

## ***The Experience Economy is for Likers***

A critique of the mature experience economy and its automated approach to meaning

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The 'experience economy' is not what those prophetic men of the *Harvard Business Review* promised in 1998. And rightly so: they foretold a kind of Rainforest Cafe-esque Nike amusement park in which everyone speaks in a narratively gilded but intrinsically bankrupt branded code ("Welcome™ to™ hell™!™ Your™ Adventure™ Will™ Begin™ Shortly™") and also way more mist (they ultimately advocate what is essentially a 'lean in' policy re: mist). And they, Pine and Gilmore, imagined that, in a mature experience economy, you would gladly pay admission for all of this. By assuming a consumer/producer relationship in the experience economy, they missed the point. By definition, Experience and Content are not 'consumed' to begin with, and as experiences become increasingly mediated through digital platforms, 'consumers' are replaced by 'users'. The currency of experience comes to exist in the exchange of meaning, which today, through 'sharing' and digital activity, means the creation and exchange of *data*. Data is the real product-that-keeps-on-producing of the experience economy, and the profiteers operating on the exchange of user data are its *Raubritters*.

The experience economy, articulated as 'the next step in the progression of economic value' (from agrarian to commodities to service and finally to experience) by Pine and Gilmore, assumes three conditions about the nature of contemporary exchange, all of which were undermined when the world universally and irreversibly *logged on*: that it operates within a traditional consumer/producer paradigm, that an Experience is a designed entity paid for outright, and that this exchange is terminal, as in, Experience is an end product and not a means.

### **THE DOGMA OF PROGRESS**

Within the digitised experience economy, 'consumerism' becomes a misnomer and the producer/consumer dichotomy dissolves: the user acts as both start and endpoint in the chain of surplus value production. Fomenting and ever-accelerating this breakdown is an absolute devotion to the free market dogma of Progress, and, like the homely and prudent children of God, we keep our heads bowed as we blindly pursue *efficiency*, the paradoxical nirvana of Progress. This internalised, faith-like pursuit eventually collapses in on itself without ever reaching its crux. Because pursuing progress—though an assiduously righteous pursuit—is pursuing the end of progress. Because pursuing absolute efficiency is pursuing nonexistence.

Our pursuit of efficiency begins when the individual discovers itself. Freshly washed and dried in the values of a new Free Market, expressing individuality through economic self-sufficiency is now both his liberty and his mandate. Before this, the Middle Ages were still a time of 'target incomes': 'the typical reaction to economic good times was to take *more* days off' (Graeber 498) and it wasn't until the development of the market economy that people started seeing themselves as 'isolated beings who defined their relations with the world not in terms of social relations but in terms of property rights' (Graeber 497). Those who owned factories or ships, and not necessarily those of any given birth, came to wield power.

The promise of Progress comforted individuals in an unprecedented way: that an individual's newfound freedom to generate his own 'human capital' through hard work alone (systemic boosters and barriers be damned) would allow him to move fluidly across classes and accumulate private property (power). However, while scientific progress (the invention of antiseptics mid 19th century alone) eliminated not

all but most premature and infection-related death, enlightenment values not only did not eliminate but encouraged further efforts of enhanced survival through domination and accumulation: 'the basic problem of survival—though solved—is solved in such a way that it is not disposed of, but rather forever cropping up again at a higher level' (Debord 40).

Efficiency as a pursuit in and of itself is pursuing survival if *being the most efficient* is the highest held value of competing bodies. An incorporated body of individuals is surely more efficient than an individual, thus corporate enterprises eventually came to have privilege *above* the individual in public policy (and constitutionally exercises many of the same rights). 'The destruction of an ever-increasing number of smaller enterprises for the sake of growth of ever larger corporations was an economic necessity that one might regret but that one had to accept as if it were the outcome of natural law' (Fromm 8). In an article about the epic unravelling of antitrust laws for *The Washington post*, Eleanor M Fox quotes John Sherman, author of the Sherman Antitrust Act, in 1890: 'If we will not tolerate a monarch, we will not tolerate a king of trade.' But during the Reagan and Carter presidencies, infamous for their deregulation, antitrust became 'pro-efficiency' and not 'anti-bigness'. Efficiency and Progress, colonised by competing states in a newly global economy, put the individual back in her place: not as an isolated single actor competing amongst other single actors, but as an isolated actor serving a larger state in its competition for economic dominance.

