespread illusion of wealth was the vast expansion of credit. As we have seen, courtiers had customarily bought their luxuries with borrowed money; at the other end of the social scale, the poor had long purchased food on credit. During the consumer revolution the habit of borrowing permeated the ranks of the bourgeoisie, and credit buying began to be used for a wide range of consumer goods. Credit became a branch of big business. French retailers of food, drink, and pharmaceuticals had long offered credit (and had traditionally been expensive in consequence), but they did so on a personal, unsystematic, unwritten basis. During the consumer revolution borrowing was transformed into a large-
scale, impersonal, rationalized system of installment pur-
chase which made possible the acquisition of goods with-
out ready cash—indeed a fantasy come true.

Installment plans were "developed into a national in-
stitution" in France by Georges Dufayel (1855-1916), be-
ginning in the 1870s. His clients generally paid 20 percent of the standard purchase price for household goods at over 400 stores accepting Dufayel's tokens, and repaid the rest in small weekly installments. Dufayel received 18 percent commission on his sales. By the turn of the century the Dufayel firm had served over three million customers and had branches in every large French town. In Paris alone 3,000 clerks were employed to handle the orders and another 800 went out each day to collect repayments.28

These figures, however, do not fully convey the sig-
nificance of credit purchase in allowing an ordinary wage-
erner to enjoy a convincing illusion of wealth. The power of that illusion is expressed more vividly in the magnifi-
cent store, costing $10,000,000, that Dufayel built in the Rue de Clignancourt just after the turn of the century. "On entering Dufayel's store by the principal door," re-
marked one admiring observer, "it seems as though you are entering a palace rather than a shop." The entrance porch was richly ornamented with carvings and statues representing themes like "Credit" and "Publicity" and surmounted by a dome 180 feet high. Inside the building were 200 statues, 180 paintings, pillars, decorative panels, bronze allegorical figures holding candelabras, painted ceramics and glass, and grand staircases, as well as a theatre seating 3000 that was decorated with silk curtains, white-and-gold foliage wreaths, and immense mirrors. But Dufayel's establishment was more than a reproduc-
tion of a palace of the ancien régime: it also incorporated the
most up-to-date attractions of consumer society. If there was a traditional cut-glass chandelier inside the dome, on the outside, at the very top, was a revolving light of ten million candlepower (almost as powerful as the search-light on top of the Eiffel Tower) visible for twelve miles—

which makes an excellent advertisement at night." If the theatre was "an object of astonishment and admiration to all visitors," who attended monthly musical performances there, the far plainer Cinematograph Hall in the basement was far more popular. There 1,500 people paid admission to attend each of four hour-long performances every day.

"The cinematograph attracts many people to the store, and is an ingenious and profitable method of advertising." Dufayel's genius was to transform the traditional décor of an aristocratic palace into a modern, democratic environment of mass consumption. The décor of the building faithfully symbolized its merchandise: to sell credit was to sell the illusion of princely wealth to the masses.

Dufayel's firm was so successful that rival credit companies were established, and department stores, beginning with the Samaritaine in 1913, began to organize their own credit companies. The proliferation of credit, together with the proliferation of inexpensive imitation goods, permitted (in a phrase then popular) "the democratization of luxury." As the word democratization suggests, the dream of wealth, more than any other dream yet mentioned, has a social dimension, and it is therefore worthy of special attention.

**Georges d'Avenel on the Democratization of Luxury—**

Georges d'Avenel (1855–1939) was the most perceptive French analyst of the democratization of luxury. Around the turn of the century, he published a lively series of articles for the *Revue des deux mondes*, collectively titled "Le Mécanisme de la vie moderne" ("The Mechanism of Modern Life"), which appeared from 1894 to 1905 and which, simultaneously published in book form, went through numerous editions. The title of the series is intriguing.

