Don't Touch Me (I'm Electric): On Gender and Sensation in Modernity

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Apparently I am at risk. The stresses of a busy urban lifestyle, pollution and holes in the ozone layer are undermining the protective role of that important bodily organ – my skin. Unprotected, I start to display the symptoms of an illness called ageing. Happily, though, there are skin creams which can restore the protective power of my skin. Scientific research has produced a new 'skin technology' which can save me. It will isolate me in a laboratory world as bland as my newly smoothed skin. It will keep me in a kind of suspended animation. Which, considering I am thirty next birthday, is just in time.

Current advertisements for anti-ageing skin creams seem to be simultaneously futuristic and old-fashioned. Many of them present a modernist narrative of technological and scientific progress, yet also address their audience's awareness of the negative aspects of technological modernity. They play on women's fears about ageing, but they tend to represent ageing as something done to us. The female body is represented as vulnerable – under attack – and its protector is Science (with its traditionally 'masculine' associations).

Ideas of women as vulnerable and in need of protection have a long history. In contemporary advertising, skin 'problems' are linked to stress, which in turn is linked to a working lifestyle (in one ad a woman is shown using a mobile phone), as well as to pollution. In the nineteenth century, women – especially young women – were thought to be particularly vulnerable to new technologies and new lifestyles. It seemed to some observers

Figure 2.1 Advertisement from *Marie Claire*, April 1997. The image of a cityscape is unusual in skincare ads, but the concerns it evokes – about pollution and ageing, and the need for 'protection' – are not.

(mostly, but not all, male) that women were ill-suited to modern life, and that middle-class women in particular were ill-suited to the education and work to which they had fought to gain access. (As I'll show, women's 'vulnerability' is figured differently according to class.)

In this essay I look at the ways in which ideas about bodily sensation have been articulated in terms of feminine vulnerability. I want to show how attempts to understand the effects of modern life on people's bodies have linked 'femininity' with passivity and 'masculinity' with agency. At stake in the struggle over these categories was what constituted agency and who counted as political actors. By coupling femininity with passive responsiveness and political conservatism, many writers in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century managed to dismiss women as social agents at a time when they constituted a significant political threat. In the late twentieth century many commentators on the media still tend to accept the opposition between critical distance and absorption, assuming that an openness to and absorption in sensation is related to passive acceptance.

