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## Consumption and Emotion: The Romantic Ethic Revisited

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#### ABSTRACT

This article revisits Campbell's (1987) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* thesis in the light of new intersections with sociological issues of embodiment and emotions. A variety of themes and issues are raised: the persistence of mind/body, reason/emotion dualities in the consumption literature, the importance of 'disappointment' in consumer culture, external factors which mediate the consumption experience, and finally the interpretation of both Romanticism and romantic, interpersonal relationships. A largely disembodied and socially disembedded account of consumption and emotion is on offer here, the implications of which extend far beyond the limits of Campbell's thesis to debates on consumer culture and the sociological enterprise in general. In making these claims, we highlight the need for a 'passionate' sociology which would in turn integrate embodiment and emotions more fully into the consumption agenda. These key themes are discussed, with some sociological pointers for the future, in consumption and beyond.

#### KEY WORDS

consumption / embodiment / emotion / reason / Romanticism

### Introduction

A seminal text on consumption, Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), has placed a number of important issues on the agenda of consumer research. The nature of consumer

desire and its elusive satisfaction is thrown into critical relief here, alongside the pre-acquisition phase of consuming and its aftermath. In its emphasis on the mentalistic dimensions of modern consumption it has also sought to understand consumer behaviour in relation to an underlying cultural logic – one that, it is claimed, stems from a commitment to Romanticism and its associated values. Throughout the text, consumption is emphasized as a creative, hedonistic activity in which imagination and emotions play pivotal roles.

Whilst Campbell's work has been well received in the sphere of consumption studies, recent developments in related areas such as the sociology of the body and emotions make a critical review of its legacies both timely and topical at this particular juncture. Taking these and associated issues as our point of departure, we seek to problematize Campbell's view of emotions and Romanticism alike. However, it is not our intention to downplay Campbell's contribution to consumption literature. Nor indeed to formulate a theory to replace it. Instead, we suggest ways of capturing a more complete picture of consumption's emotional dimensions. Our purpose, more specifically, is three-fold. First, to revisit the Romantic ethic thesis in the light of new intersections with issues surrounding the body and emotions (especially the embodied nature of social life), recalling and updating existing critiques of Campbell in the process. Secondly, in doing so, we highlight the need for a 'passionate' sociology which would in turn integrate embodiment and emotions more fully into the consumption agenda. Finally, as an attempt to open up some potentially fruitful new lines of development in related fields of enquiry, we consider the future destiny of the Romantic ethic in relation to changing and evolving meanings of romance.

It is important, of course, to acknowledge at the outset that Campbell has already provided further clarification of his own original thesis in a rejoinder to a previous critique (Campbell, 1996, in reply to Holbrook, 1996). Moreover, Campbell's work, and the field of consumption studies more generally, have moved on somewhat since the *Romantic Ethic* was first published (see, for example Falk and Campbell, 1997). The extent to which Campbell's seminal text still provides a key resource for consumer researchers nevertheless reinforces the relevance of our own current undertaking. Indeed, this article itself, appearing as it does at this time, stands as a testament to the scope and breadth of the thesis in both its applicability and its continued presence as a site for further critical discussion and debate.

It is also necessary here to flag up what is missing from our considerations of 'consumption', not just as an academic concept but as an inescapable experience affecting our daily lives. There are competing theories which increasingly address the bodily basis of consumption. For example, Featherstone (1982), Turner (1984) and Falk (1994) have all discussed the role of the consuming body and the body in consumer culture, whilst Bourdieu (1984), via the 'habitus' as a structuring structure of dispositions and the very embodiment of taste, provides a socially embedded account of consumption and the struggle for social distinction. Although our present critique remains focused on Campbell's

work, the issues and arguments raised therefore anticipate and echo these broader debates, which in turn set the agenda for future studies in consumption and beyond. With these points in mind, it is to a brief sketch of the Romantic ethic thesis we now turn.

## Modern Consumerism and its Romantic Ethic

[W]hile it may not explain everything, Campbell's romantic ethic helps us comprehend why consumers are consumed with consumption, take pleasure from pleasure, desire to desire and want to want.

(Brown et al., 1998: 8, emphasis added)

Campbell's *Romantic Ethic* (1987) has a decidedly different focus to much former theorizing on consumption. Modelling itself upon Weber's (1930) classic theory of a Protestant asceticism ethic fostering the spirit of capitalism, Campbell sets out to identify and describe the corresponding ethic that drove, and continues to drive, consumerism. As such, Campbell is often credited with pursuing the 'intellectual origins' (Gronow, 1997: 78) and the 'mental basis' (Falk, 1994: 38) of modern consumption.

In order to explore the dynamics of modern consumerism, Campbell devotes the first half of his book to a theorization of two, clearly differentiated types of hedonism: traditional and modern. Campbell subsequently argues that a commitment to Romantic principles facilitated such a transition. The model of traditional hedonism, based upon concepts of need and satisfaction, involves the hedonist extracting pleasurable sensations from social and cultural interactions. The centrality of the body and bodily stimulation is reinforced by Campbell's listing of traditional hedonistic activities: 'eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, socializing, singing, dancing and playing games' (1987: 69). Here, pleasure and fulfilment are achieved through immediate and direct, tactile and sensory experiences.