But efficiency is not only about the market. Efficiency is part of our way of life: it's why we have maps that endlessly recalculate to save us two minutes, it's why my dad is obsessed with LED lights, it's why we prefer the kiosk to the customer service desk. Efficiency is an aesthetic, or possibly a joy. More accurately, experiencing efficiency is its own kind of *aesthetic sensation*.

Which is why, in an essay about alternative contemporary art events in *Temporary Art Review*, I once called the experience economy the FOMO economy. The unrelenting immediacy of Experience (as advertised) makes us a little crazy: it makes us believe that it is the experience designer and not *our participation* in an experience that brings an Experience to fruition. A user can miss out on an opportunity but not on an Experience, because Experience involves *being* and not *having*. Though we only have one word for both the verb and noun of 'experience', the noun exists only when the verb *verbed*. A user can't have an Experience without having experienced something (Pine and Gilmore specifically note the product of Experience is something 'memorable') but today one can witness a mediated version of experience *as it* unfolds, which creates urgency in the experience economy. Urgency is the gold that backs up the digital currency of mediated social exchange: all the most important things are happening right now and to be in the position to 'share' them is extremely valuable.

The paradox of efficiency, automation and urgency is that it theoretically – when followed through to an extreme, largely unmediated, logical conclusion – leads to a single Supermachine that would put all the gadgeting, all the progress, to rest (Fuchs, 'Internet and Society' 134). This theory is deterministic and assumes an impossible monopoly where a reigning corporate entity is then supplanted by its own product, but is relevant here on a consumer object level. As leisure labour diminishes at an accelerated

rate (my dad closes his garage door from his smartphone, a single tablet replaces a library of print bound books, the refrigerator orders milk when it senses you're running low, an algorithm manages investments, etc.), this has profound implications for our neo-'free' time. We now spend more time controlling, 'prosuming' and sharing than we do *doing* or *buying goods for pleasure* and this has reshaped our approach to 'consuming' Experience.

### **A NEW CONSUMER/PRODUCER PARADIGM**

There is something wrong with the way we think of consumerism (and the way we think of ourselves). Damaging, for example, is our collective agreement that we (or rather that *other people*) (mis)place value in an endless stream of random garbage that has nothing to do with our lives, as if our desires and insecurities are somehow not a part of us but just other things to *have*, *no longer intrinsic but acquired*. (I like to imagine I buy almond-scented candles not because I am a cog in the sheeple machine, but because they are part of the little paradise I am building in a world that is constantly bothering me about things like the *evils of consumerism*.)

Consumerism, however, is not inherently noxious: the buying and using of goods alone does not necessarily invite moral decay. In his essay 'Consumption', David Graeber attempts to define the word—the ideology rather—about which both eager grad students and the French have written unrelentingly but had not yet unpacked as a linguistic term. Early occurrences of 'consumption' framed it in relation to *destruction*: to consume something was to destroy it. Graeber notes, for example, the first 14th century appearances of the word in French and English describe the era's common wasting disease, referring to it interchangeably as 'tuberculous' and 'consumption' (492). Additionally noting the word's Latin roots, Graeber writes, 'it implies something not just being thoroughly taken over but being overwhelmed in a way that dissolves away the autonomy of the object or even that destroys the object itself' (491).

It wasn't until the 17th century, when authors like Adam Smith and David Richard begin referring to consumption as the yin to production's yang, that the term addressed economic behaviour (492). However, Graeber conclusively argues that today's broad application of 'consumption' as a catch-all term to describe activities outside of labour/production – or as encompassing all aspects of leisure – is a mistake. For instance, watching TV is not an act of consumption because it involves neither destructive action nor physically taking anything inside the body.