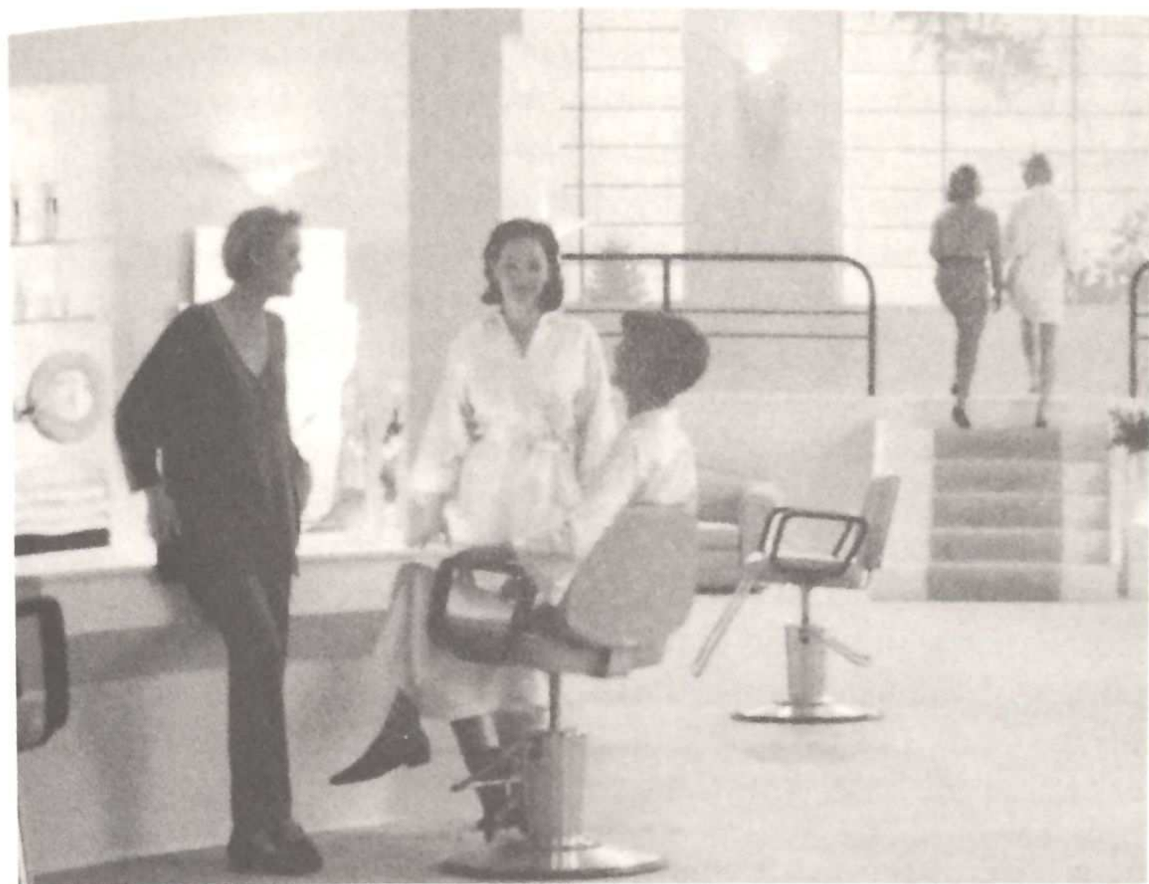

Figure 2.2 The 'Pond's Institute'.

This chapter is divided into five parts. The first looks at the ways in which the physical and psychological effects of modernity were linked to ideas of femininity through association with hysteria. The second part looks at the construction of an ideal masculinity linked to the figure of the armoured warrior. Part three considers the transformation of this idea in the work of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud; some of the ways modern life seemed to undermine existing models of masculinity and femininity; and how gender categories were renegotiated. In the fourth part I look at the emergence of the understanding of sensation in terms of nerves and electrical currents. Part five explores representations of women of different classes as 'hypnotized' and 'intoxicated' by an onslaught of sensations. At the end I appropriate aspects of the writings of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer to dismantle the opposition between critical distance and sensory absorption.

The feminizing of the symptoms of modernity

In the late nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth new forms of machinery seemed to be taking their toll on people's

bodies and minds. In the British popular press, concerns about the damaging effects of technology came to the fore in the years preceding the First World War. In 1914 *Pearson's Weekly* listed the 'ailments' produced by technological progress, '"wireless anaemia", paralysis from vibration of a car, aeroplane deafness and "picture palace headache"' (Broks, 1997: 111–18). The dangers of factory labour were documented early in the nineteenth century: not only were industrial accidents very common but the everyday repetitive jolts of industrial machinery were taking their toll on the body of the labourer. But arguably less attention was paid to this than to the dangers of railway travel, which was the nearest many middle-class people came to experiencing industrial machinery. An 1857 study documented the effects of the vibrations of the trains, which had no suspension, on the bodies of railway engineers. Middle-class train passengers experienced these vibrations to a lesser extent, cushioned by the upholstery of the seats in the first- and second-class carriages. As well as this physical shaking, they were subjected to the deafening sounds of the train, and the rapid shifts in the field of vision produced by travelling at speed (Schivelbusch, 1986: 117).

Commentators noted that these attacks on the body did not necessarily produce straightforward physical symptoms. The effect could be indirect: physical symptoms could be the 'expression' of the psychological traumas provoked by sudden or extreme stimuli. In industry, workers were exhibiting psychological as well as physical strain, and seemed traumatized by industrial accidents. People suffering shock after railway accidents, despite having no visible injuries, were initially thought to be suffering from 'railway spine', 'a supposed microscopic deterioration of the spine'. Only in the 1880s was this understood in psychological terms as 'railway brain' (Schivelbusch, 1986: 134–49). The linking of neuroses with the physical 'jolts' and sudden shocks of industrial modernity became commonplace. For example, Jean-Martin Charcot, well-known for his studies of neuroses such as hysteria, suggested that certain forms of hysteria could be brought on by an accident.

The phenomenon of shell-shock in the First World War posed new problems for understanding neuroses. Significantly, the term 'shell-shock' was coined because soldiers' neuroses were initially seen as specifically caused by the new explosive shells – the sound they produced, the suddenness with which they exploded, and the

horrific way in which they could reduce a human body to fragments. A more convincing argument is that war neuroses were a response to the combination of these new technical developments in modern warfare with changes in the organization of troops and strategies of warfare (such as the use of trenches), changes which have been described as a kind of 'mechanization' of warfare.

Nevertheless, the feature of modernity thought to produce neuroses was its capacity to surprise, jolt or shock. One of the effects of these 'shocks' was to close down sense perception. Symptoms common amongst hysterics, shell-shocked soldiers and industrial labourers included loss of feeling in parts of the body and loss of sight or hearing. Although both men and women suffered from neuroses, it was the classification of women suffering from these symptoms as hysterical which enabled the symptoms to be 'feminized'. Hysteria had traditionally been thought to be an effect of female biology, socially produced only insofar as it occurred in women who did not fulfil their 'natural' function of childbirth. Charcot, who popularized the theory that hysteria could be brought on by trauma, still rooted it in female biology, believing that although men could also suffer from hysteria, young women were more likely to be hysterics, because they were more 'impressionable', 'weaker' and subject to 'nervous attacks'. It was thought that women and overly 'feminine' men could temporarily lose sensation as a result of trauma. Nevertheless Charcot linked hysteria with modernity. As modern life became faster and more technological, hysteria was thought to be on the increase.