Yet according to Campbell, this traditional type of hedonism has been supplanted through modernity by a parallel hedonistic enjoyment of imagined or anticipated emotions. Although, in Campbell's own words, it is an 'exceptionally difficult exercise' (1987: 76) to gain direct pleasure from the imagination, modern hedonists have gained the capacity to autonomously control and decontrol imagined emotions. Pleasure is sought through this process of 'emotional management' rather than through tactile sensation. Mental images are constructed and then consumed 'for the intrinsic pleasure they provide' (1987: 77). Therefore, Campbell's thesis is a 'hybrid' model of, effectively, rationally managed or (de)controlled passion (i.e. through the construction, control and enjoyment of imagined emotions). As Campbell puts it:

[I]n modern, self-illusory hedonism, the individual is much more an artist of the imagination, someone who takes images from memory or the existing environment, and rearranges or otherwise improves them in his mind in such a way that they

become distinctly pleasing. No longer are they 'taken as given' from past experience, but crafted into unique products, pleasure being the guiding principle. In this sense, the contemporary hedonist is a dream artist, the special psychic skill possessed by modern man making this possible.

(1987: 78)

This, as Falk (1994: 53) comments, meshes well and updates Elias' (1978) 'civilizing process', involving a shift from the expressive to experiential dimensions of corporeality and its modes of transgression.

Having identified self-illusory hedonism as the spirit of modern consumption, Campbell turns his attention to exploring the cultural ethic underpinning or animating this spirit. It is claimed that Romanticism is a primary facilitator of modern hedonism's condition, and by implication, modern consumption. While appreciating that original Romantic artists and philosophers did not intend to endorse a consumerist ideology or ethic, their values, beliefs and lifestyles lead Campbell to insist that the Romantics 'brought about a state of affairs generally conducive to modern consumerism' (1987: 208). As a reactionary discourse to the disenchantments of the external world through modernity, the historical significance of Romanticism centres on its re-enchantment of the individual psychic world. The Romantics' philosophical framework espoused an emotionalist world view, the 'cult of the self' being at the forefront of human existence. Not only did a Romantic ethic initially create the capacity for modern hedonists to consume imaginatively, but it is argued that the 'self'-centred legacies of Romanticism have continued to renew the spirit of consumerism ever since.

Yet it is the specificities of modern hedonism, for Campbell, which paradoxically account for the inevitable failure of material goods to live up to the imaginative capacities of the individual. Paradoxically, the more proficient one becomes at creatively imagining emotions and sensations, the more likely it is that 'real' consumption fails to deliver a comparable intensity of pleasure. This establishes a cyclical pattern of consumer frustration in which actual consumption is typically a disillusioning, dissatisfying experience. The implications of this cycle of desire and disappointment for the market economy are tremendous. In their quest to experience the dramas of their imagination in reality through the medium of material goods, modern hedonists are ceaseless in their demand for original, novelty commodities. Consumers' desires become insatiable as they search for that elusive, completely satisfying experience amongst the seemingly endless supply of new products. However, while the Romantic ethic thesis has proved highly influential in the field of consumption studies, it is not without its problems, as we will demonstrate here.

### **Duality/Dualism: Embodied Thoughts, Emotional Reflections**

Perhaps the first issue to tackle concerns Campbell's own particular approach to the dualistic legacies of Western culture and society, including the supposed

age-old struggle between mind and body, reason and emotion. As outlined above, Campbell's thesis can be read as a bold and innovative attempt to overcome these former dualities, or at least to bring them into closer alignment.

However in our view, problems remain here, resulting paradoxically in a disembodied approach to consumption and a similarly ethereal or partial account of emotions – one which masks as much as it reveals about the embodied nature of emotions in social life and their intimate relations with rationality. For example, if we view emotions as thinking, moving, feeling complexes which radiate through the body as an ongoing stream of lived experience (Denzin, 1984) – providing both the existential basis of culture and self (Csordas, 1994) and the intersubjective, intercorporeal dimensions of social life (Crossley, 1998; Williams, 2001) – then Campbell's own predominantly mentalistic or imaginative approach to these matters appears somewhat problematic. Indeed, one of the key sociological insights to have emerged from recent scholarship on emotions has been the embodied nature of social life, helping in the process to put 'minds back into bodies', 'bodies back into society', and 'society back into the body' (Frank, 1991). Perhaps Campbell would not deny this, or would retort that his analysis in no way rules it out. Nonetheless, the strongly mentalistic emphasis of his approach returns us continually to this largely disembodied position, or at the very least, to one in which these embodied dimensions of consumption are neglected or underplayed.

