

**UNDERSTANDING  
CONSUMERISM THROUGH  
NIETZSCHE'S APOLLONIAN  
& DIONYSIAN**

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In my research, I set out to understand consumerism and its power within society. I examined the act of consumption itself and attempted to unravel the motivations behind it. I concluded that it can be regarded as both an instinctive, spur of the moment impulse, and a rational, long term decision. For this reason, consumerism is a driving force in modern day society, and plays a large part in the formation of our society. I am interested in examining such a society as it relates to the natural world. In my work, I chose to highlight the fringes of consumer society against sprawling, intricate landscapes. I view the environments themselves as characters within the work. They are not passive backgrounds that the buildings are framed against, but they possess their own intention and spirit. They set the mood of the entire image, each utilizing unique printmaking techniques.

This series a manifestation of my research, and an exploration of intaglio printmaking as a medium. Intaglio is a term for the types of printmaking that use lines and textures engraved or etched into a metal plate to create an image. With these techniques, ink is carried from the deepest areas of the plate to the paper, while the surface is wiped clean. I utilized a variety of techniques in the work, including spit-bite aquatint and dry-point. Aquatint is a technique used to create tone in an image. A plate is finely dusted with ground rosin and etched using acid. The rosin acts as a resist to the acid, resulting in a fine texture that prints as a section of tone. Spit-biting is a aquatint technique where the acid is painted directly onto the plate, creating an uneven, watercolor effect. Dry point is a technique in which the artist draws directly onto the plate with a thick metal needle. As the plates are metal, often copper, the act requires significant force and intention. Each line is deliberate and has its own character. In my experience, no line is idle or unnecessary. This goes for much of the intaglio process. Because so much effort is needed, an artist must truly set out with drive and purpose.

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The idea of love in modern society is a strange thing. To be honest, I have always been baffled by the practice of dating in general. Why must there be such structure around relationships? The scheduled place, time, and buying things for one another. This strange, stifling dance humans partake in. Love someone by spending time with them, is that not enough?

When one is a small child, it seems as though adulthood will bring knowledge. It seemed that grownups knew so much more than me; when my parents' friends would come over for dinner, and I would sit in the corner of the dining room playing with wooden toys while their laughter rumbled through the air. But, as I grow up, I find myself losing understanding far faster than I gain it. I think I comprehend less about the concept of gifting your partner a wildly expensive, sparkly rock on a ring now, than I did when I was five. I suppose that is the heart of it. Consumerism is so entrenched in society. Such a major force in the world, and yet I am continually baffled by it.

Relatively recently, when I was making my way to Napa, I stayed in a hotel in Nevada. It was a casino hotel, just on the border of Arizona. The rooms were absurdly cheap, as the patrons were expected to blow all their money gambling in the lobby below. I was looking out of the hotel window, about eight stories up, observing the night scenery. The hotel was one of many, one of the smaller ones in fact, part of a pocket of brilliant lights and billboards, standing in stark contrast to the rust colored desert. This little patch of knock-off Vegas glimmered in the darkness, overshadowed by a massive sand dune.

The whole scene was quite bizarre to me. I saw the dregs of consumer society, reminiscent of a city about a hundred miles away, glowing against the desert. Such a tiny, human thing, dwarfed by the expanse of nature, and yet seemingly so important. I wondered why a triviality, such as the human impulse to consume, could have such force.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I attempt to understand the widespread impulse to consume that is prevalent in modern society. I will do this by analyzing the phenomenon of consumerism through the lens of Nietzsche's idea of the Apollonian and Dionysian, and its associations with pleasure seeking, short and long term. I argue that consumerism is simultaneously a Dionysian, or romantic, and Apollonian, or rational, impulse. I will argue this by examining consumerism as it relates to pleasure seeking, and how this, in turn, relates to the concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian that Nietzsche proposes.