In Britain and America the medical profession attempted to draw a distinction between symptoms related to hysteria and those related to 'neurasthenia' (also termed 'nervous exhaustion'). These boundaries are tenuously drawn, with the neurasthenic woman often sharing the same symptoms as the 'hysteric', yet treated with more sympathy because of her apparent 'refinement' and 'ladylike' qualities (Showalter, 1987: 134–5). In other words, neurasthenia and hysteria were distinguished according to the class and 'breeding' of the sufferers. In addition, neurasthenia was more explicitly linked to the social and technological transformations that characterized modern everyday life for the bourgeoisie. In the 1860s George Miller Beard had defined it as an 'American nervousness', stating that:

> A deficiency in nervous energy was the price exacted by industrialised urban societies, competitive business and social environments, and the luxuries, vices and excesses of modern life. Five characteristic features of nineteenth-century progress – the periodical press, steam power, the telegraph, the sciences, and especially the increased mental activity of women – could be held to blame for the sapping of American nervous strength. (Showalter, 1987: 135)

Apparently, in the United States neurasthenia was not seen as a feminine condition; instead it was linked to the stresses of business and money and even seen as 'an impressive illness for men' (Showalter, 1987: 136). For women and for men, neurasthenia was thought to be caused by excessive stimulation and the 'incapacity' of the individual to react to this stimulation (Buck-Morss, 1992). Nevertheless, the majority of American neurasthenics were educated, middle-class women, and their symptoms were thought to be brought on by overstretching their minds. Even this could be understood in physical terms. Psychologists and physicians conducted experiments exploring the relationship between 'mental fatigue' and physical sensation and sensitivity, which suggested that mental fatigue could be measured by measuring changes in the sensitivity of an individual's skin, although opinions varied as to whether mental fatigue increased or decreased skin sensitivity and awareness of pain (Rabinbach, 1992: 149; 343, note 26).

Usually, hysteria was associated with hypersensitivity. Perhaps the most interesting instance of this is dermographism, in which a condition of the skin makes it so sensitive that touching or scratching produces welts which may last for up to forty-eight hours. Women in general, and hysterical women in particular, were thought to be most prone to this condition, and male sufferers were found to have 'feminine qualities', being 'emotional' and 'impressionable' (Beizer, 1994: 20–9). To demonstrate the condition doctors would write on the anaesthetized skin of the patient and then photograph it. As Janet Beizer points out, this hypersensitive skin and the practice of writing on it reinforced the idea of the hysteric's body as 'expressive' (an idea later taken up by the surrealists Louis Aragon and André Breton) yet what it 'expresses' are merely the whims of the doctor (they drew abstract patterns and lines or wrote the diagnosis, the patient's name, their own name, or, more unsettling still, the sign of the devil). Beizer