If mind and body do not exactly come together here, through a fully embodied approach to consumption, then the same may also be said of relations between reason and emotion. It is clear that emotions display a variety of relations with rationality – relations which Campbell's own hybrid emphasis on the rationally controlled decontrol of emotion only partially captures. These, for sake of clarity and simplicity – ideal types, perhaps, with the requisite caveats and qualifications, including recognition of the reciprocal interplay between the conceptualization and experience of reason and emotion in consumer culture – may be schematically outlined and summarized as follows.

### Domination/Sequestration

Within this traditional Western viewpoint, emotions – *qua* chaos, the irrational or the 'miasma of the indeterminate' (Bauman, 1992) – are banished and replaced by the steady (male) hand of reason. On closer inspection, unqualified support for this strongly oppositional viewpoint is in fact quite difficult to find. For example, emotions have an important role in the work of rational philosophers such as Aristotle and Spinoza. Even Weber, sociological heir to the Kantian tradition, may be read in a more favourable light than many of his critics credit him for, concerning his treatment of emotion and incapacitating fear of the irrational (Albrow, 1990). Nonetheless, the domination/sequestration theme does serve to capture, in spirit if not content, an important point of reference in the history of Western thought, or perhaps more correctly the

advent of rational modernity, and the quest for ‘dispassionate rationality’ to which it has given rise. In short, from this viewpoint, emotion is indeed the scandal of reason, conceived in instrumentally rational terms (Bauman, 1992).

### Liberation/Liquidation

If the orthodox viewpoint is premised on a formal opposition between reason and emotion – where reason is advocated – then the reverse may be said of alternative Western thought and practice, in which emotion is championed over the supposedly stifling hold of rationality. Here, the opposition between reason and emotion is radically inverted – a substitution of the positive and negative polarities in this age-old debate. Of course, Romanticism with its own (one-sided) appeal to emotion vis-a-vis the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment, fits more or less readily within this latter viewpoint: emotions stand in need of liberation from the calculative hold of rational modernity, and the stifling emotional legacies to which it gives rise.

### Calculation/cultivation – ‘Managed’ Hearts and Commodified Emotions

The limits of both sections above, in turn pave the way for a more complex, subtle and sophisticated understanding of reason–emotion relations. This appears to be a calculation/cultivation viewpoint, traceable across the course of Western history, but is gathering increasing momentum within the current era. It is not so much a question here, as these very terms of reference suggest, of emotion dominated by, or liberated from reason, as the management of emotion by reason, for better or worse. Rather, it is a channelling of affect through the calculative deployment of emotion in the service, or under the guidance, of rationality.

A variety of work may be drawn upon in support of these contentions: from Elias’ (1978) ‘civilising process’ to Hochschild’s (1983) ‘managed heart’, and from Giddens’ (1991, 1992) reflexive self and ‘pure-relationship’ to the ‘postemotional’ claims of Meštrović, (1997). To be sure, there are important differences between these authors, not least in the degree to which the emotional body is adequately theorized. All nonetheless converge, through advocacy or critique, with respect to the cognitive penetrability or rational (de)control of emotions – an ‘arranged’ marriage which is not without its tensions or costs. Emotions become ‘things’ to be managed or monitored, manipulated or manufactured – labourers put to work according to the latest rational imperatives or market dictates of late/postmodernity.

As for Campbell’s own analysis, without violating too many of its assumptions, it may be more or less happily accommodated under this calculation/cultivation rubric; one premised on a ‘hybrid’, rationally ordered world of managed emotions, pleasurable or not. In so doing, Campbell’s analysis, as does Hochschild’s, remains indebted to a reading of emotions within the Romantic

tradition – however rationally modified or transformed they may have become, and whatever one's view of the sources or merits of these particular types of emotion management. For Hochschild, the individual, *qua* 'emotion manager', dances to the tune or market dictates of late capitalist imperatives, via feeling rules and the various commodified forms of deep and surface acting they engender. McCracken (1990) has argued also that rational consumption remains thoroughly cultural in character, the commercial sector not only shaping the possibilities for consumption but also those very emotions that are amenable to managed (de)control. In contrast, Campbell wishes to distance himself somewhat from the 'manipulative' implications of such a viewpoint, favouring instead the more autonomous, imaginative, self-directed consumer of hedonistic pleasures. Either way, this is a situation in which the rational, calculative attitude is deployed in the management of emotions. It is a viewpoint which takes us so far, but not perhaps quite far enough, in revealing the intimate nature of relations between reason and emotion within Western thought and practice, both past and present.

#### Consummation/unification – An Intimate/Passionate Marriage

Here we arrive at a fourth viewpoint on this relationship, one in which the 'marriage' between reason and emotion is well and truly 'consummated'. It is neither simply a question of rationality dominating or managing emotions, nor emotions freeing themselves from the suffocating hold of rationality, but of their harmonious convergence – a supportive, synonymous unification. A growing body of literature may be drawn upon here, in support of these contentions – from Damasio's (1994) exposure of *Descartes' Error* and the affective basis of effective decision-making, to Barbalet's own insightful (1998) exploration of the passion for rationality; and from feminist reconstructions of being and knowing (Jaggar, 1989; Rose, 1994), to Crossley's (1998, 2000) innovative recasting of Habermasian communicative rationality in emotional terms. The opposition between reason and emotion, seen in this light, is indeed far less 'durable' than belief in the opposition itself (Barbalet, 1998), masking as much as it reveals about the precise nature of this relationship, including particular types of emotion and rationality in particular contexts. Rather than repressing emotion in Western thought and practice, therefore, it is necessary to fundamentally 'rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and construct conceptual models that demonstrate the *mutually constitutive* rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion' (Jaggar, 1989: 157, emphasis added). The implications of this final viewpoint are clear: the relationship between reason and emotion in consumption, as elsewhere, is not simply oppositional or even that tensionful, but one which is both constituted and consummated in more or less harmonious ways.