## **Consumerism**

Consumerism is defined as 'the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods.'<sup>1</sup> This preoccupation is driven, in large part, by pleasure seeking on behalf of the individual. The phenomenon has been termed *hedonic consumption*, and refers to 'those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one's experience with products'<sup>2</sup> This is a marketing term, coined in an effort to understand the driving forces behind consumerism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of Consumerism by Oxford Dictionaries

<sup>2</sup> Hirschman, E. C., & Holbrook, M. B.

<sup>3</sup> The first term appeared in The Journal of Marketing. The definition is fairly recent, and research is still being conducted on the subject. A summary was compiled in The Journal of Consumer Psychology under the title 'Pleasure Principles: A Review of Research on Hedonic Consumption.'

The acquisition and consumption of goods brings pleasure in a variety of ways. It can create short-term pleasure, characterized by an emotional or immediate sensory response, such as the consumption of a product that smells, looks or tastes pleasant.<sup>4</sup> Consumption can also trigger a long lasting pleasure, associated with the perceived use of a product, its affirmation of the individual's identity, or its potential within society. This is explored by Joseph W. Alba and Elanor F. Williams in *Pleasure Principles: A Review of Research on Hedonic Consumption*. “In addition to physiologically driven pleasures<sup>5</sup>, there are many features of products that consumers find to be psychologically pleasurable, including—but not limited to—the thought, care, or style put into a product and even what a product's basic essence is perceived to be with regard to its purity and authenticity.”(4) A consumer’s choice to buy this kind of product is motivated by the desire for pleasure and, importantly, foresight. The product is perceived to have a social value, beyond its utilitarian use.

A product may be produced to serve a specific, niche purpose within society. In this way, it becomes more than just a product in and of itself, and instead symbolizes much more. An item of clothing becomes an expression of personal identity, it is not only functional, but advertises the wearer’s personality, social group, or class. This concept is explored by Andrea Migone in an article on Hedonistic Consumerism:

*[The modern model of consumerism] granted consumers an interactive, diverse, generally sophisticated, and autonomous approach to consumption[...]an expression of individuality within the bounds of modern capitalist structures, an all-encompassing expression of modernity through aesthetics.(11)*

The modern notion of consumerism allows individuals to express themselves through their consumption. People are able show who they are, as projected onto consumer goods. There is also great diversity in the consumers’ options. In a modern capitalistic society, products are not manufactured in bulk, and instead occupy individualistic niches.<sup>6</sup> This adds more to the aspect of personal identity associated with them. The product is unique and different, and its owner is therefore regarded as the same.

The personal identification with consumerist products is tied closely to *commodity fetishism*, a term coined by Karl Marx. Commodity Fetishism refers to the ability of products to take on an identity of their own. Marx states in the first chapter of *Capital Vol.1*

*A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.*

Here, the value of the labor needed to produce the consumer product is not acknowledged, instead the product itself becomes significant. It has a socially generated identity of its own, seemingly outside of the process that created it. The product is more than a sum of pieces,

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<sup>4</sup> Alba , Joseph W., and Elanor F. Williams.

<sup>5</sup> Assuming there are embedded sensory responses or things that evolutionarily and biologically feel good, sex being an example.

<sup>6</sup> Migone, Andrea

derived from nature, it has its own character. A table is more than wood that had been processed, carved, and assembled, it has a value beyond that. Therefore, relationships develop between the products themselves. The labor put into making the product is seen as a means to an end, a feature of the product instead of the work that created it.

