Business and Magic: Émile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* and modern consumption

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Abstract *This work examines the emergence of department stores and how this new commerce was crucial in establishing the phenomenon of consumption in modernity. In particular, we investigate through Émile Zola's novel,* Au bonheur des dames, *how the social values and sales models of department stores appear as "cathedrals of modern consumption", creating, at once, a world of business and magic.*

Keywords: *Department stores; Feminine sociability; Consumption and magic; Cultural history of consumption*

Resumo *Este trabalho examina o surgimento dos grandes magazines e como esse novo comércio foi decisivo para a consolidação do fenômeno do consumo na modernidade. Investigamos, através do romance* Au bonheur des dames *de Émile Zola, como os valores sociais e os modelos de venda dos grandes magazines*

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Palavras-chave: *Grandes magazines; Sociabilidade feminina; Consumo e magia; História cultural do consumo*

Resumen *Este trabajo examina el surgimiento de los grandes almacenes y como ese nuevo comercio fue decisivo para la consolidación del consumo en la modernidad. En particular, analizamos a través de la novela* Au bonheur des dames, *de Émile Zola, como los valores sociales y modelos de ventas de los grandes almacenes fueran como "catedrales del comercio moderno", creando, a una vez, un mundo de negocios y magias.*

Palabras-clave: *Los grandes almacenes; sociabilidad femenina; El consumo y la magia; Historia cultural del consumo*

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I.

The objective of this article is to analyse the emergence of the department stores in the main European and North American cities in the second half of the 19th century and to investigate the way in which this new business was central to the consolidation of the phenomenon of consumption in modernity. This study especially approaches the style, the modes of sociability and the sales strategies which were inaugurated there by observing how this business model structured the consumption practices as we experience them today. Among the most important points we emphasise: price-fixing, credit implementation and distance selling by means of catalogues; the transformation of the stores into spaces of feminine sociability and the double character of the department stores which, in only one time, articulated a manufacturing structure in their backstage with a world of dream and magic for their customers. This study results from an analysis of the classic novel "A*u Bonheur des Dames*" [*The Ladies' Paradise*] by Émile Zola ([1883]1886) and from the interpretation of part of the literature which is related to the cultural and historical dimensions of consumption (MILLER, 1981; LEACH, 1984; MCCRACKEN, 2003; HAZEL HAHN, 2009; VERHEYDE, 2012; ROCHA, 2009). The innovations the department stores introduced were significant and, even after more than hundred and fifty years[4], they defined constant patterns for the organisation of urban life and for consumption practices.

In fact, by transforming the sales space into a communication space, the department stores materialised values of the rising bourgeoisie, proposed new tastes, customs, behaviours and alternative forms of sociability. They actuated in a pedagogic way by making the consumption activities become a purpose in itself and the constitution of the daily experience in the big cities. The department stores taught what to consume, how and when to consume it by means of their communication and their catalogues, which, according to Miller (1981), were like cultural primers which emphasised symbolic functionalities and character-

[4] *Le Bon Marché* was founded in 1852 in Paris and *Macy's* in 1858 in New York, for example.

istics of the products and made consumption become a life project. The department stores mark the story of consumption by expanding the phenomenon and its effects in contemporary society.

In order to know something about this cultural story, to understand the impact department stores had on the cities in the middle of the 19th century and to capture certain "spirit of the time", we will study the text *Au Bonheur des Dames* [*The Ladies' Paradise*], written by Émile Zola and published as a novel in 1883. Great classic of the French literature, the book tells the saga of the young Denise who, coming from the small Valognes, arrives at Paris and gets a job as a saleswoman of the *Au Bonheur des Dames*, a store, which is established in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin and which is involved in a process of intense expansion and little by little absorbed the whole traditional business of the surroundings. Writing about his time, Zola presents an account of the changes in the urban landscape of that time, combined with a detailed description of the department stores – of the modes of operation, internal proceedings and sales strategies, relationships between salespeople, the competitors' reactions and the way in which it affected the Parisian social life. *Au Bonheur des Dames* and its owner Octave Mouret well represent that which Weber ([1920] 2004) indicates as "perturbation caused to cosiness", a kind of impact that removes the traditional economy from the comfort zone.