This, in turn, raises a more general set of issues. That is, the need for a more emotionally founded, if not 'passionate' sociology itself (Game and Metcalfe, 1996) – one, contra rationalist 'myths' of dispassionate or disem-



bodied enquiry, which takes the embodiment of its practitioners seriously, as well as those it seeks to study. Sociology, like science itself, is indeed a passionate vocation, one involving imagination and insight, creativity and flair. As a reflexive social discipline it

celebrates an *immersion in life, a passionate involvement with the world and with others* . . . An engaged or passionate sociology involves a *sensual, full-bodied approach to knowing and to practices of knowledge* such as reading, writing, teaching . . . passion, social life and sociology only exist in the in-between, in specific, moving social relations.

(Game and Metcalfe, 1996: 5, emphasis added)

Not only would this serve to reanimate the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959), breathing new emotional life into its classically rationalist bones, it may also help us to see rationality itself quite differently. A viewpoint which goes far beyond both oppositional viewpoints, and the hybrid models (of rationally managed emotion or rational hedonism) discussed above.

The outcome of these arguments, returning to Campbell and ongoing debates surrounding consumption, is that equating the emotional components of the consumption experience with imaginative hedonism and the rational (de)control of affect, results in a partial account of a far more complex process; one which incorporates, quite literally, a more full-bodied, non-dualistic role for emotions both in rationality and consumption alike. Campbell in this sense, slides ineluctably back to the 'Janus-faced' view of the consumer he wishes to avoid (Falk, 1994: 94), backed up by the broader cultural logic of modernity, conceived in 'complementary' terms as the 'tango' or 'tension' between rationality and emotion. This is a viewpoint which takes us so far, but not perhaps quite far enough in overcoming the dualist legacies of the past, whether disembodiment or unbalanced readings of emotions are at stake here.

### **Disillusionment/Disappointment: Does It Matter?**

If Campbell's Romantic ethic thesis results in a somewhat partial account of emotions and a less than full-bodied approach to consumption, *qua* rationally controlled mentalistic exercise, then the 'desire-acquisition-use-disillusionment-renewed desire' cycle upon which it rests is equally open to criticism, particularly with respect to the disillusionment part of the equation. While disillusionment may indeed be an important, if not characteristic, feature of consumption, other responses are nonetheless possible, thereby countering the largely anti-climactic quality of much of Campbell's analysis at the point of actual consumption – one in which consumers' attempts to realise their fantasies and desires through a commodity are more or less doomed to failure. For example, the consumption of new goods may exceed our expectations, however shortlived this may turn out to be (Brown, 1998: 169). Moreover,

the possession of commodities may be greeted either with a sense of (corporeal) delight – what Lupton (1998) terms *neophilia* – or with fear and anxiety (i.e. its *neophobic* counterpart).

Of course, it also remains possible that disillusionment itself may promote a somewhat more realistic assessment (perhaps even a healthy scepticism) of the consumption experience, thereby narrowing the gap between fantasy and reality, and squaring the circle, if not of ever renewed consumption, then at least of the illusory belief that our dreams can be realised in a commodity – itself the kickstart, for Campbell, to actual patterns of realised consumption. Underpinning these issues is the point that, while Campbell may take issue with the ‘manipulation thesis’, his own depiction of consumers, *qua* imaginative dream artists or Billy Liar-like figures, still results in a situation in which their own critical faculties and discriminating potential is largely lost or blunted, in favour of this self-perpetuating cycle, whereby desire chases its own tail. This is not to deny our inescapable fate as consumers, passionately pursued or not. It suggests a more complex picture of ‘mixed possibilities’, however fleeting, in which disillusionment is not the only response to the realization of desire in actual patterns of consumption, nor perhaps the guaranteed kickstart, as Campbell implies, to the renewal of desire in this or that product, or the rationally (de)controlled pleasures with which they are imaginatively imbued.

