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The Sweet Shop and the Toy Shop: Consumption, Sign and Play in the Confectionery Industry

Introduction

The confectionery industry is the epitome of processed food: the point at which physically consumable entities most clearly overlap with synthetic objects. This is reinforced by the fact that confectionery is consumed for pleasure rather than nutrition; low on the scale of necessity, it exemplifies the commercially constructed needs that characterise consumer society. Confectionery represents the peak of alimentary superfluity just as it exists at the peak of the dietician's food pyramid, and according to these principles, I explore the mechanisms and dynamics that condition its consumption. After a brief history of processed food and the confectionery industry, I outline how synthetic food is inherently a commodity according to Marx's definition, before drawing upon the writings of Jean Baudrillard to delineate the complex relationship between consumption, sign and play in the confectionery industry.

Processed Food and the Confectionery Industry

Food processing has been around for millennia, and Chris Otter remarks that it is 'misleading to regard the industrialisation of food as a purely "modern" phenomenon'.¹ Methods of food preservation such as salting and smoking date from primitive societies, and heating food is already a modification of it. An article in the *Scientific American* traces a timeline of food processing from roasted meat (1.8 million years ago) to bread (30,000 years ago), chocolate (1900 BC), sugar (500 BC), coffee (mid-1400s), carbonated water (1767), corn flakes (1894), MSG (1908), spam (1926), chicken nuggets (1950s), high-fructose corn syrup (1957) and lab-grown meat (2013).² While food processing is a spectrum, this spectrum demonstrates certain thresholds of change, and the examples

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from corn flakes onwards indicate more chemically complex ingredients as well as advanced and mechanised methods of food manufacture. It is evident that food is becoming 'increasingly synthetic', a shift which Otter situates in the context of industrialisation and the transition from an organic to a mineral economy.³ Whether this is a primarily positive development in reducing global food scarcity, or whether there are negative implications for health, is a vast and separate topic of discussion. I wish to focus on the semiotic implications: the synthetic nature of many modern foods, combined with advances in packaging materials and presentation, has led to food progressively resembling non-consumable objects, causing a shift in the ways in which individuals relate to it.

The specific domain of the confectionery industry has undergone similar transitions. Laura Mason discusses how the origins of sugar consumption, derived from the skill of refining cane juice, can be traced to India over two thousand years ago.⁴ This was denoted by the Sanskrit words *sakkar* and *khanda*, which form the basis of 'sugar' and 'candy'; both the words and the skill of refining sugar were transmitted westward across Persia and the Middle East, reaching the eastern Mediterranean by the tenth century through the Muslim conquests (p. 9). Mason describes the historical association between sugar and decoration, citing the Renaissance Italian *collazione*. These were banquets of sweetmeats arranged during celebrations, 'part food, part entertainment' (p. 10), including pastries, sugar-preserved fruit, jellies and marzipan. Mason goes on to describe how '[t]ogether with silver, gold, fine glass and linen, sugar paste was a precious decorative material' in post-medieval Europe (pp. 91-2). Here, sugar is categorised with other inedible materials used for ornamentation, where its primary purpose is not ingestion but spectacle. In Italy it was used to make *trionfi di tavola*, 'elaborate and highly accomplished sculptures designed to entertain and flatter the nobility' (p. 93). Confectionery was a luxury item.

However, through industrialisation and mass production, this aesthetic potential has been reconfigured from art to play. Contemporary confectionery is cheap and widely available, and so its decorative capacity is motivated by a logic of persuasion rather than impression, corresponding with invitations to interact rather than observe. Instead of an artistic spectacle of wealth, confectionery is now framed as a game which aims to encourage participation and consumption. The transitional overlap between confectionery as art and confectionery as game is evident in the traditional nineteenth-century sweet shop. Here, the shiny surfaces of sparkling and patterned boiled sweets displayed in their transparent jars were simultaneously spectacle and advertisement. The abstraction of signification increased further when

transparent jars were replaced by opaque, individual plastic packaging covered with images and brands.

An increasing semiotic complexity manifests itself in ingredients as well as presentation. Mason describes how boiled sweets were produced through boiling syrup to 'hard crack' (a stage in the codification of sugar-heating processes) and then letting it cool quickly, which created a 'sparkling transparency' (p. 39). The process was aided by agents: '[l]emon juice or honey were used in a pre-industrial age; glucose or tartaric acid in mass production, further inhibiting crystallization' (p. 40). The transition from lemon and honey, whose organic derivation is still visible, to the more specific chemical distillations of glucose and tartaric acid, is testament to the increasing complexity and synthetic nature of confectionery.