The word mechanism, traditionally associated with means of production, was applied by d'Avenel to means of consumption. In each of his articles he discusses one aspect of modern consumption: institutions like department stores and supermarkets; the manufacture (but this is not emphasized) and retailing (this is emphasized) of items like paper, silk, porcelain, clothing, and alcoholic beverages; systems of credit, advertising, and insurance; methods of transportation such as steamships, buses, and the Métro; entertainments such as the racetrack and theater; and domestic consumption in the form of lighting, heating, and home decoration. All these things and more are subsumed under d'Avenel's exceptionally broad understanding of what mass consumption encompasses. The principal value of his commentary lies in his multiplicity of perspectives. He defines the phenomenon as an area for general social inquiry. In the words of one admirer, d'Avenel wielded "statistics like an engineer, caprices like a caricaturist, motives like a sociologist, and recollections like an historian."

The historical perspective, the ingrained habit of viewing contemporary events in the light of history, enables d'Avenel to assess his own times with exceptional lucidity. He wrote some well-received traditional historical studies of the aristocracy and Church in seventeenth-century France. In the course of this research, however, he became convinced that the doings of eminent political and ecclesiastical figures bore little relevance to the lives of ordinary people. "The public life of a people is a very small thing in comparison to its private life." No doubt this conclusion reflected d'Avenel's disdain for contemporary public life. The Third Republic of his day was suffled by the adventures of Boulanger and the sordid Panama scandal, and d'Avenel's contempt for its political shabbiness was by no means unique or unjustified. A wealthy aristocrat with the title of viscount, he was not predisposed to favor Third Republic politics, although he was sincerely liberal in religion and social outlook.
Instead of retreating to the anti-Semitic and legitimist fanaticism of many of his social peers in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, d'Avenel used his criticism of contemporary society to enrich his historical work. Turning off the well-trodden path of public history, he ventured into a realm of private history few had explored—the history of slow changes in material life, in food, clothing, furnishings, lodgings, and lighting, to name only a few examples. The bedrock of his research was a statistical compilation of private incomes and expenditures over seven centuries. Gathering these data involved staggering labor: d'Avenel claimed he examined as many as 75,000 prices as part of his research. He was convinced, however, that household budgets were the key to penetrating lost worlds of private history. From these budgets he concluded that material life had changed radically, that it had been "transformed from top to bottom" over the centuries, and that this transformation had progressed independent of political or legal events, even so-called revolutionary ones. But statistics were only the means to his ultimate goal, which was "to penetrate into the intimacy of humble homes of yesteryear, to scrutinize the relations formerly established between rich and poor, finally, to discover, buried beneath the heap of dead statistics, a thousand secret emotions of our fathers."

The dry figures of prices and incomes provided the key to the mental life of the past; "the history of figures becomes the history of men." Spending patterns had never been based on a logical and sober assessment of material well-being; instead, spending was motivated primarily by mental pleasures ranging from the thrill of success in doubling one's income to the "vaporous reveries of inebriation," D'Avenel concluded that "for the poor as for the rich, this question of income and expenses is above all a matter of imagination."

If his dissatisfaction with contemporary society enriched d'Avenel's historical outlook, his research into the consumption patterns of the past made him an astute observer of the consumer society evolving around him and, above all, of the imaginative pleasures it afforded. In "The Mechanism of Modern Life" he demonstrates over and over how ordinary citizens of his own day could enjoy the illusion of wealth; the backdrop, stated or implied, is the preceding seven centuries, when striking differences in appearance and possessions erected a "brutal barrier" between peasants and courtiers. The consumer revolution had toppled that barrier. In his article on porcelain, for example, d'Avenel describes how the rich used to eat off porcelain and the poor off clay or wood; now Frenchmen from millionaire to peasant eat out of the same dish, as it were. The industrial changes that made possible large-scale production of tableware also revolutionized interior decoration, so that the working classes could afford factorymade rugs and wallpapers that offered some appearance of wealth in the place of reality. The illusion of riches could be enjoyed in dress, especially in "the democratization of the 'silk dress,' that ancient symbol of opulence, thus procuring the illusion of similarity in clothing—a great comfort for the feminine half of the human race." Although mass-produced silks selling for a franc and a half a meter in department stores were less beautiful than fine Lyonnais ones costing six hundred francs a meter, "they make more people happy." Technological advances had also transformed the feather industry; cheap and persuasive facsimiles of the rarest varieties, or even of totally imaginary ones, could be purchased by any shopgirl. Rabbit pelts could be turned into exotic furs like "Mongolian chinchilla." Artificial flowers with brilliant colors, flexible rubber stems, and papyrus corollas were available to all. The pleasures of novelty could also be enjoyed by everyone. The privilege of following changes in clothing fashions had spread to both men and women, people whose grandparents had probably purchased only a few new outfits in their lives.