On the one hand, as this suggests, our criticisms turn on a questioning of the degree to which disillusionment is inevitable, alongside the assumed superiority of the ‘pre-consumption’ imaginative experience. However, on the other hand it is also perhaps worth raising at this point a broader critique – admittedly extending far beyond Campbell’s own terms of reference – concerning the importance of disappointment in an era where it is all too frequently denied, glossed or evaded. Ours is an age in which a premium is placed on notions of self-improvement, personal growth, happiness and fulfilment in all walks of life, from the boardroom to the bedroom, the beauty parlour to the analyst’s couch. Consumer culture plays an important role here, hand in hand with a rapidly burgeoning ‘emotion industry’ (Crossley, 2000) designed to help put us in touch with and manage our emotions in ways which maximize our full potential. What is lost here in all of this, as Craib (1994) rightly points out, is the importance of disappointment as something to hold on to rather than escape from, given the false promises and illusory ideological ideals of late modernity; ideals which writers such as Giddens (1991), through notions such as the (endlessly) reflexive self and the pure relationship, themselves do not simply document but reinforce. The upshot of this, for Craib, is a kind of ‘false’ or ‘immature’ self. A vision, that is to say, of the

omnipotent, self-constructing self which maintains many of the phantasies of infancy into adult life . . . the false self that modernity encourages; the self that denies disappointments or in other ways avoids disappointments that are a necessary part of everyday life.

(Craib, 1994: 168)

Paradoxically therapy, as alluded to above, has also become caught up in these very fantasies and dreams of the 'good life' which it is called upon to disentangle (Craib, 1994). Where then, we may ask (rhetorically perhaps), does Campbell's Romantic ethic thesis sit in relation to these issues? Is the autonomous self-illusory hedonist suffering from a similar malaise to that which Craib diagnoses of Giddens' reflexive self? Disappointment itself, in Campbell's case, becomes little more than a stepping stone, rather than a critical point of existential realization, in the search for ever-renewed pleasures, fantasies and self-illusory goals of personal fulfilment. Campbell's analysis, from this viewpoint at least, fails to adequately problematize these very acts of self-illusory, imaginative hedonism – ideals, on closer inspection, which themselves are no simple or straightforward creation of 'autonomous' dream-artists. A 'mixed bag' of possibilities, indeed, disappointing or not.

### **Autonomy/Manipulation: Mediating the Romantic Ethic**

Part of the problem here is Campbell's emphasis on the Romantic dimensions of consumption as autonomous hedonism, and the subsequent role this plays in generating consumer desire. The concept of autonomous hedonism seems to distinguish the Romantic ethic thesis from other more manipulationist theories of consumption. Yet, given its central importance to Campbell's work, a number of issues relating to autonomous hedonism remain unclear. What exactly have modern hedonists achieved autonomy from, and is the more important question to find evidence against such autonomy? In order to explore such issues, this section proposes that at least two other forms of autonomy are in fact inferred in Campbell's theorization of modern hedonism besides the autonomy from material consumption for emotional and imaginative pleasure referred to earlier, namely: (1) autonomy from media power and manipulations of consumer ideology; and (2) autonomy from social relations surrounding consumption.

Taking these two autonomies in turn – which, it should be stressed, in no way implies their independent existence from one another, merely their separability for analytic purposes – the first, autonomy from media power and the manipulations of consumer ideology, has been critically addressed before (Brown et al., 1998). The central contention here is whether consumer desire, as insatiable emotional and imaginative longing, can be regarded as a cultural inheritance of Romanticism, or a consequence of the very industry it turns to for satisfaction.

To muddy the waters still further, one could argue that modern consumers who possess a more obvious 'Romantic' sensibility – stereotypically, one that is idealistic, fanciful and visionary and therefore somewhat susceptible to believing advertising promises – can be seen as an exemplary personality type given the manipulative, ideological control of consumer industries. Critics of mass culture such as Marcuse (1964) have long suggested that media and marketing

institutions purposely mobilize a ceaseless drive for novelty to ensure that consumers become receptive to the themes underlying new consumption temptations. This strategy, rehearsed many times before, certainly seems to fit with Campbell's own admission that the practices of autonomous hedonism occur largely in forms of non-utilitarian consumption which do not involve 'mundane objects' (Belk, 1998). Only new, exciting, experiential consumables qualify as facilitators of autonomous hedonism, leaving practical necessities beyond the realms of the Romantic ethic and the part that it plays in modern consumption. We should also recognize at this point that much consumption is repetitious – a matter of routine embedded in daily, habitual practices which demand little or no forethought nor consequent reflection. Again, these points suggest that Campbell's thesis offers, at best, a partial account of the consumption experience – one which takes us far beyond these mundane, unthinking acts of consumption and the 'disenchanted' concerns to which they speak.

Given this, one might well wonder if the 'emotions' of a more Romantic consumer, disembodied or otherwise, may simply cause such consumers to become more receptive to the appeal of new products, or whether they actively demand them. Certainly, consumers may defend their autonomy to the bitter end, conceptualizing themselves as the main protagonists or 'heroes', so to speak, within their own narratives of consumption (Vander Veen, 1994). Yet, in many ways these same self-conceptions, underpinned as they are by the belief that each consumer must take responsibility for constructing their own uniqueness and individuality through consumption, are evidence of the ideological stronghold of contemporary consumer culture and its rhetoric.