This is further emphasised by the parallel etymologies of 'confectionery' and 'synthetic'. 'Confectionery' comes from the Latin *cōnficere* which means 'to put together, make up, prepare, complete' (OED). Synthetic has a similar root, from the Latin *syntheticus* which stems from the Greek *συνθετικός*. This is a combination of *syn*, a Greek prefix meaning 'together', and *thesis*, a Greek word meaning 'putting, placing' (OED). The Latin *cōnficere* and the Greek-derived *synthetic* are equivalent, composed of the elements 'putting' and 'together', indicating the inherently manufactured and mediated composition of confectionery.

These principles can be applied to a variety of processed food. There is clearly a ludic element to the advertisement and consumption of fast food such as McDonald's, which is corroborated by the inclusion of plastic toys in children's meals, evoking another parallel between food and toys as simultaneous objects of consumption. Nevertheless, I have chosen confectionery as a case study because it epitomises processed food as the smallest and highest (therefore, least nutritionally necessary) triangle of the food pyramid and because of the historical association between confectionery and decoration. The latter has transitioned from elite spectacle to mass-produced gamification, encouraging interactivity in the service of consumption. In addition, the signification of packaging and advertisements is particularly relevant in confectionery compared to other industries; a study by Charlton et al. (2015) has identified that, particularly in Western countries, the marketing of 'discretionary' foods (confectionery, snacks, soft drinks) is higher than that of 'core' foods (fruit, vegetables, grains).⁵ Consequently, while the interrelation of play, consumption, simulation and semiotics in food consumption might be relevant to several industries, its pyramidal superfluity and inherently decorative, gamic qualities make confectionery a particularly pertinent case study.

Synthetic Food as a Commodity

In *Grundrisse*, Marx outlines the mutual influence that production and consumption exert over each other. On one hand, 'consumption produces production' because a product is only fully realised when consumed.⁶ In turn, consumption stimulates the need for further production as replenishment. Nevertheless, production also creates a specific manner of consumption, and Marx aptly illustrates this through food: 'Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth'.⁷ Marx's comment expresses the complication of primal 'need' through an economic market which prescribes certain social contexts and cues. The means through which a need is resolved rebounds and alters the nature of the need itself. Here Marx identifies the opposition between 'cooked' and 'raw' meat, recalling cooking as the first form of food processing; this primary manipulation of food, compounded by the addition of implements, introduces a sophistication into the need that it gratifies. In the logical extrapolation of Marx's remark, even cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork appears primitive in relation to the fantastic flavourings and syntheses of today's food industry. The more complex the gratification, the more complex the need becomes. While everybody needs protein to live, an individual does not necessarily *need* the specific form of a steak, and even less the more specific form of an Oreo Cookie Ice Cream. Alongside this increasing sophistication of needs, we can trace the increasing semiotic complexity in food.

Existing on the boundary between organic consumable object and inorganic, non-consumable object (a condition embodied in the ambiguous edibility of icing figures on children's birthday cakes), confectionery traces a particular relationship to use-value and exchange-value. According to *Capital*, use-value is the literal function of an object produced by labour. Marx uses the example of a table; as an object, 'the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing'.⁸ However, when it becomes a commodity, participating in the system of exchange where values are made quantitative and equivalent, the object acquires a mystificatory character. Yet even in this semiotically altered form, a table is still recognisable as wood. The natural materials that constitute a Haribo Tangfastic (as with many other non-alimentary synthetic objects) are more complex. In a Tangfastic, one can no longer see the collagen, the citric acid and the spirulina cyanobacteria, but rather a treated, ingestible synthesis of these ingredients. Where Marx distinguishes the 'ordinary' object from the fetishised 'commodity', confectionery is

already geared towards persuasion and advertisement in its very constitution. This is before it is branded as a commodity, which entails being stamped with packaging, plastered over billboards and entering the system of monetary exchange. In the very status of becoming an object (and becoming an object precedes becoming a commodity), synthetic food is participating in the system of desire and gratification that characterises consumer society.

Confectionery is always already a commodity, and its very ingredients exemplify the constructed and sophisticated needs of today's food industry. In this, it has a particular relationship to consumption, which has a double meaning. In the OED, the definition of the verb 'consume' is divided into three parts: 'senses relating to physical destruction', 'senses relating to the use or exploitation of resources', and 'extended uses'. The first part contains five definitions, all of which recall the Latin roots of *consume* in 'consumer'. *Consumere* meant to destroy, wear away, waste and squander, from *con* as 'together' and *sumere* as 'to take up' (OED). Section II contains definitions six to nine, and number six is divided into three subsections: (a) 'to eat or drink; to ingest', (b) 'to use up (esp. a commodity or resource), exhaust' and (c) 'to purchase or use (goods or services)'. Number six, then, includes both the physical consumption of food and the economic sense of consumption. Yet these senses are only distinguished several stages down the definitional tree. The two branches are connected at the root: 'to eat' and 'to purchase' are combined under 'use or exploitation of resources'.