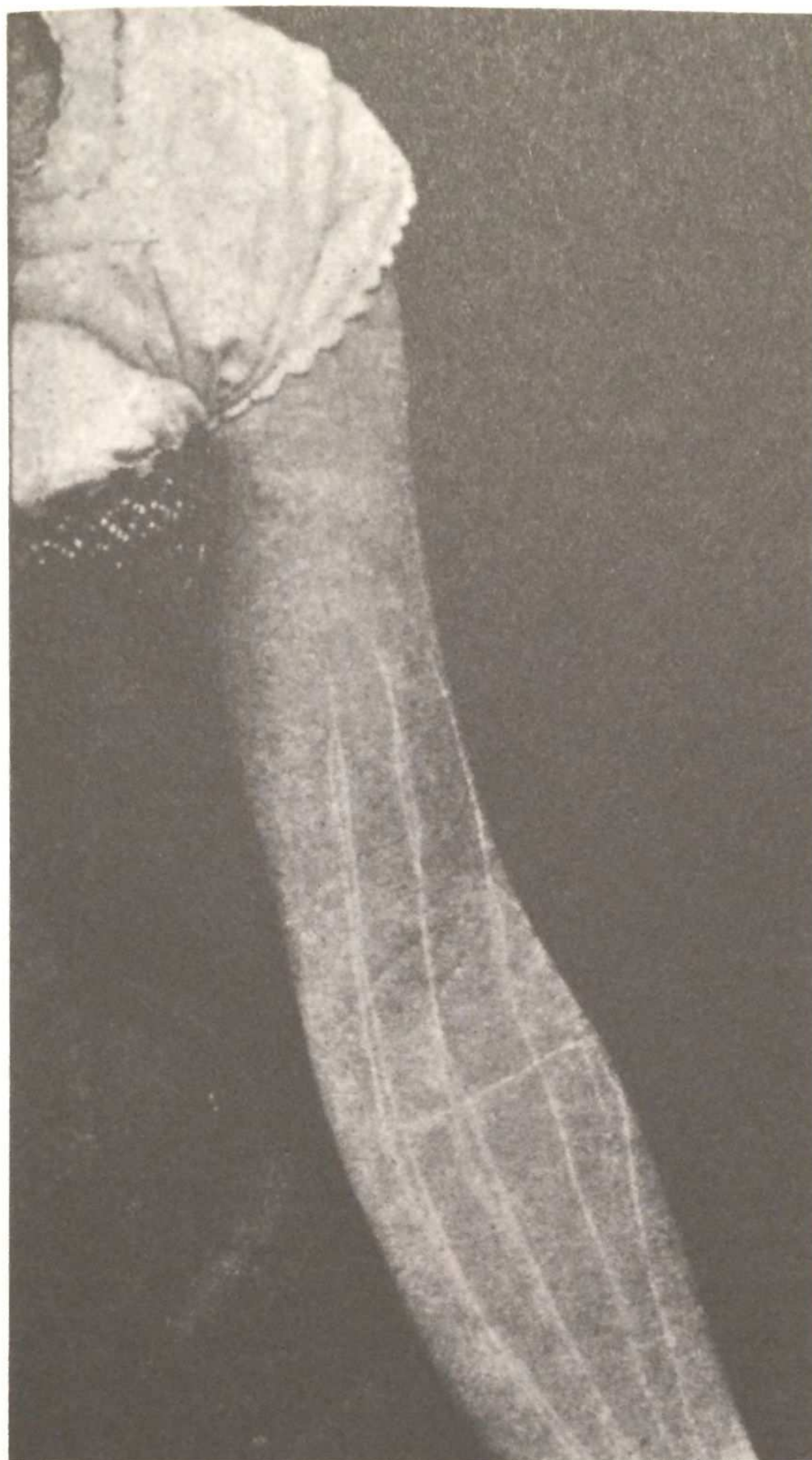

Figure 2.3 Etchings on young woman's arm. Women – especially hysterics – were said to be more impressionable than men; consequently they were thought to be more often subject to dermographism, the immune reaction that doctors appropriated as skin-writing or skin-drawing, and sometimes referred to as autography or lithography. (Published in T. Barthélémy, *Etude sur le dermographisme ou dermoneurose toxivasomotrice*, 1893; photo Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Médecine, Université René Descartes, Paris.)