D'Avenel wholeheartedly welcomes the mass of cheap imitations flooding the marketplace. Instead of living with
constant frustration, the humble could now enjoy the pleasures of being rich:

Each time [industries] extend their reach, the life of a great number of individuals gains a new satisfaction; they allow the pale and illusory but sweet reflection of opulence to penetrate even to the humble. These vulgarizations are the work of our century: they honor it greatly.\(^9\)

To those who protested the banality of the pleasure derived from these vulgarizations, d'Avenel responds:

The character of the new luxury is to be banal. Let us not complain too much, if you please: before, there was nothing banal but misery. Let us not fall into this childish but nevertheless common contradiction which consists of welcoming the development of industry while deploring the results of industrialism.\(^4\)

And to those who complained that the democratization of luxury meant the proliferation of "bad taste," d'Avenel suggests that the cause of decline in workmanship is not only technological—the replacement of handwork by machinery—but also social and psychological—the desire to have consumer goods resembling those of the rich. The shopgirl prefers a shoddy, mass-produced silk to a sturdy, handsome cotton because silk, originally valued for its intrinsic beauty, is now valued by the masses for conveying an aura of moneyed glamor. The illusion, and not the fabric, is the source of the consumer's pleasure. D'Avenel defends this subjective satisfaction. When a manufacturer admits to him that the lovely tints of mass-produced silks do not last long, d'Avenel remarks:

I am not pleading here the cause of the "shoddy"; it doesn't need a lawyer, and if it needed a poet the dyers could say: "Qu'importe le façcon pourvu qu'on ait l'avresse... " ["What does it matter what's in the bottle as long as it gets you drunk?"]\(^2\)

D'Avenel's defense of the joys of cheap imitations stands in refreshing contrast to the frequent condescend-

ing dismissals of them by those who can afford better. On the other hand, he is condescending in another way. His very defense of these goods implies the acceptance of a social system where significant inequalities in income endure despite the growing equality in merchandise. Indeed, d'Avenel not only accepts this system but praises the democratization of luxury for strengthening it. In modern society, technology makes possible an "equalization of enjoyments" without a corresponding "equalization of incomes."\(^3\) From his statistical research d'Avenel knew that incomes had in fact become less equal during the nineteenth century: he himself estimated that bourgeois had multiplied their real income by three or four times, the very rich by six to eight times, and the masses by only two times. But he contends that the rich man's increase in fortune has little real meaning, that his additional income buys only "artificial" luxuries, in the form of rarities, rather than genuine comforts. "Leveling consists of this: that the common people have acquired more real well-being, more useful luxury than the wealthy."\(^4\) Mechanical invention diminished meaningful class differences by overturning the traditional relationship between the utility of an object and its monetary value. "There is more difference between a peasant lighted by a resin candle and the lord lighted by wax tapers than between a worker lighted by oil and a bourgeois lighted by electricity."\(^5\) The bicycle is another example: it is much more useful to the poor than the automobile is to the bourgeois, and the Paris Métro would soon give all urban workers the dream come true of a vehicle always at their service. According to d'Avenel, socialist "egalophiles" are not only futile, since improvement in living standards proceeds regardless of political events, but are also unnecessary. "What does inequality in money matter, when it no longer gives rise to inequality in actual enjoyments?"\(^6\)