Consuming Signs: Sweets and Semiotics

The increasing semiotic abstraction of food is encapsulated by the transition from raw meat to cooked meat to meat-flavoured crisps. The more elaborate the levels of signification, the smaller the substantial distinctions: organically distinct foods (meat, vegetables) become signs or varnishes for substantially homogeneous foods (meat- or vegetable-flavoured crisps). In terms of confectionery, the distinction between a lemon and a blackcurrant becomes abstracted to that between sweets labelled 'lemon' and 'blackcurrant'. Distinction operates at a surface level, illustrating Jean Baudrillard's thesis that contemporary culture is constantly 'substituting the signs of the real for the real'.⁹ Here, continues Baudrillard, the oppositions between true and false, real and imaginary, become subsumed into the 'orbital recurrence of models and [...] simulated generation of differences'.¹⁰

That the difference between lemon and blackcurrant flavoured sweets is simulated is substantiated by the physical composition of

these sweets. One example is Fox's glacier fruits, which contain six flavours: blackcurrant, strawberry, raspberry, lemon, lime and orange. The ingredients are listed as:

Glucose Syrup, Sugar, Lactic Acid, Concentrated Fruit Juices (orange 0.07%, lime 0.06%, raspberry 0.06%, strawberry 0.1%, lemon 0.05%, blackcurrant 0.1%), Acidity Regulator sodium lactate, Natural Flavourings, Natural Colours (anthocyanin, carotene, chlorophyllin, curcumin).¹¹

The physical distinction between the flavours is a matter of – at most – 0.1%: one thousandth. At its least, it is 0.05%: five 10 thousandths. The amount is negligible, and yet the *idea* of difference is accentuated by appearance, as illustrated by the final ingredient in this list: 'Natural Colours'. Colour is significant in creating a surface sense of distinction which also seeps into the gustatory experience.

A recent Internet controversy questioned whether all the flavours of the popular confectionery 'Skittles', often marketed as 'Taste the Rainbow', actually taste the same. An article in the *Independent* complained that '[b]ecause it's cheaper to make sweets with different colours and scents than actual flavours, we might be being mugged off'.¹² In the article writer's own blind taste test, she did identify taste variation between the colours, but these were mainly down to 'scent and colour' rather than flavour. More formally, Wu et al. conducted a study testing the relationship between colour and flavour perception, performing a blind taste test using Skittles on Chinese graduate and undergraduate students who would likely have been unfamiliar with the sweet.¹³ They chose Skittles because of their bright and distinct colours. The study found that the proportions of correct identifications of flavour decreased significantly when participants could not see the colours compared to when they could, 'suggesting that colour, as visual information, contributes to taste perception, a conclusion consistent with other studies'.¹⁴ Indeed, the 'Taste the Rainbow' slogan of Skittles capitalises on the idea of synesthetic consumption: tasting colours, a mingling of visual and gustatory experience. At the same time, it reveals the truth of the semiotics of confectionery, which is that the means of differentiation is on the surface. One tastes *colour*, not substance; appearance, not ingredient. This is a concrete instantiation of Baudrillard's 'simulated generation of difference': the rainbow will rub off with water, revealing identical material beneath.

Visual consumption is a crucial aspect of consuming confectionery, particularly in an image-oriented economy. Baudrillard's theory of

simulacra was preceded and partly inspired by Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), which identifies how the transition to a consumer economy is conditioned by images. Debord discusses the time spent 'consuming images', remarking that 'modern society's obsession with *saving time*, whether by means of faster transport or by means of powdered soup, has the positive result that the average American spends three to six hours daily watching television'.¹⁵ The example of food here is illustrative; in temporal terms, the consumption of food (cooking soup) is replaced by the consumption of images (watching television). Yet the two are also intermingled. The images on the television screen correspond with the images on the packaging of the powdered soup: the brand that is attempting to visually persuade the consumer to select it from among other brands through a ludic game of choice. This game of choice is exemplified by Baudrillard's remark in *Seduction* that '[t]he ludic is everywhere, even in the "choice" of a brand of laundry detergent in the supermarket'.¹⁶ Moreover, Debord's television screen could conceivably be advertising the packaged soup. In such a scenario, the subject is consuming images on the screen at the same time as they consume those same images on food packaging at the same time as they consume the food itself. Images are being consumed in all directions, both in terms of consuming synthetic food and in the way that these visually conditioned, already 'confected' (i.e., already 'put together', pre-packaged) foods free up time for further visual consumption through the spectacle of screens.