In order to write his novel, Zola carried out a meticulous study by doing field research in order to observe the reality of the department stores and to collect materials, inclusively the sketches of the store he was investigating[5], which was, to the utmost extent, what we can call qualitative research with an ethnographic bias. Thus much beyond the romanced narrative, Zola offers the reader an internal and detailed perspective of the "reality" of the department store and its insertion in the questions and effervescences of the city of Paris in the middle of the 1800s, because he wrote a kind of romanced documentary about the birth of a

[5] The store was probably Aristide Boucicaut's "Le Bon Marché".

new business (Gaillard, 2008). Therefore *The Ladies' Paradise*, with fictitious characters and events is a novel, but it can also be interpreted as a kind of historical account of a researcher of the department stores and as a discourse of a Parisian informant of the second half of the 19th century. For, paraphrasing Weber ([1920] 2007), that which *The Ladies' Paradise* can represent cannot only be translated into literary pleasure but into an ethos which expresses itself, and it is this quality we are interested in here. On the basis of this narrative and of other references we call more properly academic, it is possible to survey some central characteristics of the story of modern consumption and of the social experience in the department stores.

II.

The department stores actually occur in the period Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2012) defines as the "hundred years' peace" – between 1815 and 1914 –, when the world was anchored in four fundamental institutions: the system of balance of power, the international gold standard rate, the self-regulating market and the liberal State. Stimulated by the repercussion of the French revolution, the main world powers concentrated their efforts on the industrial development and on the maintenance of a universal peace that was favourable to business, which enabled the expansion of the production capacity and more rapidity in creating the merchandises (POLANYI, ([1944]2012). Changes also in the cultural order, in the customs and in the tastes provided bases for the formation of a more dynamic and farther-reaching consumption system. In the framework of this article, we are interested in the expansion of the media, the improvement of the marketing techniques, the restructuration of the cities, the exaltation of a bourgeois lifestyle and the changes in the woman's role in society[6].

The economic, political and cultural transformations, which reach their apogee in the 19th century, belong to a former process that goes

[6] We leave out other important changes of that period, such as, for example, that of sexuality (DABHOIWALA, 2013).

through the period between the 14th and 18th centuries. In the course of these four hundred years, modernity begins to be modelled and there are two fundamental pillars in it: production and consumption. In Weber's perspective ([1920] 2007), the Protestant Reformation spurred the modern capitalist production system by defining labour as a kind of praise to God and profit as the manifestation of God's will. The protestant values convert labour into a noble activity and dignify financial profit and, in the end, they both become a kind of social expression of the sacred and of blessing. At the same time in which production expanded, the consumption of certain objects of the material culture progressively separated itself from determined social positions and became an autonomous sphere, in which goods are accessible through the pure and simple monetary means, independently of tradition (MCCRACKEN, 2003). The consumption of knowledge grew in an important way – by means of books, arts and the encyclopaedias (DARNTON, 1996) –, the relic and antique business flourished (CORBIN, 2009) and romanticism significantly stimulated the expenses (CAMPBELL, 2001).

In the process of expansion and consolidation, in which the consumption and production spheres articulate with each other, department stores have occupied a privileged space since the second half of the 19th century. The store functioned as a communication friendly space by expressing the bourgeois experience with well-dressed, polite salespersons, specialists in attending the customers in a courteous way. As Miller (1981) stressed it, the department stores offered an extension of the dominant lifestyle in their spaces and broadened the accessibility of these values, which were translated into the products that were displayed on their shelves. The representation of a specific culture was already visible in the shop windows and it extended itself by means of the inner decoration of the department stores, always equipped with pubs, noble fabrics, varied departments and beautiful objects which caught the eye and constructed a magic consumption environment.