To these manipulations of commercial ideology we may add those of patriarchy, or more precisely, the imbrication of these and their influence on consumers, especially women. For example, feminists have focused upon the role that consumption plays in constructing gender identity. A variety of work can be drawn upon here to argue that consumer desire can, and has been, mobilized for more political purposes. Writing about the Victorian period, Loeb (1994) shows how early advertising promoted domestic consumption to housewives as a moral duty to reinforce their existing 'angel in the house' status. Moreover, much feminist work on popular romantic fiction has exposed this type of literary consumption as selling the 'bourgeois fairy tale' (Cranny-Francis, 1994) of monogamous, heterosexual marital harmony, thus perpetuating a collective false consciousness of women, or at least those that read such texts. We may also note here the more pervasive multiple regulatory and disciplinary regimes that women are encouraged to enter into in order to conform to the market dictates of an ideal 'feminine' appearance. The ensuing continual, reflexive self-evaluation – the 'work' of consuming femininity (Winship, 1987) – serves to commodify women into consumable objects of the male gaze. Such issues, alongside many others raised by feminist work on consumption, must be recognized and adequately dealt with in any discussion of consumer autonomy.

Even if, in the most Romantic of senses, the autonomous creative capacities of the imagination remain wholly uncompromised by consumer ideology

(or for that matter, any other ideological discourse), this is not to deny that acts of consumption, whether 'real' or 'imagined', are still structured by social characteristics. This in turn leads us to consider Campbell's second implied autonomy: autonomy from the social relations surrounding consumption.

To be sure, Campbell's Romantic ethic is socially and culturally located. For example, in the concluding pages of his thesis, we are told that the Romantic ethic does not have a universal contemporary appeal (1987: 224–7). The 'Romantic habitus', in effect, is apparent only in a very specific elite age, gender and class grouping. This in itself raises concern over who can legitimately experience and speak with authority about the Romantic aspects of consumption. As O'Guinn comments:

Also troubling is that romanticism is solely the experience of the romantic. Romanticism is at least partially a trait, predisposition, or a learned interpretive orientation. Adherents constitute a culture. It describes the everyday experience of the romantic, but perhaps only that of the romantic. For the rest of us, many aspects of life may be fundamentally different or God forbid, simply mundane.

(1996: 85)

Campbell's reliance upon Romanticism to explain the modern consumerist spirit therefore problematizes the theory's applicability to social groups other than the Western, middle-class youthful male which Campbell uses as his default consumer. For example, Romanticism was specifically a European movement, but interpreted in different ways elsewhere. It remains unanswered how a Romantic ethic may manifest itself in the cultural plurality of consumers nowadays. Likewise, in gender terms, Belk (1998) highlights the irony of conceptualizing consumer desire from the Romantic period onwards as 'feminine', given that Romanticism historically was a distinctly masculine phenomenon. This contradiction is made even more ironic given Campbell's assertion that, unlike men, women do not develop 'Romantic' personality traits through the active (albeit largely mentalistic and disembodied) denial of a 'Puritan' character ideal – a factor (within the bounds of his theory) which effectively disqualifies women en masse from ever having any real motivation to consume Romantically. Conceptually standing, where this leaves women in relation to the practice of autonomous hedonism is ambiguous to say the least.

Despite having identified the predominance of Romantic values in a particular cultural grouping, the portrayal of a mentalistic, self-directed consumer consequently de-emphasizes the broader, socially-embedded nature of consumption. By this we mean consumption put to use for the purposes of social emulation and imitation, as a means of social display and communication, or as a strategy in the power games of competitive social groups (Bourdieu, 1984). Seen in this light, one might argue that Campbell's Romantic ethic comes close to the postmodern divorcing of consumption from the embodied, and hence embedded, social structure and relocation into the disembodied and disembedded realm of the hyper-real (Baudrillard, 1998). Indeed, echoing a critique more typically aimed at theorists of postmodern consumption, Uusitalo (1996: 93)

similarly calls for accounts of hedonistic or Romantic consumption to guard against declaring 'the end of the social' when celebrating such acts as subjective and autonomous.

There is also a broader point to be made here, that of the apparent autonomy of Campbell's thesis as a whole. Certainly, the Romantic ethic seems unnecessarily distanced from other perspectives within consumer culture theory. Of course, this critique is not specific to Campbell. Instead, it raises wider issues concerning the over-reliance on one concept or theme to produce a single explanatory account of consumption (Miller, 1997) when consumption, by its very nature, is a multifaceted, many-layered, embodied and embedded social and cultural activity.

To summarize, Campbell fails to convincingly incorporate the interconnections between autonomous hedonism, consumer desire and external determinants within his thesis. We suggest that his argument is further problematized due to the neglect of commercial pressure or social structural influences upon the cycle of 'desire-acquisition-use-disillusionment-renewed desire'. While Campbell may be correct in highlighting an ongoing historical connection between Romanticism and consumption, one must also acknowledge how examples of the commodification and management of emotion in contemporary consumer culture challenge the very tenets of Romantic ideology. However, this is not to side despondently with the manipulationists and accept that autonomous consumer agency is a near impossibility in an age of external temptations to consume. It is simply to suggest, optimistically perhaps, a more complex dialectic between some sort of autonomous hedonism and the machinations of commercial ideology.