But what does it actually mean to 'consume' these images? Consumption here is applied in the senses of 'use' and 'ingest': to absorb and take something in. Images are taken in and become part of the subject's mental repository, their imaginative set of ideas. This is how images seep into the experience of the food. A sweet in the shape and colour of an apple implies the idea of an apple; when consumed, a phantom apple is consumed alongside it as the sign stimulates imaginative consumption. This might be preceded by a packaging that illustrates a bright and fantastical apple, which further conditions the perception of taste. Physiologically, images can also act as cues that stimulate sensory mechanisms such as increasing hormone levels related to hunger, producing a simulation of physical consumption.¹⁷ Here, nothing is actually physically taken in; the mechanisms of physical consumption are enacted without their object. However, the activation of neural circuits and reward pathways in the brain is where the effect of the consumption of images (something mental) meets an effect of the consumption of food (something physical), just as food and shopping can both trigger the release of dopamine in the brain.

This dichotomy of physical and imaginative consumption is identified by Tim Dant, who describes how commodity fetishism leads to an ‘overdetermination of the social value of the object in that it is not merely consumed (exchanged and used) but in addition the object or class of objects can be enjoyed at the level of imagination (fantasy and desire)’.¹⁸ I would argue that this imaginative engagement is not distinct from consumption, but part of it, involved in the very ‘use’ of the object. ‘Consuming’ the object converges with ‘imaginatively enjoying’ it, because gaining pleasure from the object means using it. While imaginative use does not *physically* ‘consume’ resources, the process can be considered psychologically; an object whose purpose is entertainment is made redundant if it is no longer entertaining. It is worn out, as in Debord’s example of the ‘sheer fad item’.¹⁹ Like the commodity in general, Debord discusses how the fad item interrupts the ‘organic development of social needs’.²⁰ It also interrupts the organic form of consumption, because a fad item is psychologically consumed. Its use-value is novelty and interest, and so its destruction or exhaustion is defined as a loss of interest rather than a physical depletion. Consumption is still working according to Marx’s definition, where ‘consumption accomplishes the act of production only in completing the product as product by dissolving it’.²¹ The same process is at work, except that the fad item is not dissolved physically but psychologically.

Consumption as Play

The next variable to be added to this identification of confectionery as an inherent commodity, soliciting specific forms of physical, economic and visual consumption, is play. Play is a means of describing the forces at work in the consumption of confectionery, both physical and economic. Recently, this dynamic has been identified and formalised under the title ‘gamification’. Gamification describes the strategies involved in framing a situation or object as a game in order to increase a subject’s engagement with it, whether this engagement is towards a pedagogical or economic purpose. Gamification involves the use of ‘game mechanics’, which refers to the ‘basic elements that make up games’, including ‘points, badges (*achievements*), levels, leaderboards, and rewards’.²² Examples include customer loyalty programs which involve ladders and rewards. These work by ‘cultivating a sense of mastery – and progression towards it at all times’, aiming to ‘maximize engagement’.²³ Robson et al. (2015) set gamification in a psychological context, commenting that ‘[g]amification can produce desired behaviour change through the formation of habits by reinforcing the reward and emotional response

of the individuals participating in the experience'.²⁴ As implied by the idea of a 'reward' response, there is a neurological mechanism behind these strategies, concerning the stimulation of dopamine. This corresponds with the neurological mechanisms that facilitate sugar addiction: both drugs and food can stimulate 'abrupt dopamine increases in the brain reward system', and excessive activation of this system has also been hypothesised to contribute to a lack of impulse control in activities such as gambling, sex and shopping/buying.²⁵

Behind these pragmatic market strategies of gamification lie certain theoretical principles connected to early scholars of play, notably Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. I wish to outline two key concepts from these critics: Huizinga's conception of the 'magic circle', and Caillois' distinction between *ludus* and *paidia*, which is then developed by Baudrillard and applied to the process of economic consumption. Huizinga is widely regarded as one of the first play theorists, positing various principles of play that have gone on to be developed by later critics. One of these principles is the idea that play occurs on a different dimension to ordinary life, within a particular, carved-out space. Huizinga remarks:

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.²⁶

From Huizinga's list, the 'magic circle' is often taken as shorthand for denoting this space, and its qualities include a kind of lightness or inconsequentiality: what happens inside the game has no serious consequences on the world outside it, because the space of the game is independent. The magic circle is self-contained, governed by its own rules and its own logic. Caillois revises Huizinga's concepts by identifying specific categories of play: agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation) and *ilynx* (vertigo).²⁷ He also suggests that play participates in a spectrum from *ludus* to *paidia*, where *paidia* refers to energetic, spontaneous play while *ludus* is controlled, mediated, rule-governed play.²⁸