The department stores established their six commercial methods which were responsible for the sustenance of their business model: price-fixing and price list, the consumers' free entrance to the stores, the cre-

ation of different departments with varied products, return policy, price reduction united with sales increase and investment in advertising (VERHEYDE, 2012). In the entrepreneurial model of the department stores, the shops sold everything and adopted practices the main purposes of which were to facilitate and stimulate purchases. In contrast to the traditional business, the department stores were (…)

> (...) the wonderful power of the piling up of the goods, all accumulated at one point, sustaining and pushing each other, never any stand-still, the article of the season always on hand; and from counter to counter the customer found herself seized, buying here the material, further on the cotton, elsewhere the mantle, (...). He [Mouret] then went on to sing the praises of the plain figure system. The great revolution of the business sprung from this fortunate inspiration. If the old-fashioned small shops were dying out it was because they could not struggle against the low prices guaranteed by the tickets. The competition was now going on under the very eyes of the public (…) (ZOLA, [1883] 1886, p. 68).

A determined financial logic, which betted on massified sale with reduced profit margins, united with large-scale production, sustained the acceleration of consumption. In his analysis, Miller (1981) observes that the strategy of "*Le Bon Marché*" consisted above all in shortening the producers' flow of the goods to the consumers' hands, thus increasing the merchandise turnover and the sales volume and the subsequent cash receipt entry. Obviously, in order to administrate transactions of such dimension and velocity, the stores had to structure themselves by broadening the physical space, augmenting the number of employees, dividing labour into sectors, aligning the routines and the rigour of the internal protocols.

The department stores sold sewing materials – among them threads, knitwear, silks, wool, lace, embroidery – and stimulated the *prêt-à-porter*, at the beginning with redingotes and coats and later on also underwear and other pieces of clothing. Entire departments were dedicated to gloves, scarves, stockings, perfumes, and umbrellas and varied other departments for decoration articles, souvenirs, bibelots, furniture and even wines and other alcoholic drinks. John Wanamaker – businessman

who, during the second half of the 19th century, created one of the first department stores of the United States in the city of Philadelphia – was a pioneer in the segmentation of the children's public by creating an exclusive department in his store. During the first decades of the 20th century, in the United States, stores such as Bloomingdale's and Wanamaker's had enormous spaces for pets. Other sections included flower shops, restaurants, beauty shops, barbershops, art galleries, libraries and so on (Leach, 1984). The project of the department stores was to encompass the totality of the products and services in gigantic buildings where their customers could virtually find all the possibilities of consumption at one place. This challenge, which was a mortal blow to traditional business, translates itself into the character of M. Baudu, the shopkeeper, Denise's uncle, who, perplex, thought:

> Was it not unconceivable? In less than four years they had increased their figures five-fold: the annual receipts, formerly eight million francs, now attained the sum of forty millions, according to the last balance-sheet. (...) they had now a thousand employees, and twenty-eight departments. These twenty-eight departments enraged him more than anything else. No doubt they had duplicated a few, but others were quite new: for instance, a furniture department, and a department for fancy goods (ZOLA, [1883] 1886, p. 188).

The merchandises were chosen by the purchasers of the stores, who sought the best agreements for large volume orders. In order to receive, select, fix prices, organise and distribute the profusion of items they daily received in the sections, the department stores relied on a true factory structure of processes which were mechanised in their backstage. On this level, merchandises were no more than impersonal objects without life and employees worked in serialised activities, executing repetitive and sequenced movements. This area of the department stores had to be invisible to the customers; it occupied the subsoil, the back rooms or entresols of the buildings (LEACH, 1984). The sectors carried out specific activities – product entry, labelling, stock, packaging and delivery – and there was no particularisation or differentiation in them; it was the arena of manual work, of the conveyor belts, of the machines and of the levers:

> The receiving office was on the basement floor, in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin. There, on a level with the pavement, was a kind of glazed cage, where the vans discharged the goods. They were weighed, and then slipped down a rapid slide, its oak and iron work shining, brightened by the chafing of goods and cases. Everything entered by this yawning trap; it was a continual swallowing up, a fall of goods, causing a roaring like that of a cataract (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 35).