## **Where Do We Go From Here – An All-consuming Romance?**

One way of envisioning the future destiny of the Romantic ethic in academic research may be to examine the pervasiveness of the practice of self-illusory hedonism. In doing so, the most obvious place to begin would be with the experience of emotion and the role of the imagination in romantic relationships. Indeed, Campbell himself has suggested that the cycle of 'desire-acquisition-use-disillusionment-renewed desire' is not necessarily limited to the consumption of material goods, but applies equally to interpersonal relationships, especially romantic engagements. For a long time, it seems, feminist perspectives have enjoyed a stronghold over theorizing love and romance, leaving the development of other alternative avenues underexplored. Where, then, we may ask, as a final issue in this paper, does imaginative hedonism stand in relation to changing and evolving meanings of romance?

The experience of 'falling in love', for want of a better phrase, is viewed by Campbell (1987), like Giddens (1992), as a largely disembodied, mentalistic, intensely self-reflexive process – one which, intentionally or otherwise, down-

plays the sensual, erotic dimensions of embodiment, including sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 1997). Desire for an 'other' is premised upon the act of 'projective identification' in which the qualities of a potential partner are intuitively grasped through imaginative or psychic communication. So too, acts of self-illusory hedonism provide an ongoing impetus for romantic attraction:

Here, the required novelty is guaranteed by the very number and diversity of persons which an individual will normally encounter in a life-time of social interaction, consequently ensuring that there are plenty of 'strangers' upon whom one can project one's dreams.

(Campbell, 1987: 93–4)

Such theorizations seem to imply that romantic relationships are primarily entered into for the purposes of realizing or expanding the self, effectively making the experience of falling in love much more of a 'self-ish' act than a 'self-less' one.

All this again places considerable emphasis on each individual as autonomous, calculating agents, responsible for the organization and management of their own romantic destinies. It also takes much emphasis away from the individualities of their prospective partners. In a similar vein, Illouz (1997) argues that new forms of 'consumerist love' have commodified and rationalized romantic relationships. She proposes that romance is no longer able to stand above the realm of commodity exchange, but has become thoroughly intertwined with the discourses of consumer capitalism. The specificities of late modern culture have imbued 'the affair' with the values of consumer rationality and, at some levels, made it representative of lifestyle and identity-based choices. Shopping around for a better deal in the marketplace of potential partners certainly acts as a foil to the assumed permanence of conventional romantic narratives. However, at the same time, through commodification, romantic encounters have begun to lack authenticity, spontaneity and sincerity. Love and romance have become staged and exteriorized emotional productions, leaving 'consumers' with an ironic awareness that many times before, others have acted out the very same scripted romantic conventions that they are currently rehearsing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the supposed infiltration of consumer ideology into romantic relationships, Illouz's research highlights a definite shift away from idealizing love in ways akin to the original Romantic vision of love as a near religious, intense and absolute fusion of two beings – mind, body and spirit – towards conceptualizing love using work or marketplace metaphors (e.g. love as 'hard work', love as a 'process of bargaining'). Moreover, the phenomenological indicators of falling in love, the overwhelming, spontaneous embodied emotions so celebrated by Romantic ideology, are rapidly being dismissed as irrational, untrustworthy and highly suspect for the development of future stable relationships. For example, Hochschild (1994) has noted the 'cooling' of emotional advice in women's magazines regarding relationship management. On the other hand, this change in attitude may be indicative of

a growing awareness that distorted or fabricated cultural representations of romance do not always resonate with 'real-life' involvements, leading to disappointment and despondency and perhaps an altogether more realistic assessment of such relationships. So too, as Illouz points out, 'love at first sight', a mainstay of the Romantic's conception of love and an infallible indicator of true passion, has been deconstructed and demystified through the contemporary divorcing of sexuality from love. From her own research, 'lust at first sight' or simple 'infatuation' seem more accurate descriptions of seemingly instant attractions.

Yet, returning to Campbell, his work, for better or worse, is an attempt to trace the legacies of Romanticism through to the present day, particularly within the sphere of consumption. A similar approach to romantic relationships is needed as a means of challenging much recent sociological scepticism as to the possibility of experiencing 'authentic' emotion in what, in so many other ways, is an inauthentic, commodified age (Meštrović, 1997; Ritzer, 1995).<sup>1</sup> As Duncombe and Marsden (1998) suggest, we may experience as 'authentic' that which others (i.e. sociologists and other cultural critics) dismiss as inauthentic or false consciousness. However, who is kidding who?

Perhaps a useful starting point here in such an endeavour would be to problematize the overly-simplistic assumption that the commodification of romance will necessarily prevent spontaneous romantic encounters and authentic emotional responses to a person or product. Leading on from this, one might begin to question whether such a rigid opposition needs to be maintained between the original Romantic emphasis on the 'real thing' – that is, immediate, authentic, uncompromised engagements with nature, society, the self – and the emotional experiences that are facilitated through the consumption of appropriate products. While authentic emotion may remain resistant to total commodification, one might argue that consumption has the capacity to potentiate or enhance the experiential indicators of Romanticism (whether conceptualized as ethereal or embodied).