In *Seduction*, Baudrillard distinguishes the 'modern meaning of play' as the mode of the 'ludic' – a mode which has been dominant since at least 1970, where Baudrillard first discussed the ludic in *The Consumer Society*.²⁹ In the latter text, Baudrillard defines the ludic as a 'play with

combinations, a combinatorial modulation: a play on the technical variants or potentialities of the object'.³⁰ Here, he continues, domestic gadgets link up with 'slot machines, tirlipots and the other cultural radio games, the quiz machine in the drugstore, the car dashboard'.³¹ What these mechanical applications have in common is a logic of selection: they offer choices between elements that are materially equivalent, distinguished only by symbols. This stimulates a 'vague or passionate curiosity for the "play" of mechanisms, the play of colours, the play of variants'.³² Later, in *Seduction*, Baudrillard remarks that this form of play has 'nothing to do with play as a dual or agonistic relation'.³³ Opposing, frictional and contradictory forces are replaced by frictionless surfaces, and the play of substance is replaced by a play of pattern.

Games of Choice

Participating in this play of pattern, the confectionery industry poses a game of choices within choices. The first choice is between brands of confectionery: Jelly Belly is a choice of brand among other brands, such as Skittles or Fox's Glacier Fruits. If Jelly Belly is selected, the choices then open up to the jelly bean collections under this brand, making the second set consist of the themed collections of Jelly Belly flavours. These include 'Fruit Bowl Mix', 'Tropical Mix', 'Smoothie Blend' and 'Beanboozled – Yum and Yeuch!'.³⁴ Within each of these collections, there are multiple flavours in keeping with the theme of the category. For instance, 'Smoothie Blend' contains 'Cherry Passion Fruit', 'Mandarin Orange Mango', 'Mixed Berry Smoothie', 'Pineapple Pear Smoothie', 'Strawberry Banana Smoothie'. These sets of choices constitute the game of consumption, as each selection leads to another selection.

The game of choice is reinforced by the fact that a version of 'Beanboozled – Yum and Yeuch!' can come packaged as a board game, complete with a spinner and ten possible options on which the player can land. As the most outlandish collection of Jelly Belly's beans, 'Beanboozled' consists of conventional jelly beans intermingled with flavours of inedible substances including 'Dead Fish', 'Mouldy Cheese', 'Booger', 'Lawn Clippings', 'Canned Dog Food', 'Toothpaste', 'Baby Wipes' and 'Stinky Socks'. The appearance of each of these flavours is identical to the appearance of a pleasant flavour; for instance, 'Booger' is the same appearance as 'Juicy pear'. Players spin the spinner until it lands on one of these appearances which they then try, taking the risk that the flavour will be one of the odd ones. This is a game of semiotics, dependent on making the same sign point to two different things. In this, it participates in Caillois' category of *alea*: games of chance.

'Beanboozled' takes the analogy between consuming confectionery and consuming artificial objects to another level, as this confectionery is flavoured as objects. Non-consumable entities such as 'Baby Wipes' and 'Stinky Socks' are made into signifiers of flavour; playful 'consumption' is taken to its logical extreme. Yet what are the actual ingredients of these bizarre sweets? While there are no actual 'baby wipes' or 'stinky socks' being consumed, the physical objects do play a role in the composition. Erin McCarthy describes how Jelly Belly's first step is analysing the real thing in a gas chromatograph, which converts the object into vapours and then analyses the chemical makeup of these vapours to convert them into flavour markers.³⁵ These flavour markers become the starting point for making jelly beans. In the example of 'Stinky Socks', Jelly Belly spokesperson Jana Saunders Perry comments that their 'flavor scientist aged his own socks in a sealed plastic bag for a couple of weeks' before putting them in the gas chromatograph, which 'generated a report of the socks' flavor makeup'.³⁶ Using this data, the flavour scientist created the taste of the bean – a taste which has its roots in real olfactory mechanisms.

The flavours are added to several basic ingredients of jelly beans: all are variations on sugar, glucose syrup and modified cornstarch to which are added the various flavourings, colourings, glazing agents and acidity regulators. Still, even the ingredients that make up confectionery are themselves often synthetic, composed of further elements. For instance, 'gelatin' is often listed as an ingredient, but it is really a 'product obtained by the partial hydrolysis of collagen derived from the skin, white connective tissue and bones of animals', a combination of peptides and proteins.³⁷ When interrogated, the substances that constitute confectionery entirely dissolve. The jelly bean is constituted by signs because if one attempts to find its 'referent', the primary components which are 'con-fected', the ingredients dissolve from one's grasp.