New theories on consumption are so much less about destruction than creation, so much so that we argue it's practically labour. The automation of objects has fundamentally changed our relationship with tools. Labour and production, once acts of *gesture*, have now become acts of (remote) *control*. Gestural objects were built as an extension of human body/power for physically productive use, but automated objects are built to mirror our own autonomy: they give us not an extension of ourselves but fully realised (and, theoretically, perfectly executed) autonomous functionality of a given task on demand. And thus, writes Baudrillard, we witness 'the great shift from a universal gestural system of labor to a universal gestural system of control' (49).

After a lengthy analysis of drapes and bed posts and how cars have tail fins to signify speed, and how the endless march towards perfecting functionality has not *replaced* gesture but instead splits gesture up infinitely into singular automated self-functioning task machines (a fire once cooked food, created heat and gave light, but now we have ovens, microwaves, toasters; we have lightbulbs; we have space heaters and central heating), Baudrillard writes, 'Man has to be assured about his sense of power by some sense of participation' (52). Our relationships with our objects are now about control. The only thing you physically *do* with a smartphone is touch it, but the potential of *control* you have when using it is endless. 'It is no longer his gestures, his energy, his needs...that man projects into automated objects, but instead the autonomy of his consciousness, his power of control, his own individual nature, his personhood' (Baudrillard 120). Our 'consumption' is in fact the production of the residue of control, of our individual nature, of our personhood. This elusive state of labour puts an emphasis on holistic Experience and less on Object.

Interestingly, though, Pine and Gilmore specifically write experiential marketing out of their definition of a product in the experience economy. This fundamentally misunderstands our relationship with brands: the unravelling of the consumer/producer paradigm puts an object's corresponding brand experience at the heart of a user's interaction with it. Columbia University Psychology professor Sheena Iyengar devotes many chapters in *The Art of Choosing*, a compilation of her studies on perception of choice and control, to studies that specifically concern brand experience and its effects on physical, sensual perception of products. She explains a study in which participants, strapped into an fMRI, sampled what they were told were different sodas (all actually Coke-a-Cola) and after each sip they were shown either the Coke logo or a randomly coloured light. The ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with pleasant tastes, was active for 75% of the Coke-loving participants when *sipping the soda and seeing the brand name*. They were 'tasting the brand' and 'as far as their brains were concerned, the Coke-associated sips really did taste better than the light-associated ones' (161).

The brand experience affects more than our physical experience with a product: another study suggests it is what makes the object singular to begin with. Iyengar writes about witnessing firsthand the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and surveying the discontent and mistrust of the new capitalist system lingering years later: a 2007 survey showed that more than one in five Germans would like to see the wall put back up (61). An older gentleman Iyengar surveyed paraphrased Fromm's theory of 'freedom from' vs. 'freedom to': 'In the Soviet Union you had money but couldn't buy anything. Now you can buy anything but don't have any money' (63). She then describes the most interesting part of a study she was conducting with elderly citizens that once lived in Soviet-controlled East Berlin, which was peripheral to the study's objectives:

'When the participants arrived, we offered them something to drink from a selection of seven popular sodas like Coke, Diet Coke, Pepsi and Sprite. When I presented this selection to one of our first participants...he caught me off guard with his reply: "Well, but does it matter. It's all just soda. That's just one choice."' (67)

She reorganised the study and found this kind response to be overwhelming ubiquitous. To these participants, for whom socialism was internalised, the only choice presented was *soda*. And to a younger generation, the choices were more nuanced, corresponding to each brand. Though distinct from staged experiences— which Pine and Gilmore see as true experience economy products— an object's corresponding brand experience is fundamental to the evolution of the experience economy today.

As we inch closer to the consumer reality of an object's absolute automation, experience (both staged and branded) becomes the underpinning export of the consumer economy because 'Experience' is really code for *productivity*. A user doesn't want to just *buy* something—she wants to *have an Experience*— because she wants to be a productive member of society in every facet of her life. This is what Pine and Gilmore fundamentally misunderstood: that every product of the consumer economy, and not just those that charge admission, exist and consciously operate in an experience economy.