In addition to these social factors, the impulse to consume is also driven by external, corporate factors. Advertising is ever present. This contributes to social pressure to be an active consumer in society. As Migone points out, “Those who are not included in the twin processes of production and consumption are marginalized from society and looked on with suspicion if not contempt.”(18) Additionally, products are often designed to become useless after a short period of time, a corporate tactic known as *planned obsolescence*. Planned obsolescence is common in society, as explored by Adam Hadhazy in a recent BBC article:

*In various forms, from subtle to unsubtle, planned obsolescence still very much exists nowadays. From so-called contrived durability, where brittle parts give out, to having repairs cost more than replacement products, to aesthetic upgrades that frame older product versions as less stylish – goods makers have no shortage of ruses to keep opening customers’ wallets.*

Planned obsolescence is extremely prevalent in society. Products are designed to break down after a number of years, and the parts needed for old models are more difficult to obtain than buying an entirely new product. There are also the social forces at play. Old products are seen a sub-par, simply because they are old. They appear to be less fashionable, functioning or useful. They reflect negatively on their users as well. An individual may appear to be less competent or intelligent.

Apple is an example in both cases. The company had admitted to slowing down their old phones, via software updates, rendering them useless to their users.<sup>7</sup> Apple also advertises their new phones as classy, sleek and high-end. Reflecting the same sentiment on their users. In contrast, old Apple products are seen as clunky and useless.

Given these forces acting within consumerism; personal identification, commodity fetishism and planned obsolescence, it is possible to understand the widespread impulse to consume on a broader scale.

### **Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian**

In his first philosophical work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche proposes the ideas of the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian*, two forces inherent within society. For Nietzsche, the Apollonian represents humanity's logical and rational aspects, while the Dionysian represents its hedonistic and romantic ones. The words themselves, Apollonian and Dionysian, are derived from the names Apollo and Dionysus, two prominent figures in Greek mythology.

Apollo is the god of light and reason. His domain is one of introspection, categorization, and logic. He is also the god of prophecy, a metaphor for man's ability to craft logical predictions about the future. “...[he was]the god who made men aware of their own guilt and purified them of it; who presided over religious law and the constitutions of cities; and who communicated with mortals through prophets and oracles his knowledge of the future and the will of his father, Zeus<sup>8</sup>”.

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<sup>7</sup> BBC Article

<sup>8</sup> Apollo. Encyclopædia Britannica

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the idealistic dream world of Apollo: perfection that is unreachable to humans, yet something they constantly strive for. It is a dream world, meaning that it has no real connection in reality, it is representative of all that man could be, instead of what he is. Nietzsche is adamant about this inaccessibility, Apollo represents an absolute ideal, and in some ways, an absolute rational truth.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, Dionysus is the god of wine. In Greek mythology, he is known as the mad god, delighting in tearing men limb from limb. He is the most passionate of the gods, representing universal human desires and man's connection with nature.<sup>10</sup> As Walter Otto wrote in his book *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*:

*The madness which is called Dionysus is no sickness, no debility in life, but a companion of life at its healthiest. It is the tumult which erupts from its innermost recesses when they mature and force their way to the surface. It is the madness inherent in the womb of the mother. This attends all moments of creation, constantly changes ordered existence into chaos, and ushers in primal salvation and primal pain—and in both, the primal wildness of being.*<sup>11</sup>

Walter Otto describes a sentiment shared by Nietzsche, the idea that humanity should embrace its most powerful emotions, better known as the Dionysian madness.

Dionysus and the creatures associated with him, were some of the most popular subjects in Hellenistic sculpture.<sup>12</sup> There are a multitude of marble sculptures depicting satyrs, nymphs, and the god himself from this time period. This enduring popularity speaks to the God's mass appeal within Greek society. For those in power, Dionysus became a symbol of fertility, agriculture and nature. He also embodied the classic archetype of the Greek hero.<sup>13</sup> He was born a demigod, his mother a mortal woman and his father Zeus, the king of Olympus. He achieved many feats in his mortal life, and only then did he gain divinity.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Dionysus was a patron of the common people, representing all that a man could be in life. In the modern day, he is known primarily for being the god of wine. This can be taken literally, tying into his patronage of nature and fertility, but also as symbolic of a state of mind. More accurately, Dionysus is the god of the state of drunkenness.