Unpacked, the series of signs can be described as follows. The brand 'Jelly Belly' is a sign that points to the series of brightly packaged confectionery. The bright packaging points to its contents, which are first identified by labels of different flavours. After these labels, one accesses the colour and texture of the sweet's appearance. This colour and texture then points towards the flavour. This flavour is constituted by chemical ingredients which break down further and further as one attempts to identify their components until they reach the micro level of proteins and amino acids extracted from animals. These are the elements which are synthesised to make confectionery: its most primary components are chemical permutations.

Yet these elements are not the essence of confectionery; confectionery is really constituted by the entire series of signs mentioned above, which become equivalent. In other words, the signs of packaging and advertising do not *point* towards the substance to be consumed (the physical jelly bean) but constitute *part* of the process of consumption. Where Baudrillard remarked that 'billboards and the products themselves act as equivalent and successful signs', we can identify a more specific list of equivalent semiotic components: billboards, screens, plastic packaging, confectionery surfaces, colours, flavours and even ingredients.³⁸ The ludic game of choice is played on all these levels, and it is a choice between signs, performed inside a magic circle which can be a newsagents, a supermarket, or any other kind of sweet shop.

Games of Disclosure

In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard described how objects for consumption are

always arranged to mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing impulse [...]. Clothing, machines and toiletries thus constitute object pathways, which establish inertial constraints in the consumer: he will move logically from one object to another. He will be caught up in a calculus of objects.³⁹

These 'object pathways' can be considered in terms of travelling within as well as across: there is a pathway in the navigation *of* objects as well as the navigation *between* objects. Each object of confectionery is not only an element within a system of codes, but its own system of codes. Just as there is a progression from apple to apple-flavoured, there is also the development from chocolate to chocolate-coated, from caramel to caramel-centred. Traversing this series of nested enclosures constitutes another dimension of the game of consumption.

'Caramel' originated as a term for sugar that had been heated to the point that it became hard; at this stage, 'caramel' was simply constituted of sugar and often considered spoilt since there was no use for it (*Sweets* p. 27). In the late nineteenth century, 'American caramels' arrived in Britain, composed of sugar, milk, butter and cream (*Sweets* p. 54). Now, caramel had become a confection: a synthesis of various elements. Even later, Mason describes how when chocolate manufacturers began experimenting with chocolate bars sold by number rather than weight, they 'used other confections as fillings. Caramel was a popular choice, along with nougat, mallow, crisped rice and peanuts' (p. 57). These

confections were 'coated in chocolate' (p. 56). In Britain, caramel was consumed in the form of Mars Bars (devised in 1932) and in the United States, caramel was contained in Snickers (devised 1930) (p. 57). The ingredients of a Mars Bar are listed as 'Sugar, Glucose Syrup, Skimmed Milk Powder, Cocoa Butter, Cocoa Mass, Sunflower Oil, Milk Fat, Lactose and Protein from Whey (from Milk), Whey Powder (from Milk), Palm Fat, Fat Reduced Cocoa, Barley Malt Extract, Emulsifier (Soya Lecithin), Salt, Egg White Powder, Milk Protein, Natural Vanilla Extract'.⁴⁰ This is a far cry from simple boiled sugar, or the combination of sugar, milk, butter and cream. The progression is from caramel to 'American caramels' to Mars Bars; from one ingredient, to a confection of several ingredients, to a confection of confections. Recalling the etymology of confectionery, the process involves 'putting together' items which are already put together. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes the 'the hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished'.⁴¹ The counterpart to the 'more real than the real' is the more confected than confected. Modern confectionery is a physicalised code.

Yet navigating this code is precisely part of the game, as the ludic progression within the object of consumption works according to a spatial dialectic. There are countless examples of confectionery organised as a layered structure: Maltesers have a crispy inside and chocolate outside, Haribo Tangfastics are covered with a sparkly sugar coating, and Peanut Butter cups are small containers. There are also gobstoppers which Mason describes as 'a particular object of fascination, changing colour as they become smaller, needing frequent inspection and comparison by their young consumers' (p. 70). This is an attractive style of organisation, providing the pleasure of beginning on one level and uncovering another. Gaston Bachelard identified the attraction of nested structures in *The Poetics of Space* (1994), remarking that 'there will always be more things in a closed, than in an open, box', a feeling encapsulated by the exclamation '[b]ut who doesn't like both locks and keys?'.⁴² This interactivity reinforces the gamic aspect which distinguishes mass-produced confectionery from the decorative spectacle of sugar sculptures in luxurious settings discussed above. Still, both cases are conditioned by their economic contexts; commercial principles have shaped the interactive, inside-outside dialectic of confectionery, whose goal is to invite and encourage consumption.