Even notions of aesthetic sensation, *rasa*, taste, etc., have been recast as *production of personal identity*. The enveloping nature of *Brand Experience*, underpinned by several centuries of emphasis on building individual human capital, leaves no room for uncalculated presentations of the self (and don't forget: corporations are people too!). *Our desire to be the object of another's desire is now expressed not in the consumption of goods that make us supposedly more desirable, but in the ritual act of digitising our lived experiences, which involves both producing and consuming, and accumulating the currency of this exchange.* As historical manifestations of production become increasingly automated and most things we talk about 'consuming' are images/spectacles/experiences, the producer/consumer paradigm becomes an anachronistic framework in which to analyse participants and byproducts of the experience economy.

In place of 'producer' or 'consumer,' we will analyse an experience 'user.' A *user* navigates a platform, an experience, an abyss of data, goods and communications. Like a boat making waves as it moves through a body of water, a user creates digital inertia through use. A user indeed acts as a prosumer (a term coined by Alvin Toffler amidst the 80s dot-com explosion): she uses control, knowledge and communication—not physical production—to create and exchange meaning. A user participates in a designed experience and, through this participation, creates her Experience. Participation is the foundation of the experience economy; it is the consumer's paradox of control that drives this desire to participate and amplifies the experience economy, forcing every object (and individual) to wrap itself in 'brand' Experience and Narrative if they want to have any skin in the game.

If not an absolute design to be consumed, what then is a designed *experience* (and how can we differentiate it from product experiences)? Pine and Gilmore differentiate 'staged experiences' from other economic offerings in that the takeaway is a 'memorable' thing. 'Memorable' could potentially be at odds with our modus operandi of efficiency, which is why efficiency is an aesthetic in Experience and not the final memory-maker. This is how we know Experience is not a self-contained meaning-maker.

We seek a seemingly more efficient way to accumulate the most amount of meaning with the least amount of work: instead of finding meaning in the designed experience, we digitise and share this experience, allowing meaning to accumulate on its own through 'Likes', etc.

Nonetheless, 'memorable' is still key in differentiating the designed experience from capital-E-Experience, though today's experience economy conflates 'memorable' and 'authentic'. We can buy and have everything except authenticity so naturally we hyper-commodify it. Authenticity has become the *piece de résistance* of the *crème de la crème* of experiences which is why, paradoxically, the most successful designed experiences are synthetic, impermanent designs: festivals. Even Pine and Gilmore agree festivals reign supreme, and many have noted what big business they are (for example see: 'How music festivals make money' by Melissa Locker in *Fortune*, 2013).

The nature of tourism makes a truly authentic tourist experience impossible (as a tourist you are always inherently a visitor) thus festivals are tremendously successful authentic experiences because they can't be one-upped in nature or by the Other. There is no authentic festival citizen, only festivalgoers. This betrays a truth: it is not something 'natural' that we want when we say 'authentic.' What we want is something vaguely familiar that is *designed to be navigated* in an authentic (or *novel* because 'authentic' is inherently Other in a user-orientated paradigm) way: not something truly foreign, but rather a familiar experience designed for us to encounter *novel opportunities for participation*. We don't want the *encountering* to be authentic at all (if we did, our experiences would consist of either being intentionally lost or just staying at home). Festivals present us with novel opportunities for participation within familiar architecture. And again, though participation is the foundation of Experience, it is not what ultimately gives the experience *meaning*.

## THE RITUAL OF SHARING and THE EXCHANGE OF MEANING

When the underlying motivator of Progress is accomplishment and not fulfilment, we are encouraged to seek meaning through affirmation. Seeking affirmation allows us a sense of purpose and of somewhat-quantifiable significance, but Progress alone does not necessarily give our experiences meaning. There is no holy text of Progress, there is no direction; there is only speed, efficiency, acceleration. So we drag and drop our lived experiences into digital dataspheres where they can accumulate attention and affirmation. We do this while concurrently navigating the 'shared' experiences of other users, exchanging a currency of affirmation and creating meaning: the *exchange* allows for the circumnavigation of meaning for lived Experience.