Critical Remarks—Does it matter? D'Avenel correctly stresses the radical differences between modern levels of
consumption and those of preceding centuries. His historical research gives him a clear-eyed recognition of what industrialization means to the vast majority, in practical terms. Many other social critics who contrast past and present regard only differences in production methods. They portray a former utopia of small shops, craftsmanship, and good will, and a present hell of grinding factories, industrial strife, and degrading labor. D'Avenel looks instead at the level of consumption each productive system is capable of supporting. The contrast he draws is between the physical and psychological miseries of ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-lodged masses and the far more comfortable and uniform conditions of contemporary life. But his emphasis on higher consumer standards leads him to underestimate the costs of the physically taxing and psychologically unrewarding labor that is often involved in producing modern goods. D'Avenel could argue that working conditions are no worse than before and that they are more than compensated for by the new pleasures of consumption. These responses deserve consideration by anyone proposing an impossible marriage of past production and present consumption. Still, gains in consumption should not be used as an excuse for the persistence of bad working conditions. Improvement of those conditions does not necessarily entail a return to primitive consumer levels. D'Avenel himself cannot be accused of having used this excuse directly, and to fault him for slighting production is to blame him for not covering a topic he never intended to discuss at length. The point is that his arguments could readily be turned into evasions of or excuses for the failings of modern production methods, or even into a defense of consumerism as an opiate to lull workers into forgetfulness of their dissatisfactions.

D'Avenel was aware that many wage-earners remained unhappy despite the leveling of enjoyments. In his article on alcoholic beverages in "The Mechanism of Modern Life," he notes that an enormous number of workers did not use their high wages to gather a nest-egg or to enjoy a more comfortable life, but only to fill their heads with drink like some "feudal Negro" of the Sudan. Why would the most cultivated, proud workers in the world behave in this manner, drinking not in jolly festivity but rapidly, silently, grimly?

You would have to understand their interior life, probably better than they understand it... Only in drink are promises never eluded... The more his reason takes flight and his head strays, the alcoholic, in stupefying himself, loses himself and, however crude be his dream, he dreams!"7

"Qu'importe le flacon pourvu qu'on ait l'ivresse..." In describing the inebriated worker, d'Avenel comes disconcertingly close to describing the dream world of the consumer, whose pleasures he has defended so vigorously. Is there any great difference between solitary drinking and solitary moviegoing, between "stupifying" oneself with a bottle or with a department store, exposition, or Salon de l'Automobile? Does not Corday describe the "distant visions" exhibits as draughts of highly distilled liquor which give the masses a taste of power and life? Perhaps d'Avenel is right in claiming that the worker himself does not know why he craves dreams, but clearly something is desired which is not found in the leveling of enjoyments. Why this flight, by whatever method, from reality to illusion—from sobriety to drunkenness, from reason to stupor, from waking to dream?

One possibility frequently mentioned in twentieth-century analyses of mass culture is that the pleasures of consumption fail to compensate for the dreary work the drinker has to do all day long. Another possibility, raised by d'Avenel's own writings, is that the illusion of equality is not so convincing as he suggests. His social theory assumes that a shoddy silk dress or a "Mongolian chin-chilla" gives the same sense of wealth as a handmade silk dress from Lyon or a mink coat. D'Avenel understands the objective differences in quality, but he assumes that
the masses won't notice or won't care. Still, if the rich seek the unique and genuine, the work of art rather than the mass-produced, why shouldn't ordinary people want them too? If the rich take pride in having an educated "good taste" that appreciates the difference between a cheap imitation and an expensive original, why shouldn't that education be available to all? Even without a high degree of education, people are aware of the desirability of unique or rare items. In the "Mechanism" series d'Avenel often reminds his readers that wealth consists of the ability to possess, not beautiful or comfortable things, but rare ones. However, he admits, an object cannot be rare and also be possessed by the masses. No matter how desirable the item, no matter what its former associations with wealth, as soon as it becomes cheap enough to find a mass market it loses its rarity and therefore its desirability. D'Avenel notes that department stores tend to accelerate the dissipation of the illusion of wealth. These stores offer objects for mass consumption whose great attraction has been the difficulty of obtaining them because of their costliness (for example, Mouret offered Oriental rugs at cut rates). The results are good business and disillusioned shoppers. The pleasure of the illusion of wealth disappears into the distance as the mass market keeps encroaching, transforming the rare into the commonplace. When everyone can afford an imitation or cheap Oriental rug, then people want a handmade tapestry. The genuine continues to signify wealth, and common people continue to suffer from the vision of unattainable merchandise. There can be no authentic democratization of luxury because by definition luxury is a form of consumption limited to a few. Modern society has instead introduced the proliferation of superfluity.