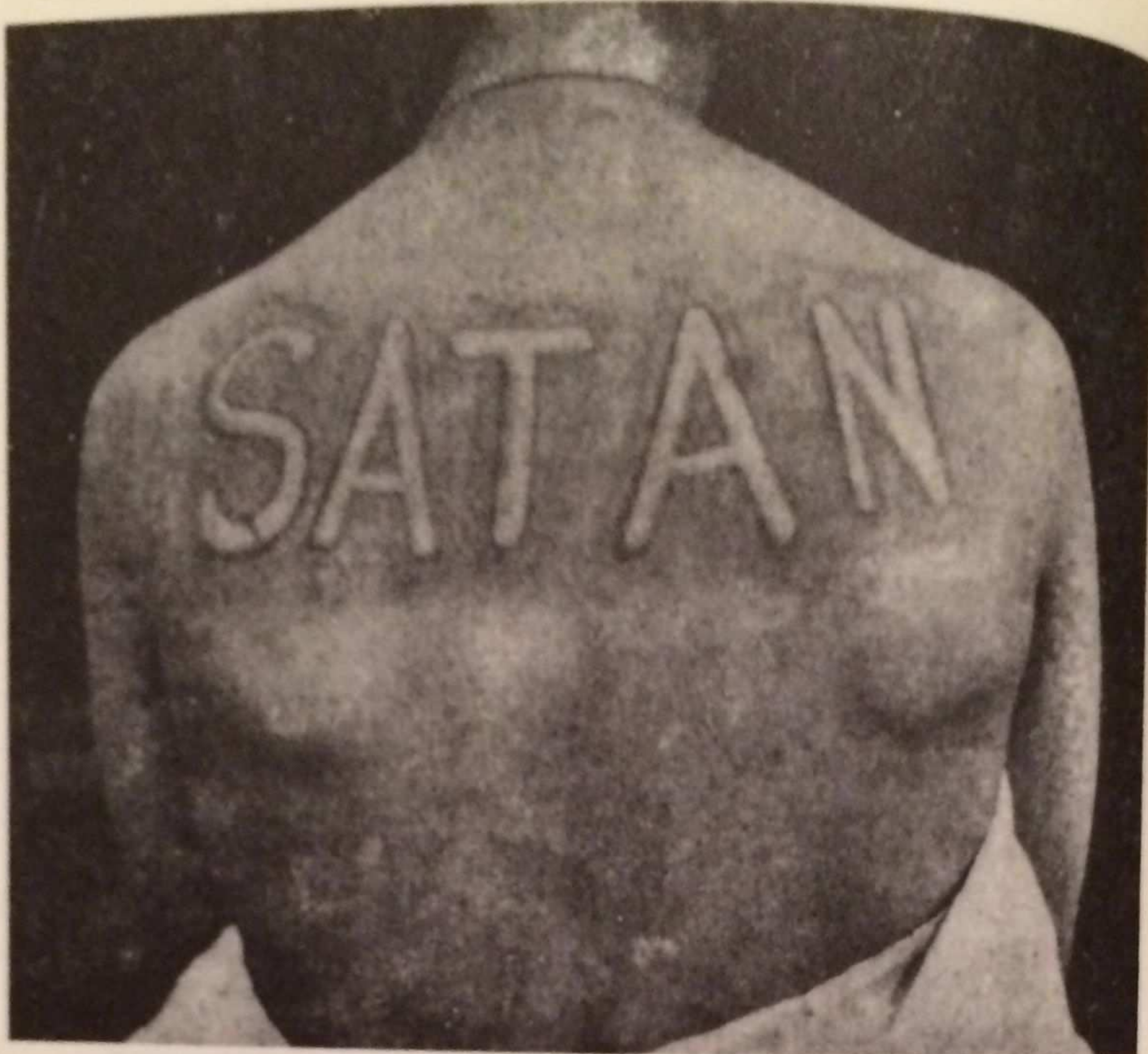

Figure 2.4 Doctors fascinated by dermographism often used the sign of the devil in their writing experiments. The clarity of this photograph suggests that it may have been retouched. (Published in T. Barthélémy, *Etude sur le dermographisme ou dermoneurose toxivasomotrice*, 1893; photo Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Médecine, Université René Descartes, Paris.)

shows that dermographism reinforced the perception of the woman as 'impressionable', by making her become a 'medium of communication between men' (Beizer, 1994: 291).

Overall, women were thought to be more vulnerable to the over-stimulation of modernity – whether mental stimulation (ideas, competition in business) or direct physical stimulation.

Armoured masculinity

Some writers have suggested that the occurrence of hysterical symptoms in male soldiers in the First World War urged a rejection of the image of the weak, impressionable and feminine sufferer. Yet, as Beard's work on neurasthenia would suggest,

symptoms would be read completely differently according to the class and sex of the sufferer. Joanna Bourke has shown that, in Britain, the wartime appearance of hysterical symptoms in men did not straightforwardly 'masculinize' hysteria as shell-shock (Bourke, 1996). Hysterical and anorexic women had often been seen as 'malingerers' by Victorian doctors and represented as deserving of 'punitive cures' in Victorian literature (Showalter, 1987: 138–9). Similarly, in the early years of the war it was thought that men who seemed to be suffering from neurasthenia were malingerers, faking the symptoms in the hope of gaining discharge from the army. Although malingering in the army was punishable by death, medical practitioners believed 'that all that separated the neurotic from the malingerer was intention' (Bourke, 1996: 110). In other words, while the malingerer simulates symptoms in order to deceive, the hysteric simulates symptoms without knowing he is doing so – a kind of unconscious malingerer.

By 1917 military hospitals viewed most cases of neurasthenia as genuine. The numbers and type of soldier suffering from neurasthenia made it difficult for the War Office not to recognize it, since the alternative would have been to execute large numbers of experienced and committed soldiers. Most significantly, as Bourke shows, the official attitude to shell-shock shifted because of the social class of the sufferers. Although only one in thirty British Army men at the Front was an officer, they counted for one in every six hospitalized neurasthenics. Rather than accuse officers of malingering (and, therefore, of cowardice), distinctions were made between different kinds of war neuroses:

> most sympathy was reserved to those suffering anxiety neuroses (the form predominantly experienced by officers) as opposed to hysteria (the form predominantly reserved for privates). (Bourke, 1996: 112)

The distinction between these two different kinds of neurosis in working-class soldiers and officers hung on the notion that the privates were more susceptible to sensations of fear, sensations to which an officer's public school education and training had taught him to pay no attention. The 'hysterical' soldier was feminized, 'seen as simple, emotional, unthinking, passive, suggestible, dependent and weak – very much the same constellation of traits associated with the hysterical woman' (Showalter, 1987: 174–5). By contrast, the officer, even when

neurasthenic, fitted an ideal notion of masculinity, nobly repressing his fear for the sake of the other soldiers.

This notion of a masculinity founded on the closing-down of the senses emerged in the modern period. For instance, in Kant's 'aesthetic judgement' the man most worthy of respect is the warrior who refuses to follow his senses which tell him he is in danger, and who seeks to control reality rather than allow it to control him by being armoured against or resisting sensory responses:

> Kant's transcendental subject purges himself of the senses which endanger autonomy not only because they unavoidably entangle him in the world, but specifically, because they make him passive ('languid') instead of active ('vigorous'), susceptible, like 'oriental voluptuaries', to sympathy and tears. (Buck-Morss, 1992: 9)

When Kant wrote about 'aesthetics' he distanced himself from the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility. This, for Kant, is associated with femininity and effeminacy. Indeed, Goethe praised Kant for having 'brought us all back from the effeminacy in which we were wallowing' (quoted in Buck-Morss, 1992: 10). Masculinity, then, becomes associated with being sense-dead and self-contained while an openness and responsiveness to sensation is associated with femininity and lack of control. Femininity also had historical associations with fluidity – the female body 'spills over' while the (idealized) male body has defined boundaries. This association is there in Goethe's formulation, in the idea of 'wallowing' in effeminacy. The epitome of the bounded male body is in the armoured figure of the warrior. The ideally masculine soldier refuses sensation in order to subject himself to its extremes. Yet in the First World War the soldier became the antithesis of this: the hysterical, feminized body which, because it is caught up in sensation ('hyper-sensitive'), consequently suffers from a deadening of the senses (the loss of sight, hearing and feeling which count amongst the symptoms of hysteria).