We, as users, *use*: we like and share and like and share. And this use can become its own object of use. Let's call it a social object. The Facebook platform allows only for sharing, but it is a user's *use* of that platform—the creation and sharing of social objects—that opens the gates of exchange. Users transform their lived experiences into social objects—thus into data-generators that fuel the algorithmic machines—which we gladly do because we seek the implicit affirmation of our lived experiences (as they are represented) in accumulated 'likes'. And we enjoying 'liking' others' shared experiences as well: we

want to use our (mediated) voice to both demonstrate our taste and to tell the machine when we think any given social object is worth seeing, or rather, worth *using*.

Baudrillard writes, 'if hypochondria is [someone obsessed with the functioning of internal organs] then the modern man is a mental hypochondriac, someone obsessed with the perfect circulation of messages' (29). At the core of our exchanges, conscious or not, is the efficiency of algorithms that specifically optimise connectivity. A 'like' explicitly expresses to the algorithm that a given shared experience is not just something you enjoyed seeing, it's something you think others should see. You understand your implicit role as a point of connection when 'liking'. Social software uses a 'networks' metaphor and not a 'page' metaphor deliberately to shape our conscious relationship with it (Langlois 13). We internalise the networks metaphor and the power we have as points of connection within it. This understanding of ourselves further substantiates the meaning we create through our activity.

One significant limitation to how these circulation systems are currently configured is that 'like' is not a very complex currency for meaning. To be 'liked' can be powerful and, though seemingly democratic, the danger is that it flattens the landscape of communication in which we give meaning to Experience. This kind of digital exchange refereed by algorithms tells us that anything we don't 'like' lacks social value and can be systematically ignored. This also reinforces meaning through accumulation as opposed to more abstract qualifiers that cannot be systematically processed.

That is not to say the currency isn't cosmically inflated. It is. Our relationship with 'like' is extremely fragile. In 2009, Burger King made a funny Facebook application that credited a user with one free whopper for every 10 friends they deleted, essentially redefining the currency of a 'friendship' as 'one bite of a burger' (Langlois 17). BK gave a friendship/connection real economic value. Facebook immediately shut this down because it relies on vastly connected networks—and not necessarily on meaningful or controlled connections—to more efficiently collect and disseminate data for profit. Meaningful connections retard the algorithms because algorithms are creatures of efficiency of meaning exchange, not of meaning itself.

Data is, unlike an entry or collection of entries in a journal, an impossible, infinite sum of Experience. Though this data is based in objectivity, its representation of personal thoughts and experiences is biased by efficiency: the Gmail AdSense algorithm doesn't care what your experiences are; they care how they may be useful and to whom (Langlois 15).

Coming back to our metaphor that Progress is indeed a faith-based practice, algorithms assume the existence of an efficiency theos. This is not an emotional God, not an angry and jealous God, but rather it assumes a truly omniscient, purely theoretical, absolute being. The world of Forms doesn't *have* Forms, rather it is an algorithmic state. Algorithms *are* forms, they are material. And they exist to efficiently deliver the right messages to the right people, deriving 'right' of course from the very data upon which they function.



The value of the experience economy lies not in lived experience but in 'shared' experience and the data it proliferates. Those in control of the data pipelines are the ones ultimately profiting from this traffic. If any given capital-E-Experience is a destination then sharing platforms are the railroads we take there and back to every Experience (often more than once), and railroads have always been big business. 'The more time a user spends on Facebook, the more profile, browsing, communication, behavioural, content data s/he generates that is offered as a commodity to advertising clients. The more time a user spends online, the more targeted ads can be presented to her/him' (Fuchs, 'Digital Labour' 27). We as users keep the machine working, we alone generate profit for the machine: we are the product being delivered, first as data then as users, and around again. The experience economy bowed to the values of Progress and Experience is left in a perma-rinse cycle of meaning.

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