In contrast to Apollo's world of dreamlike idealism, Nietzsche describes the intoxicated world of Dionysus. In this world, one is driven by instinct and desire. They are capable of deep emotion, and succumb to heights of both intense rage and joy. This is also a structure less, formless state of mind. Outside of society, it is the opposite of rational, Apollonian thought. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche states that when one succumbs to a Dionysian way of life, they

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<sup>9</sup> This feeds into Nietzsche's ideas on perspectivism. He thought that philosophers of the past had largely ignored their own biases in their search for an objective, universal truth. He is adamant about the inaccessibility of the Apollonian world because it represents a perfect ideal, something humanity can never reach as it is perpetually trapped within its own biases.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, R. R. R.

<sup>11</sup> Otto, Walter F. *Dionysus*

<sup>12</sup> Hellenistic sculpture was a period in Greek sculpture after the Classical era. While Classical Greek sculpture often depicted idealistic, mythical heroes, and content in a similar vein, the Hellenistic period expanded greatly. This expansion was an embodiment of the changing political atmosphere of the time. Broader subject matter was acceptable, including depictions of the humanoid creatures that occupied the world of Dionysus.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, R. R. R.

<sup>14</sup> Dionysus. *Encyclopædia Britannica*

can escape the horrors of death, and live with their emotions in the present moment. He presents this as an alternative to the Christian idea of salvation.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche was adamantly against Christianity as a whole during his lifetime. He did not believe that humanity should take their morals from a higher, ultimate power, and should instead go through life defining their own moral code. He believed that humans should live focusing on the here and now, on being human. By embracing all that that is, including the Dionysian, one attains a greater state of being. Instead of salvation, they have a deeper sense of what it means to be human.

Nietzsche says that in order for society to function properly, there must be a balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects. A society too Apollonian leads people to become apathetic, devoid of emotion. While a Dionysian society is too formless to produce anything of note, and cannot progress. He goes on to observe that the world of his time was too Apollonian.

Nietzsche was born in 1844. *The Birth of Tragedy* was published in 1872. In his lifetime, he saw the world after the industrial revolution. He observed a society driven by science, logic and reason, condemning pleasure seeking and the Dionysian side of human nature. According to Nietzsche, in order for this society to be saved, it must embrace its own Dionysian aspects.

To accept the Dionysian side of life is to be confronted with humanity's worst aspects, the most violent and hedonistic, and to embrace them. It is to contemplate the most intense form of nihilism, and emerge still wanting to live.<sup>16</sup> In his work, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche states

*Anyone who, like me, has, with some enigmatic desire or other, made an effort for a long time to think profoundly about pessimism[...]without really wanting to do so, opened his eyes for the reverse morality: for the ideal of the most high-spirited, most lively, and most world-affirming human being, who has not only learned to come to terms with and accept what was and is but wants to have what was and is come back for all eternity[...]because over and over again he needs himself - and makes himself necessary.<sup>17</sup>*

This is the acceptance that Nietzsche speaks about. The highest form of existence in his opinion. After contemplating the depths of pessimism and nihilism, emerging. And calling for the world again. This acceptance of the ugly is what he calls Dionysian. According to Nietzsche, modern society has lost this key aspect. People do not acknowledge the broad scope of their emotions as valid. They push away negative, impulsive, violent emotions. They are personally stunted, unfulfilled in life, as they do not acknowledge half of themselves. From his analysis, one can draw the conclusion that society in the present day is much more Apollonian than Dionysian.

By analyzing marketing techniques perpetuating consumerism, it is clear that it is seen as a predominantly hedonistic impulse. The act of obtaining and consuming products is framed as pleasure seeking, by articles such as *Hedonic Consumption* and *Pleasure Principles: A Review of Research on Hedonic Consumption*, appearing in *The Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, respectively.

Consumerism is predominantly seen as a solely romantic, or Dionysian, act. While these factors drive part of the impulse to consume, I argue that there exists equally a rational, Apollonian motivation. This motivation comes with long-term pleasure seeking. This kind of pleasure seeking is not an impulsive decision, it requires foresight on behalf of the consumer, the

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<sup>15</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*

<sup>16</sup> *Academy of Ideas*

<sup>17</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil: Aphorism #56*

ability to see a product's long term potential. Therefore, consumerism is both a rational and romantic impulse.