Hence the production chain occurred in the backstage of the department stores, where the employees were alienated from the result of their work (MARX, [1867] 2008) and they constituted elements of a cogwheel which operated incessantly far from the consumers' sight. Different from the craftsman-like or traditional work, in this sphere the control of the finished product was not the domain of any worker. Like in the factories, the spaces, which were destined to these productive sectors, were impersonal; they had narrow corridors, humid environments and pale luminosity. Contrasting with the life, the colours, the heat and mainly the meaning of this exhibition of products and people in the salons, which were open to the large public, these production spaces were well camouflaged in the department stores (LEACH, 1984). In these hidden zones, there were the infirmary, the refectory and the employees' lodgings. These companies used to offer lodging to the young workers, who came from other regions and did not have a family in the cities (MILLER, 1981; LE GOFF and AITKEN, 2011).

Hence the department stores were places of residence and work of a large population of individuals, who therefore lived in a situation similar that of schedules: times to wake up, to work, to eat and to sleep. Even those, who went home in the evening, spent great part of their lives according to the clock of these sales machines. Generally off days were only granted in the days, in which the stores were closed and the employees/workers spent most of their days separated from the wider society, living according to the rhythm of the production. As total institutions (GOFFMAN, [1961] 2003), the department stores encompassed the whole life of their "reclusive" employees and they took their time entirely, they even controlled their intimacy and the smallest details:

> At first nothing was heard but a loud clattering of knives and forks, the gourmandising of big fellows with stomachs emptied by thirteen hours of daily work. Formerly the employees had an hour for meals, which enabled them to go outside to a café and take their coffee; and they would despatch their dinner in twenty minutes, anxious to get into the street. But this stirred them up too much, they came back careless, indisposed for business; and the managers had decided that they should not go out, but pay an extra three halfpence for a cup of coffee, if they wanted it (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 145).

The teams that worked with the public's attendance were fundamental as intermediaries between the potential purchasers and the profusion of goods which were scattered all over the salons. They had to be concentrated, well-disposed and always smiling. Since the services, which were offered to the customers – to lead through the departments, to explain the products, to fetch specified items, to offer water, to carry purchases – were an important part of the attractiveness of the stores, the salesmen had to demonstrate good will and attention with regard to the customers, even if they were exhausted and eager to sell. After all, it was on the basis of the department stores that the commission system was initiated, stimulating the sales effort and also the competitiveness between the members of the departments. A Hobbesian universe, of "all against all" established itself at that moment between the salespersons of the modern business: "(...) a struggle for existence of which the proprietor reaped the benefit" (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 34).

III.

Since the middle of the 18th century, Paris established itself as a more and more prosperous urban centre and the place of a rising bourgeoisie. The forms of sociability began to become more independent from the aristocratic control and diverse spaces established themselves as accessible places for the meeting of common people, such as cafés, parks and theatres. Already since the beginning of 1800, the city received a considerable flow of peasant immigrants, most of them young people who left

their families and came alone in order to attempt to "earn a living". Thus the Parisian streets, still maintaining their medieval characteristics, were little by little taken hold of by "strangers", individuals who lived alone and, at first, without any affective bond (SENNETT, 1988). The living conditions in the Paris of the beginning of the 19th century were depicted by Victor Hugo in his classic work of 1862 *The Miserable*, which approaches the period of 1815 until the barricades of 1832, which were put up against the army in the narrow streets of the city.