Klaus Theweleit argues that this modern construction of bounded masculinity has its roots in the expansion of trade in the medieval period, which opened up new sensations to the merchant classes:

> Every new trade route disclosed a novel pleasure; every new object from some foreign land held the possibility of a new feeling. Pepper took its place alongside the salt of the earth. Paprika and silk: those were once words for new sensations. (Theweleit, 1987: 303)

As available experience and sensation expand, instead of becoming open to sensation the European man becomes increasingly 'self-confined': he becomes a 'tough armored ship that can be sent out to seize and "order" the world according to the European perspective' (Theweleit, 1987: 302). The process of colonization constructs an ideal masculine self based in the distancing of sensation and on individualism. This ideology of armoured manhood can be seen at its most extreme and explicit in the writings, analysed by Theweleit, of German Freikorps officers. These soldiers identify with armoured masculinity and oppose it to the fluid, feeling and therefore relatively unbounded bodies of women. They associate their fear of and disgust towards women with the threat of Communism, perceiving Communism in terms of the 'mass' which threatens to engulf the individual and women as similarly engulfing (the most fear and hatred is saved, therefore, for the 'Red woman'). In this way women are metaphorically linked to the collective experience of the mass, or the crowd, and mass experience becomes feminized (Theweleit, 1987).

The consciousness shield: Simmel, Freud, Benjamin

Theweleit argues that it is consciousness that armours the masculine self. This armoured consciousness is both the ideological product of, and the justification for, men's roles in war and colonization. Yet for the sociologist Georg Simmel, writing at the turn of the century, the sensory stimulation and 'rhythm of life' of the modern city itself necessitated a kind of mental armour:

> The metropolitan type of man – which of course exists in a thousand individual variants – develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies which would uproot him. ... The reaction to metropolitan phenomenon is shifted to that organ which is least sensitive and quite remote from the depth of the personality. Intellectuality is thus seen to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life. (Simmel, 1964: 410–1)

Although Simmel refers to metropolitan 'man' he does not directly associate this armouring with masculinity, and it is possible that for Simmel it applied to women too. The protective

'organ' to which Simmel refers is the conscious mind, the seat of the intellect and (cold) reason. It protects 'the more unconscious layers of the psyche', where emotion, deep feeling and habit reside. In this Simmel seems almost to prefigure the argument Freud was to make twenty years later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In that essay Freud was addressing questions raised by war neuroses in men, drawing upon previous work on the similar neuroses related to industrial labour, and hysteria in young middle-class women. He develops a new version of the body 'armoured' against sensation.

Freud tentatively suggests that consciousness functions as a kind of shield, protecting against the 'excessive energies' of the external world. Consciousness protects us against the 'shocks' that these stimuli provide by preparing us, producing the necessary anxiety. If we are prepared for these shocks, i.e. if consciousness succeeds in cushioning us against them, then we reconcile them with our experience. If, however, we are totally unprepared, if consciousness fails in its job as a shield, they produce a sensation of fright and we become traumatized. In the event of trauma, we can attempt to 'master the stimulus retroactively' – either through dreams in which we reproduce the anxiety we would have had, had we known what was about to happen, or through recollection (Freud, 1984).

In Freud's and Simmel's essays the conscious mind is conceived as a protective shell. Far from simply taking on board sensory information it actually guards against it. If modern experience is characterized by an increase in stimuli and in technologically produced abrupt shocks, consciousness must continually be on the defence, the individual increasingly cushioned against experience. Thus the armoured body shifts from a general philosophical ideal (Kant's transcendental subject) to an explanation of a peculiarly modern form of consciousness resulting from the barrage of stimuli characteristic of industrial society and modern warfare. Yet it remains tied to masculinity. It is not that women cannot form this shield, indeed they must in order to survive, but it took an 'epidemic' of hysteria in men to arrive at this conclusion. In other words, Freud arrives at an apparently ungendered set of speculations about the modern subject and undoes the association of the armoured body with masculinity, yet he only does this as a result of the crisis in gendered distinctions brought about by shell-shock. Furthermore, we can

speculate that since more women than men suffered hysterical symptoms, this shield is supposed to be less effective in women. As Harvie Ferguson puts it,

> The pliant female body, unprotected by a hard reflective shell of intellect, was continually falling into a state of helpless torpor in which it was receptive to a multiplicity of uncontrolled and disordered impressions.' (Ferguson, 1996: 45)