It is arguable that the divide between rational and romantic, or Apollonian and Dionysian, changes depending on the individual. What is a rational impulse to consume for one person may be a romantic, emotion driven one for another. However, this argument is irrelevant in the present context. It does not invalidate the existence of rational motivations driving consumerism, it simply states that motivations are subjective, and broad generalizations cannot be applied. I do not dispute this, I am arguing that rational impulses exist in the same capacity that romantic ones do.

However, this counterpoint calls into question the definition of pleasure itself. This is a subjective term. While it can be argued that there are universal, biological pleasures for humans, such as sex, there are also a wide variety of pleasure determined, at least in part, by subjective social factors. Something may be pleasurable in a social context, such as the approval of a respected person or authority figure. It is pleasurable to receive praise from someone that is highly regarded socially. However, this type of measure does not exist without society, as it is a product of social structures. Therefore, the definition of what is universal pleasure and what is not, are not clearly defined.

Nevertheless, this subjectivity in the definition of pleasure does not invalidate my argument. If it is acknowledged that such a thing as pleasure exists for humans, the subjectivity in its definition does not play a significant role here. Regardless of its definition, such a thing as pleasure exists. At the simplest level, therefore, pleasure has the ability to drive a human impulse to consume. Similarly, such a thing as logic exist, therefore it has the ability to drive a consumerist action.

### **Accepting the Dionysian**

The impulse to consume is more complex than thoughtless pleasure seeking or logical reasoning. Consumerism is an embedded impulse in modern society, yet its internal mechanisms are not often discussed. As I have argued, consumerism is both an Apollonian and Dionysian impulse, it is motivated by short term pleasure seeking and longer term thought. Given this argument, the impulse itself cannot be chalked up to base human desire. It is not a solely Dionysian action, therefore it is not explainable by simply citing impulsive human nature as a cause. Instead, the question emerges, where does this need for pleasure come from.

It is arguable that corporate and social forces drive consumerism. For example, corporate marketing and Commodity Fetishism. However, when examining Nietzsche's proposals surrounding the Apollonian and Dionysian, it seems that greater forces are at play. Nietzsche proclaimed that accepting the Dionysian side of life brings fulfillment for the individual. He writes in *The Will to Power*:

*“Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary quest for even the most detested and notorious sides of existence...Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this – to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection...The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence – my formula for this is amor fati [love of fate].”*



Accepting the Dionysian is accepting all of the world's negativity as part of the validation of existence. Citing Nietzsche's claim that the modern world is too Apollonian, one can extrapolate on this, concluding that the modern world does not accept the negative aspects of life as valid or useful. Because of this lack of meaningful stimulus, pleasure is sought out, via consumerism. Half of life's emotions have been deemed illegitimate, so individuals look for that same stimulation in the socially contrived pleasures created by the act of consumption.

### **Conclusion**

Consumerism is a multifaceted impulse, not explainable as simply hedonistic pleasure seeking. It is much more complex than that, motivated by social and corporate factors as well. It is both a rational and romantically driven act. Because of this, the question of why individuals consume at all, is posed. As I have argued, it is not easily explainable as a hedonistic, impulsive action.

Nietzsche proposes that pain and rage are just as valid as pleasure and joy in an individual's life. However, in modern society, negative emotions must be avoided at all costs, they are problems to be dealt with as quickly as possible. While the pursuit of joy and happiness is ever-present, the acknowledgment of the possibility of pain is not. Anger and distress, things that must be reckoned with, are simply facts of life. In a society that does not recognize this, people turn to consumerism, and the momentary pleasure it provides, as a substitute for this lacking emotional stimulant. Half the scope of human experience is not recognized as valid in modern society, therefore individuals look to more pleasure as a substitute.

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