With the urban reforms Napoleon III and the Baron Haussmann promoted – who, in Zola's book, corresponds to the character of Baron Hartmann – in the decades from 1850 to 1860, Paris gained new buildings and boulevards. The urbanism project gave priority to traffic and to continuous movement, thus inhibiting forms of agglutination in the streets, on the pavements and in the squares. The width of the avenues and the grandiosity of the constructions made the Parisian public space more propitious for the traffic without obstructions than for an invitation to coexistence. But as Sennett (1988) indicates it, individuals need well delimited places in order to be more sociable. In the context of urban transformation, the department stores appear as important spaces of sociability (LE GOFF and AITKEN, 2011). Enterprises such as *Le Bon Marché* profited from the remodelling works, which were promoted at that time, expanded their dimensions and were more and more accessible to customers who came from diverse points of the city, inclusively from the train stations, which brought women from the surroundings to do their shopping. Their interiors were conceived in order to keep the individuals within the store for the maximum time possible, lost in the immensity of the salons, distracted in their diverse departments, enchanted by the decoration and the multiplicity of available goods. Since that time, there had been appropriate places to leave the children during the shopping and places of rest for the husbands and elderly people (LEACH, 1984):

> When she at last arrived in the reading-room Madame Bourdelais installed Madeleine, Edmond and Lucien before the large table; then taking from one of the shelves some photographic albums she brought them

> to them. (...) Quite a silent crowd surrounded the table, which was littered with reviews and newspapers, with here and there some ink-stands and boxes of stationery. (...) A few men, lolling back in the armchairs, were reading the newspapers. But a great many people sat there doing nothing: husbands waiting for their wives, let loose in the various departments, discreet young women looking out for their lovers, old relations left there as in a cloak-room to be taken away when time to leave (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 218-219).

We can say that the department stores had also such an impact when they articulated themselves perfectly well with the new social urban life. They represented the first step towards the expansion of luxury and of the consumption activities for the greatest part of society (LIPOVETSKY and ROUX, 2005). The growth of the department stores implied diverse transformations of the habits, tastes and practices not only of their preferential clientele, the women, but also of their own employees. Their expansion is related to the formation of a consuming middle class, as Miller (1981) observed it, who pointed to the social advancement of the employees of "*Le Bon Marché*" as one of the consequences of its consolidation. The British PBS television series, "*Mr Selfridge*", approaches the way in which the employees of the London department store, which was created by Harry Gordon Selfridge in 1909, enjoyed a certain social prestige and received a series of benefits from the store. In his plot, Zola also stresses the enchantment of the salespersons of "*The Ladies' Paradise*" with the modes and customs of their bourgeois customers who wasted their salaries in shopping and weekend tours. Thus a new class that was made up of workers of the department stores was soon incorporated into the consumption universe:

> When the waiter brought in the baked rice, the young ladies protested. They had refused it the previous week, and hoped it would not appear again. Denise, inattentive, worrying about Jean after Clara's stories, was the only to eat it; and all the others looked at her with an air of disgust. There was a great demand for extras, they gorged themselves with jam. This was a sort of elegance; they felt obliged to feed themselves with their own money (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 152).

One of the most significant socio-cultural transformations, which matched with the department stores, is related to the emergence of new conceptions of the feminine and to the range of concrete possibilities women were offered. Restricted to the domestic environment and chores still in the 19th century they only used to go out unaccompanied to go to church. The department stores were fundamental in the process of female emancipation by putting consumption as an activity which is a priority of women and by opening a field for them in the labour market. Besides composing great part of the sales force, women started soon to rise to more salient positions. In 1866, for example, the store "*Macy's*" had Margaret S. Gretchell the first North-American woman occupy an executive charge in retail enterprises (GRIPPO, 2009). This movement, which was observed in the department stores, was accompanied by similar businesses and already at the beginning of the 20th century, the communication, fashion and service industries relied, to a great extent, on the female presence. Soon the women, who actuated in the market, started modelling consumption culture to a certain extent (LEACH, 1980, 1984).