The logic of unpeeling, unwrapping, disclosing and unlocking involved in the layered structures of confections is replicated in the containment of confectionery inside its packaging. One of Baudrillard's most evocative descriptions of simulation is at the beginning of

Simulacra and Simulation, when he suggests that '[t]he territory no longer precedes the map' but 'the map [...] precedes the territory'.⁴³ Just so, the image of Maltesers on the packaging precedes the actual Maltesers. When Baudrillard continues that 'it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map', this suggests the Maltesers slowly revealing themselves as their packaging is unpeeled.⁴⁴ Baudrillard has identified a semiotic inversion; in a society based on images and consumption, representation is accessed before the item it represents, due to the ineluctable mediation of signs.

Baudrillard goes on to negate these comments, commenting that it is 'no longer a question of either maps or territory': inversion gives way to equivalence.⁴⁵ However, inversion is significant in *preceding* equivalence, both in his historical orders of simulacra (from counterfeit to simulation) and in Baudrillard's own exposition of his argument in the opening of this text, which affirms before it negates – conjures before it cancels.⁴⁶ In the context of confectionery, there is a specific order involved in its access as subjects progress from discovering the Mars Bar inside its wrapping to discovering the caramel inside the Mars Bar – which eventually disintegrates, its use-value disappearing, illustrating how the object is constituted by its signs. While these signs are equivalent in comprising the object, they provide an ordered temporal pathway of access through a game of spatial navigation. As put by Dant in his summary of Baudrillard's argument on fetishisation, the game is premised on a 'passion for the code'.⁴⁷

Turning the Grotesque Tables: Consumed by Consumption

Despite these modes of consumption identified in relation to confectionery, and the ludic dynamic that governs them, an argument emerges which appears to contradict the definition of consumption. If confectionery is defined as a series of signs which is consumed synaesthetically, then the object can never really be depleted. Its resources cannot be exhausted by the consumer because they are partly immaterial; however many Mars Bars are consumed, they make no dent in the disembodied permanence of the brand. Indeed, the opposite is the case: the more a brand is consumed, the more economic power it wields. The brand's energy is only depleted when it *stops* being consumed, as consuming the brand is a means of feeding it. This opens up a relationship of interdependence, something parasitical which involves a reversal of directionality. The question is invited: what exactly is being consumed in the relationship between consumer and confectionery, in the sense of 'using up'? I suggest that the confectionery industry enacts an

inversion of energy. Rather than consuming confectionery, confectionery is consuming the consumer, using up their resources physically, economically and imaginatively.

I will begin with physiological consumption. While the consumer does 'use up' the physical substance of confectionery by ingesting it, this substance also 'uses up' the consumer's own biological mechanisms through its effect on the body. Cane sugar and high-fructose corn syrup, often used in the manufacture of confectionery, contain glucose and fructose. Fructose is known to 'potently stimulate lipogenesis' which is postulated to contribute to insulin resistance, a key feature of type 2 diabetes.⁴⁸ While the exact way that these biological mechanisms work has not yet been verified, the hypothesised link between sugar and diabetes indicates that excess consumption can lead to a disablement of the body's mechanisms for processing this substance. In this sense, consumption rebounds on the consuming subject, enacting the word's Latinate etymological meaning of 'destroy, wear away' (OED). While excess consumption of anything alimentary can cause such physiological damage, the threshold for excess sugar consumption is more frequently surpassed than, for instance, carotene from vegetables.

This physical reversal in the direction of consumption can also be considered in visual and psychological terms. Debord, writing on the 'consumption of images', simultaneously recognises the image as an object of 'contemplation'. He remarks that

The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object [...] works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires.⁴⁹

In contemplating the spectacle, one is also consuming it, responding to it as a product manufactured for a system of exchange. However, the resources used up appear to be those of the consumer rather than the object; if the spectator lives less when contemplating, and if 'life' can be considered in terms of energy, then there is a loss of energy on the spectator's behalf. Energy is transferred from subject to object, and the image is not used up so much as the energy of spectator-as-consumer. The consumer is consumed by the object, mirroring Marx's description of the alienation of production: 'The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object'.⁵⁰ Whether 'spectacle' is used to describe the appearance of a product, or its packaging, or its branding, 'consuming' it (by 'contemplating' it) feeds its energy

and autonomy. The more people look at a brand, the more powerful it grows, having increased presence in people's minds. In terms of confectionery, one consumes by seeing and thinking as well as ingesting. Yet in this process, one is also consumed: the energy expended on confectionery increases its attraction and the desire for more, strengthening the hold it exerts over the spectator.