D'Avenel fails to distinguish luxury from superfluity, and so his theory of the leveling of enjoyments attempts to base social harmony on deception rather than reality. Dreams may be solitary, but reality is inescapably collective. D'Avenel's conviction that change in private life is far more consequential than change in public life leads him to ignore the public consequences that follow from even the most seemingly private acts of consumption. In part the consequences are psychological. When a shopgirl buys a silk dress to fulfill a personal fantasy, she steps out onto the street and discovers that thousands of other women have had the same dream and bought the same type of dress. For all of them the illusion of wealth is shattered. On a more objective level, too, the pleasures of possession may be destroyed when many dream the same dream. As d'Avenel himself concedes, some goods cannot be democratized without losing their inherent charm:

[It] would doubtless be more pleasant for each Parisian to own the Bois de Boulogne all by himself, or with a small number of friends, rather than share its enjoyment on holidays with 500,000 other proprietors. But it is precisely the glory of Progress to have created this congestion in making accessible to all an outing which used to be very remote.48

A "glory," perhaps, but the judgment would be more convincing if d'Avenel himself had to spend his holidays in this congested park. In an imaginary exposition voyage, many people can pretend to visit an unspoiled, uncrowded place; the actual Bois de Boulogne loses its charm because it is invaded by masses of other pleasure-seekers.

The basic weakness of d'Avenel's social theory lies deeper than this, however: it is his assumption that as consumers people seek enjoyment above all. As d'Avenel himself admits:

If the mass of citizens does not appear to appreciate the . . . new enjoyments with which the nineteenth century has endowed it, it is because the "money question" is not a question of enjoyment, but one of equality; a matter of self-respect and not at all one of pleasure. "To have money," isn't it basically "to have more money than others," and how can it be arranged so that each Frenchman has more money than the others?49
With this admission collapses the theory of social harmony through the leveling of enjoyments. Differences in income are objective and measurable; intangible, subjective similarities in enjoyment may be claimed but cannot be demonstrated. People are more aware of tangible class differences than of illusory similarities, more aware of their disadvantages compared with wealthier contemporaries than of their advantages over their ancestors. An obvious conclusion is that people should have real equality in income and seek whatever illusions they crave on their own. But d'Avenel immediately jumps to the conclusion that people will not rest satisfied with equality but will demand superiority of income. The moment he approaches the issue of equalizing incomes rather than consumer pleasures, equalizing realities rather than dreams, he evades the issue in the despairing observation that people will never be happy anyway. It would be more accurate to say that people will remain dissatisfied with equality in consumer goods when so many other differences remain. d'Avenel looks too much at the objects people own and not enough at the flesh-and-blood owners—at the differences in their mortality, education, health, manners, taste, social contacts, leisure, and social and political power. These human distinctions remain despite a democratization of goods.

Concluding Remarks—d'Avenel is the historian of the material side of "the civilizing process" whereby consumer enjoyments originally limited to a small courtly circle gradually spread among a mass public. His contribution in defining and describing this process endures despite the inadequacies of his social theory. Its inadequacy did not keep it from being shared by moderate liberals who also approved of this democratization and even wanted it extended, while at the same time opposing more radical policies of equalization. Other social critics openly lamented the end of elitism in consumption (as we shall see in the next chapter), and still others argued that democratization had not gone nearly far enough, that the mass of consumers needed to acquire far more political and economic power (Chapters V and VII). Nevertheless, all these turn-of-the-century thinkers—moderate, elitist, and democratic alike—agreed that the historical evolution traced by d'Avenel raises fundamental and portentous issues for the future.