Besides this, the expansion of the department stores occurred in a context of other women's struggles and conquests in Europe and in the USA, with the right to vote, to divorce and to education. With the occupation of territories in the field of labour, women gained more autonomy and succeeded in giving voice to their demands. Aligned with the economic and cultural questions of that time, modifications in the relationships between the male and female genders and their roles in society were stimulated and women progressively took possession of their bodies (BEAUVOIR, 1970). This process, which fortified itself with the department stores and consumption, already begins to be noted in the 18th century with the religious reform, the expansion of Enlightenment and the accentuation of the ideology of individualism, which modified conceptions about morality and sexual freedom (DABHOIWALA, 2013; BEAUVOIR, 1970).

Nevertheless, more than a space of consumption and a workplace, the department store served the female militants as a meeting point where they debated their causes. Specifically, the question of the right to vote

the suffragettes advocated at the beginning of the 20th century relied on the support of the department stores, in London[7], Paris and also in big cities of the USA, which ceded their spaces for meetings and invested in advertising in their magazines (LEGOFF and AITKEN, 2011; LEACH, 1984). These movements reunited women who emphasised their feminine aspect and elegance, some of them always adopted white dresses in order to intentionally show how, even the ladies, had force, audacity and determination to participate in political life. Quite different from the ensuing consequences of feminism – of Marxist bias and emphasis on sexual freedom and social equality – in which the female militants refuse alliances in this sphere and assume to view consumption in general as a manipulation of women and a control over them.

Between the middle of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, that which we observe basically is a life in two directions in which women stimulate consumption in the department stores and profit from it in their emancipation process. The stores constituted public spaces which were specifically forged for their sociability. There they could spend hours seeking good swaps, have a snack and chat with their friends. Many things they had to manufacture on their own before, especially clothing pieces, turned to be sold by the department stores at low prices, freeing them from certain activities which confined them into the interior of domestic life. In the department stores women were in the foreground and all the efforts were made in the sense to keep them comfortably there for the maximum time possible. For example, the first public toilet for women in France was built within "*Le Bon Marché*" (MILLER, 1981). In the department stores, the woman was the centre of attention:

> Mouret's unique passion was to conquer woman. He wished her to be queen in his house, and he had built this temple to get her completely at his mercy (...). He had already introduced two lifts lined with velvet for the upper storeys in order to spare delicate ladies the trouble of mounting

[7] In the series *Mr. Selfridge* the topic of the suffragettes appears in the plot, which depicts how they met in the café of the store and how homage was paid to them with shop windows and products which alluded to their demands.

> the stairs. Then he had just opened a bar where the customers could find, gratis, some light refreshment, syrups and biscuits, and a reading-room, a monumental gallery, decorated with excessive luxury, in which he had even ventured on an exhibition of pictures (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 208).

A profound ambiguity marks Zola's text, for Mouret, the woman was the figure over whom one wants to "triumph" and to have "at one's mercy" as well as the "queen" for whom "he racked his brains" seeking incessantly to offer well-being. Not at random, this ambiguity reflected itself in the story of the feminist movements with regard to the department stores and to the place of consumption in the emancipatory struggles.

IV.

The variety of articles and the low prices were not enough, if at first one did not carry out actions to attract the public to the department stores. In order to seduce the clientele of their cities, of the surroundings and even international ones, the department stores destined important parts of their receipts to advertising and to catalogue production. The catalogues were a kind of school, expanding the bourgeois taste to other classes and to other geographies. This important commercial strategy is emphasised in the description of how Octave Mouret, owner of the Ladies' Paradise,

> (...) spent three thousand francs a year in catalogues, advertisements and bills. For his summer sale he had launched forth two hundred thousand catalogues, of which fifty thousand went abroad, translated into every language. He now had them illustrated with engravings, even accompanying them with samples, gummed between the leaves. It was an overflowing display; The Ladies' Paradise became the household word all over the world, invaded the walls, the newspapers, and even the curtains of the theatres (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 208-209).