For example, it is feasible that the construction of, and participation in, scenarios conducive to romance, whether heavily consumption-reliant or not, may correspond to a continued longing for a more genuinely experiential type of Romantic exultation – one that may be seen to be highly elusive in the supposedly rational, disenchanting era of late modernity. Equally, one could argue that certain acts of consumption have been explicitly Romanticized in order to facilitate a more full-bodied emotional and imaginative interaction between self and commodity. As Brown's (1998) research has shown, modern manifestations of the Romantic quest are all too apparent within the consuming passions of a shopping trip, whereby consumers willingly suffer the heart-rending highs and lows of anticipation and dissatisfaction before experiencing 'love at first sight' when finally united with the product of their dreams. Although transplanted into the sphere of consumption, such behaviour infers that the desire to fulfil some innermost Romantic yearning, by whatever means, remains undeterred:



In a real sense, the sense of the biography which almost every human being experiences, we cannot but be romantic and search for the missing companion of our adult years. Romance, then, has a real foundation in human experience, however distorted and absurd it may become through commercial exploitation.

(Evans, 1998: 274).

We propose that future research agendas should consider more carefully the slide between 'Romantic' (i.e. having explicit or implicit connection to the Romantic movement) and 'romantic' (i.e. general usage to describe a quality of interpersonal relationships) influences upon, and dimensions of, consumer desire and its associated emotions. This in fact leads us to suggest that Campbell's own approach to emotions in the consumption experience, conceived as it is via Romanticism, seems largely neglectful of some of the core preoccupations of Romantic ideology, of which the obsession with romantic love and its absolute, uncontainable and even subversive quality, is but one theme. Holbrook (1993, 1996) also argues that Campbell overlooks key elements of the original Romantic tradition, that may have come to play an equally significant part in the precedents set for the motivational drives of modern consumers. For example, Campbell downplays the Romantic's preoccupation with the 'theme of return, of reunion, of reconciliation with the past, of coming home' (Holbrook, 1993: 153), as well as the more general disregard for historical influences upon the construction of Romantic discourse, including 'aspects of the medieval revival', 'disillusionment over the French Revolution' and 'the Eastern influences associated with the so-called Oriental Renaissance' (Holbrook, 1996: 25).

Therefore, in the light of this final critique, while Campbell may be commended for his attempt to place Romanticism onto the sociological agenda (at least with respect to consumption and emotion), his view of Romanticism remains as problematic as his view of emotions. Herein lies what for some may be the irony of our own viewpoint – on the one hand pointing to a critique of Campbell's limited or partial account of emotion through Romanticism; on the other hand pointing to a critique of his 'unromantic' account of Romanticism itself. Whatever the interpretation, the limits of Campbell's thesis, we suggest, are all too apparent.

## Conclusions

What conclusions, then, can be drawn here? On the one hand, as we have seen, Campbell's thesis may be criticized as a partial account of emotions which masks as much as it reveals as to their role and function in social life, within and beyond the sphere of consumption. However, on the other hand, Campbell may equally be taken to task as to his own partial interpretation of Romanticism and the continuities of Romantic ideology in contemporary social and cultural activity. Along the way, a range of associated issues have also been thrown into critical relief, including the largely disembodied and under-

socialized approach to the matter of consumption, the importance of disappointment as an antidote to the false promises and illusory ideals of late modern life, the routinized or habitual aspects of consumption, and finally the largely 'unromantic' view of romance on offer here – one which resonates with Giddens' pure relationship and the reflexive themes it embraces.

Of course, in making these claims we are mindful that Campbell's own work, alongside consumption research more generally, has moved on considerably over this past decade or so, including some promising new intersections with related fields of inquiry such as the sociology of embodiment and emotions. To the extent that this article has served to consolidate such alliances and re-embody these research agendas, it will indeed have served its purpose. Transcending the dualities, both of Western culture and the field of consumption studies, is a crucial first step in this direction, including not simply the problems of mind/body, reason/emotion dualities, but the competing and often contradictory perspectives which all too often talk past, rather than to, one another (Warde, 1996).

If, as we have argued, sociologists of various issues, be they the body, emotions or whatever, tend to perpetuate traditional dualities (at one and the same time as they try to overcome them) then where precisely does that leave the study of consumption itself? In keeping with a passionate sociology in general, we suggest the answer is that sociologists themselves, *qua* embodied consumers who consume with passion, need to reorientate their research and the very rubric under which it trades, accordingly. If indeed our fate as consumers is more or less all pervasive and inescapable – including (for better or worse) the sphere of higher education itself and the McDonaldized trends it is embracing – then who can escape such a conclusion?

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## Note

- 1 We recognize, of course, that the very notion of authenticity is itself a contested issue. Our use of the term in this context is simply to flag up the possibility of more or less spontaneous forms of emotional experience and expression, devoid of calculability or commercial manipulation.

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