This is also a reversal of Marx's commodity fetishism, as expressed through his striking example of the table. Marx describes how

by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless, the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.⁵¹

Here, Marx is discussing production, which is conceived of as a division. The product of labour is something separately congealed and externalised, a concretisation of work and effort. However, consumption is a synthesis. Rather than *producing* something that exists apart from the producer, the consumer *ingests*, taking in the object. Consumption is a mode of combining rather than dividing. The table might gain a life of its own as a commodity, but the food it holds and displays merges its life with the subject's own when these alimentary commodities are consumed. The table has been produced as congealed labour, but it is, through its association with food, the means of facilitating the consumption of objects which will eventually congeal *back* with the subject.

This cycle is not self-enclosed, nor sustainable; what merges with the consuming subject is something more than confectionery. On a larger ecological scale, the production of synthetic materials combined with excess consumption of environmental resources has rebounded, so that packaging is quite literally being ingested alongside alimentary objects. US rainwater contains high levels of PFAS chemicals, which appear in an 'array of everyday items, such as food packaging, clothing and carpeting'.⁵² Many species of fish now contain microplastics; in eating fish, humans are also effectively taking in the packaging within which these fish are distributed in the market, because waste from such packaging is returning to the ecosystem.⁵³ The *Guardian* reported that humans are eating 'at least 50,000 plastic particles a year', a statement corroborated by a recent study by Kieran D. Cox et al.⁵⁴ This mode of

pollution extends far wider than confectionery, deeply embedded in the mechanisms of mass production and consumption that govern the entire food industry. Nevertheless, it is inextricably implicated in the semiotic complexities of confectionery's highly processed ingredients and colourful, gamic wrapping. It is an extension of the logic of surplus which confectionery exemplifies: a surplus which comes to congeal with the consumer as they consume plastic alongside proteins, with potentially destructive effects.⁵⁵ If the typical toy shop is a ludic arrangement of colourful plastic, so is the surface of the typical sweet shop. Plastic packaging is indirectly consumed, consuming the consumer by wearing away their body.

While subjects initially appear to choose what they consume, the forces exerted by strategies of gamification and the neurological effects of sugar (in the stimulation of dopamine) suggest an inversion in these dynamics of control. Excess sugar 'consumes' (destroys, wears away) the body's mechanisms of insulin detection, and the visual consumption of images both gives energy to brands and, as Debord demonstrates, can take mental life from the consumer. Inverting the framework of Marx's commodity fetishism, with the division and externalisation of production, confectionery instead draws consumers towards *unification* with it. Yet what congeals with the consumer is more than a 'confection' of sugar and butter: this confection additionally includes plastic packaging and highly processed minerals that in themselves would appear far removed from anything edible. Working according to a commercial logic, confectionery exerts a force that evokes the figure of a parasite; small and superficially innocuous, the sweet latches onto its subject – eventually congealing with it – and begins to gradually exhaust its resources.

Conclusion

Both economic and physical consumption of confectionery is governed by a principle of play, which arises partly from its semiotic complexity. Superficially distinct but substantially homogeneous, choices in consuming confectionery take place within a magic circle which engages a ludic interplay of signs with no real referential counterparts. The appeal of this choice is illustrated by the structure of choices within choices, as in the example of jelly beans which are divided into categories or sets providing several levels of selection. Defined by Baudrillard as 'object pathways', consumers navigate both between brands and within them, as sweets are often compounds of compounds: confected confectionery. The logic of unfolding and unwrapping – uncovering and discovering – governs the progression from representation to substance as one peels

back packaging to discover a confection structured as a container, with one substance coating another. Representation and substance are revealed to be equivalent signs that constitute a totality, but their temporally ordered 'pathway' of navigation through levels of enclosure creates a game which engages synesthetic consumption. Visual, olfactory, tactile, gustatory and even, if textures are crunchy or popping, auditory senses are intermingled as the sweet shop is made equivalent with the toy shop. This equivalence is reinforced by the ecological effect of consuming confectionery: a cycle of surplus by which plastic packaging, whose purpose lies in distribution and ludic advertisement, enters the ecosystem and is invisibly consumed by the consumer. The plastic toy contained inside a Kinder egg is effectively ingested alongside the chocolate that encloses it.

Nevertheless, if confectionery initially appear to be the elements with which the consumer plays inside the magic circle of the sweet shop, the newsagents, the supermarket or the Internet window, they are also contained within a wider magic circle of economic forces. Within this second, larger circle, consumers are in a position equivalent to the confectionery in the first circle: they are the pawns in the game, the objects of selection. They are being consumed by the industries that draw the boundaries of the playground. Extrapolating from Baudrillard's hyper-reality, we live in a world that is more real than the real, with confectionery confected of confectionery, games played within games – and the consumer simultaneously being consumed.

Notes

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