Internet and social networks *avant la lettre*, the department stores already globalised by reaching customers at long distances, thus promoting not only consumption goods but also desires, dreams and worldviews everywhere and in other languages. Considerable amounts were invested in advertisements in newspapers and magazines, out-

doors, posters, strips and delivery cars which were decorated with the brand and the colours of the store. In fact, the department stores were among the main customers of the incipient advertising market in the 19th century (HAZEL HAHN, 2009) and they helped to model some of the main images of the modern-contemporary culture. Advertising accelerated the process of attributing meaning to the department stores, transforming their spaces and their merchandise stocks into true objects of desire. In other words, the production sphere – of pieces of cloth, inert things, hard materials, without significance – converted itself into a consumption sphere, in which goods are imbued with values, ideas, and lifestyles (ROCHA, 2010).

But the advertising actions only represented one of the peaks of the magic which is so essential for the promotion of the department stores. Within the store, the consumers had to feel enchanted by the beauty, stimulated by the quantity of goods close at hand and comfortable enough to walk through all the departments. Therefore the enterprises were very agile in incorporating technological novelties into the architecture and decoration of their interiors – *Le Bon Marché*, for example, caused a big frisson when it installed escalators at the end of the 19th century (MILLER, 1981). The department stores were also among the first establishments to ostensibly exploit glass panes and mirrors to display their products and to create new lighting effects, multiplication of images and depth of spaces. The shop windows, today an obvious pattern of any business, were a complex artistic resource which had an enormous impact on the urban landscape the department stores inaugurated (LEACH, 1984). Their effects on the individual practices were so significant – after all with them the products invaded the streets, exhibiting themselves and attracting the consumers' glance – that one can note a kind of "shop windownisation" of modern-contemporary society, that is to say an increasing spectacularisation of life (CODELUPPI, 2007). In the department stores the shop windows operated decisively as mediators between the outer world of the streets and the inner world of the store, between the passing individuals and the consumption goods:

> But just as she was entering the street, Denise was attracted by a window in which ladies' dresses were displayed (...). There was something for all tastes (...). The well rounded necks and graceful figures of the dummies exaggerated the slimness of the waists (...); whilst the mirrors, cleverly arranged on each side of the window, reflected and multiplied the forms without end, peopling the street with these beautiful women for sale, each bearing a price in big figures in the place of a head (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 7-8).

The shop window decorators actuated like artists and constantly created different scenes in order to mobilise the glances of those who passed in front of the stores. They should be able to astonish the clientele, as if they periodically found new consumption possibilities in the department stores, although the universe of the objects for sale had not changed much or even not at all. Through the glass panes, consumers, especially women, could still spy the magic world of the store, which was also decorated and organised in order to awaken the senses. Whereas in the traditional business the products were hidden in cupboards and on shelves, inhibited behind the counters and only accessible to the store employees, in the department stores they became elements of an artistic composition, in which colours and textures were constantly recombined by the shop window decorators, who elaborated multiple scenarios that way. Like a kaleidoscope, the stores were able to create different worlds on the basis of the main elements they had at their disposal, the consumption goods:

> At the back a large sash of Bruges lace, of considerable value, was spread out like an altar-veil, with its two white wings extended; there were flounces of Alençon point, grouped in garlands; then from the top to the bottom fluttered, like a fall of snow, a cloud of lace of every description – Malines, Honíton, Valenciennes, Brussels, and Venetian point. On each side the heavy columns were draped with cloth, making the background appear still more distant (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 7).

In this sense the department stores reproduced oniric images, referred to magic, to myths, to the antique rituals, to the past, and to places which were as different from daily reality as Cleopatra's Egypt or Sheherazade's

Thousand and one nights. In the main occidental cities of the mid 1800s and the beginning of 1900, the imaginary of the distant Orient was available to the consumers who were eager to experience the exotic and the unknown. So many possibilities of circulation in time and space only occur according to a logic in which linearity annihilates itself, that is to say, in a suspended plane, where what matters is not the historical sequence, scientific progress or change – values which are so modern and have been especially exalted since the Enlightenment. In the department stores, what matters is the permanence of the consumption system, be it in the streets of Paris or in an imaginary Persia:

> Turkey, Arabia, and the Indies were all there. They had emptied the palaces, plundered the mosques and the bazaars. A barbarous gold tone prevailed in the weft of the old carpets, the faded tints of which still preserved a sombre warmth, as of an extinguished furnace, a beautiful burnt hue suggestive of the old masters. Visions of the East floated beneath the luxury of this barbarous art, amid the strong odour which the old wools had retained of the country of vermin and of the rising sun (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 79).