Surely it is instructive that in confronting those issues so decent a man as d'Avenel enthusiastically endorsed the idea of equalizing enjoyments rather than money, for, at the bottom, he was approving a vast delusion whereby human inequalities are masked by material appearances. The appeal of the theory only demonstrates how seductive are all the illusions of the dream world of consumption. By imperceptible degrees the charming and seemingly innocent fantasies of Mongolian chinchilla and Moorish courtyards lead to far more serious social deceits.

It is just because the transition is so gradual and easy, Talmeyr warns, that the deception of mass consumption must be resisted from the outset. That is the final lesson he extracts from the school of Trocadéro: truthfulness demands constant effort, and, in particular, effort to use the imagination more rather than less. If people only stare at the Indian bazaar and buy its rugs and fabrics unquestioningly, the realities of colonialism will remain forever buried beneath a mountain of merchandise. Talmeyr's imagination is too active to stop at the barrier of décor. He sees beyond what is displayed to what is not displayed, envisioning the emaciated Indians who are omitted and, furthermore, seeing why they are omitted. Talmeyr contends that laziness is responsible for the successful exploitation of dreams by commerce. The Trocadéro is a commercial success because everyone wants to see distant places but no one wants to go to the trouble of traveling:

We don't go to the mountain but the mountain comes to us! Only, is it the real Japan, the real New World, and the genuine Honolulu which come? Isn't it a suspect Japan, a contraband New World, a Honolulu from a menu?
Development of Consumer Lifestyles

Bah! We don’t look too closely, and our whole concern has become to avoid any effort above all. This widespread passivity, both physical and mental, is responsible for other distressing social trends. People love to believe that there is a short cut, an easy way out, and they want to be deceived because it is a way to avoid confronting real problems.

Neither the voyage difficult to make, nor the language difficult to speak, nor the marriage difficult to endure, we want no more of that, and the same psychology is at the basis of the law on divorce, the decrees which suppress participles, and that which authorizes the opening of a Malaysian section at the exposition. The first tells us, “To be married, you don’t need to be.” The second: “To write French, you don’t need to know it.” And the third: “To go to Malaysia, you don’t need to go there.” Easy methods! But are we really sure of swimming in the ocean by putting a box of salt in our bathtub, and of returning from China, India, or the Sudan by returning from the Trocadéro?

Are we so sure social justice can be achieved by the mass distribution of inexpensive Oriental rugs and silk dresses? An easy method! But truth is not found by dreaming. Time-consuming, unceasing effort is needed to replace confusion with lucidity, simplification with complexity, and deception with reality.

4 The Dandies and Elitist Consumption

The Proliferation of Lifestyles—In The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) American economist Thorstein Veblen introduces the concept of “conspicuous consumption” to describe a way of life where wasteful and ostentatious items like “carpets and tapestries, silver table service, waiter’s services, silk hats, starched linen, and many items of jewelry and dress” are regarded as necessities. Conspicuous consumption is the style of consumption first cultivated by courtiers and then adopted by wealthy bourgeois. Veblen calls these groups “the leisure class,” and he describes its consumer habits with relentless irony.

The greater irony is that his analysis was becoming obsolete at the moment he enunciated it. The international exposition of 1900, under construction as Veblen’s book was being printed, revealed a much more raucous type of conspicuous consumption that appealed to a class which consumed “wastefully” but which was not leisureed. At the international exposition and Salon de l’Automobile, at department stores and trade shows, at other environments of mass consumption overflowing with light, noise, and merchandise, a type of consumption was revealed that was alien to the genteel type Veblen had in mind.

The advent of the new model of mass consumption did