The theory Freud develops in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is a sophisticated stimulus-response theory. He explains trauma using neurological terms (suggesting that consciousness corresponds to the outer cortex of the brain). Freud, who had moved away from thinking about neuroses in terms of the 'nerves', moves back to it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Previously he had refused to see hysteria in women as resulting directly from the barrage of stimuli that constitutes modern life. He produced instead the 'seduction theory' of hysteria, positing hysterical women as 'victims of the breakdown of idealised bourgeois family relations' (Ferguson, 1996: 49). Recent feminist studies have criticized this theory for its unacknowledged assumptions about female sexuality, and instead have explained hysteria in terms of a 'bodily protest' against femininity and powerlessness. However, they do seem to agree at least with his rejection of immediate physical cause, in favour of understanding it in relation to the broader social structures of modernity (Bernheimer and Kahane, 1985). But in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud was returning to an interest in traumas that seemed to be brought about more directly, by actual events, and to what he himself had referred to as 'the old, naive theory of shock' (Schivelbusch, 1986: 148). The explanations of hysteria which seemed appropriate to young women could not, it seems, explain similar symptoms in male soldiers and officers.

While Freud's return to neurology was motivated in part by assumptions to do with sexual difference, neurology also serves to give the essay the authority of science (this has been used as one explanation for Freud's about-turn). And it is old-fashioned. Some of the biological theories Freud uses were discredited by the time he wrote this. For example, he quotes Hering and uses terminology close to that of Hering such as the idea of a 'memory trace'. Hering was one of the main early theorists of 'organic memory'. He argued that memory occurred when sensory stimulation physically altered body tissue and left what he termed

'living traces' which could be inherited across generations. Organic memory theory is linked to the belief that moral life, experience and tendencies are biologically inheritable and accumulative. Not surprisingly, it was used to naturalize and justify racial and social classifications (Otis, 1994).

In fact, these theories about the ability to inherit acquired traits and memories could be seen to contradict the view that 'nervous maladies' are the result of the 'shocks' of modernity, and are linked to the older belief that they were inherited. In France, many nineteenth-century experts on neurasthenia accepted the view that certain supposedly 'inferior' races had hereditary tendencies towards it but that others suffered from it due to the conditions of modern life (Rabinbach, 1992: 148).

Another criticism of Freud's essay could be that, like all stimulus-response theories, it reduces experience to stimuli, and the person to a receptor of stimuli, even if Freud does qualify the idea of straightforward reception through the idea of the 'shield'. Stimulus-response models tend to consider only the ways the world acts on the human subject, instead of also considering humans as acting on the world. In this sense they construct a passive model of the human subject: a body simply receiving, or defending itself against, stimuli.[1] Insofar as it is a stimulus-response theory, Freud's theory could be said to produce a passive, not an active, subject. Armoured masculinity had previously been conceived in highly active terms, as enabling the control and conquest of nature. Yet Freud's essay envisages this armour in entirely defensive (and physiological) terms.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle has been peculiarly influential. Walter Benjamin used it in his 1939 essay on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, poetry which for Benjamin exemplifies the nineteenth-century urban experience of 'shock'. He elaborates Freud's theory: modern urban experience is characterized by an increase in stimuli and in technologically produced abrupt shocks, so consciousness must continually be on the defence. Freud had stated that if consciousness succeeds in cushioning us against shock experiences then we reconcile them with our experience. In other words, as Benjamin explains, consciousness gives the incident the character of having been lived, and it does so by assigning it a temporal status – it remains 'in the sphere of a certain hour of one's life', it becomes a memory, but, as Benjamin states, 'at the cost of the integrity of its contents' (Benjamin, 1989: 117).

As a result of this process, according to Benjamin, there is a price to be paid for the armoured self, which is loss of 'aura' – that is the replacement of the experience of historical continuity and collective experience with the fragmented experience characteristic of modernity. In this essay, Benjamin is ambivalent towards the loss of 'aura'. On the one hand it is indicative of the alienation and isolation of the modern individual, but on the other hand it might also open the possibility of new forms of collectivity and consciousness. For Benjamin and other writers Freud's essay points to the ways in which the sensations of modernity are reconciled through the construction of a continuous, coherent self. Just as Baudelaire's poetry 'exposes the passing moment in all its nakedness', Freud's essay exposes the continuous ego as a fiction, a mere defensive strategy.

In an earlier essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin seems to suggest that the destruction of aura in modernity might have two possible consequences. One is exemplified by the Italian Futurist manifesto, written prior to Italy's entry into the First World War, which extols armoured masculinity and glorifies the sensations and destructiveness of war – representing war in terms of aesthetic pleasure (some of the Futurists, like some of the Freikorps officers, went on to become Fascists). This is, for Benjamin (1992: 235), the most extreme form of alienation. The alternative possibility, the potential of which Benjamin sometimes saw in Communism, was the making of everyday sensory ('aesthetic') experience the basis of political, revolutionary action.[2] In this sense Benjamin's argument goes back to Marx and *The Communist Manifesto* in which the proletarian revolution is envisaged as 'man' stripped of illusions, standing on the precipice of history and facing the real conditions of existence. Curiously, although revolution is almost always described in terms of masculine heroism, this image of revolution evokes a nakedness and a vulnerability – that openness to the sensory world usually associated with femininity.