An essential part of the game to always reproduce new worlds within the same place was the constitution of real magic calendars which regulated the consumption activities in the department stores. Commemorative dates proliferated, religious feast days were reinterpreted and there were periodic promotions. Wanamaker was one the responsible for the creation of "Valentine's Day" in the United States, whilst "*Macy's*" department store was incorporated in the most traditional North American feast day with the "*Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade*", which since 1924 has taken place in New York. Much different from the linear and progressive character we attribute to our time, the department stores elaborated cyclical calendars, in which a virtually equal set of products and services (for even today such drastic and complete innovations in the stocks do not occur) can be periodically reincorporated into the consumption and into the individuals' hands. "The experience of consumption itself is cyclical, classifying and anti-historicist" (ROCHA, 2002, p. 163). Therefore, in a big promotion of whites, *Au Bonheur de Dames*, Zola's store,

through the rearrangement of the goods, reproduced images of "a flight of swans", "a snowy sheet of large flakes", "banners in a church", "pearly butterflies", "gossamers in the summer sun", a "tabernacle", an "alcove", a "bed of lilies", that is to say, a world of dreams, deliria and magic:

> (...) and this tide of white assumed wings hurried off and lost itself like a flight of swans. And the white hung from the arches, a fall of down, a snowy sheet of large flakes; white counterpanes, white coverlets floated about in the air, suspended like banners in a church, long jets of guipure lace crossed the air, they seemed to suspend a swarm of pearly butterflies; laces were glittering everywhere, floating like gossamers in the summer sun, filling the air with their white breath (ZOLA, [1883]1886, p. 352-353).

Through the improvised, that freely mixes and associates the available elements with the disposition, the decoration of the department stores operated a classification system in a way which was similar to that of the advertising system (ROCHA, 2002, 2010), attributing stories, places, names, at last identities to "things" which, once they were invested with meanings, could complete their destiny as consumption goods. Because, as Sahlins (1979, p.188) states it, "(...) without consumption, the object does not complete itself as a product: an unoccupied house is not a house." If merchandises do not keep an intrinsic value and if the consumers' practices do not sustain themselves in the utilitarian, the department stores had to carry out the conversion of stocked objects into goods endowed with magic properties – to beautify, to emphasise, to improve, or to transform some aspect of social life by means of ornamentation, design and communication. After all, as we mentioned it above, the success of this business model depended, above all, on the rapid passage from production to consumption. Therefore the department stores were the first to transmute the impersonal and non-human production chain into an exuberant offer of personalised, differentiated, singular products and services which was in a magic harmony with the cravings of women, men and children.

Finally, this article sought to demonstrate how the department stores were determinant for modern commerce and, above all for the consoli-

dation of the phenomenon of consumption as we experience it in the present time. And we still attempted to show that some of the sales structures and practices, which were inaugurated there, sustain themselves in the contemporary stores, shopping centres and shop windows, concrete or virtual ones. The analysis of the values of a cultural story concerning the department stores of the second half of the 19th century reveals impacts of this new business modality on society, which put consumption in a definitive way as a fundamental part of the urban experience, of the ordering of everyday life, of sociability and even more on the process of women's individuation. We especially showed that the department stores clearly demonstrate how the production and consumption domains are two sides of the same coin, opposed and complementary: in the first the utilitarian rationality predominates; in the other one classifying forms of the magic thought prevail. Hence, in the "cathedrals of modern commerce", as Zola defines them, a world of commerce and of magic appeared at the same time.

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