The 'feminizing' implications of changed ways of conceptualizing the subject were not lost on turn-of-the-century writers and artists. Individualism and the privatization of experience emerge in the modern period, but urban modernity also threatened the boundaries of the individual who, despite attempts to remain bounded, became inextricably caught up in sensation, especially

when jostled in the city crowd. Some celebrated this disintegration. For example, the *fin-de-siècle* decadents revelled in the search for sensation. In doing so they contested the existing polarity of femininity as absorbed in sensation and masculinity armoured against it. In some ways this appropriation of the qualities assigned to femininity did provide a space for a negotiation of masculinity in relation to homosexuality, but it was to have very little effect on the existing perception of women. Similarly, in the twentieth century the surrealists looked to everyday sensory experience to disrupt bourgeois ideology. Yet here too the re-evaluating of sensation did not attach value to femininity but marked the appropriation of those qualities of sensory openness, absorption and lack of bodily control previously associated with femininity. For them, as for the Italian Futurists, femininity itself still represents all that is conservative, traditional and backward looking.[3]

Responses to the disruption of existing gender categories could be crudely characterized according to two poles: one that attempts to shore up and re-armour the individual, seeing masculinity as under siege and modernity as dangerously feminizing; another that attempts to rescue those attributes consigned to femininity – particularly an openness (or 'vulnerability') to sensation – and make them available to men, without in the process disputing women's inferiority.

The electrical body and gender

One new way of comprehending perception, sensation and sensitivity was through the idea of electricity and the nerves as electrical. This produced particular and contradictory gendered meanings. Christoph Asendorf shows that a central idea of Viennese modernism was the new conception of the body as a bundle of nerves and reality as simply a set of stimuli. This derived from the work of Hermann Bahr and from Ernst Mach's *The Analysis of Sensation* (1885) in which the ego was seen as simply a fiction; the idea of the individual as made up of currents of sensation replaces the idea of the unified subject. Bahr wrote in 1891 of the 'new people' as being

> nerves; the rest is extinct, withered and barren. They live now only through the experience of nerves; they only react on the basis of nerves ... (quoted in Asendorf, 1993: 171)

Benjamin's writing on Baudelaire also draws attention to the way in which the electrical impulses of the nervous system transgress the separation of the body from the world:

> Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks or collisions. At dangerous crossings, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. (Benjamin, 1989: 132)

This passage makes explicit the link between the concept of modernity as shock and the late nineteenth-century fascination with electricity. Although nerves had been long understood in terms of electricity, it wasn't until the last decades of the nineteenth century that electricity began to have a visible presence in people's everyday lives. It was only in the 1870s and 1880s that the first central electricity stations were put into operation and some European cities began to install electric (arc) lighting in place of gas lamps to light the major shopping streets (Schivelbusch, 1995: 58, 65, 115). The length of time it took for Europe to become fully electrified suggests why electricity was one of the primary signifiers of modernity as late as the 1930s. That electricity unequivocally stood for progress is exemplified in Lenin's formula 'electrification + Soviet power = communism'.[4]

Since the eighteenth century, electricity was thought of as a kind of life force, even bringing to life dead bodies, like Frankenstein's monster. Even the electric chair was seen in these terms – the electricity seemed to be trying to reanimate the person, even after it had killed them (Asendorf, 1993: 163). Medical practitioners could finally put to use their fascination with electricity when patented devices using electricity as cure became available in the 1880s. George Beard himself was an advocate of the use of electricity in treating neurasthenia. (His *Medical and Surgical Uses of Electricity* was published in 1874.) The many uses of electricity alongside the neurological understanding of electrical charges in the body combine to reinforce the idea of electricity as a life force. In addition, analogies were drawn between electro-magnetism and sexual attraction.

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ELECTRIC WATER BATHS	HIGH FREQUENCY D'ARSONAL	THE FINSEN LIGHT SYSTEM
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Treatment of Gout, Neuritis, Rheumatism, Hair Falling Out, Hunting and Polo Accidents, Nervous Debility, Diseases of the Skin, Face Massage, Manicure, and Electrolysis.

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Light Bath, 5/-
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HOURS 10 A.M. TO 7 P.M.
Saturdays after 2 p.m. and Sundays by Special Arrangement.

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WHITAKER'S ALMANACK, 1910.

Figure 2.5 Advertisement in Whitaker's Almanack, 1910. Note the inclusion of 'nervous debility' amongst the list of conditions which can be treated.

Electricity thus becomes feminized, linked to women's roles as the bearers of new life and as erotic spectacles. Turn-of-the-century images of electricity and electrification depicted women emanating electricity from their fingers, holding together the wires of the newly electrified city. In literature and art, women's hair (already an erotic object) represented the flow of electricity. Rimbaud's poem 'Les Chercheuses de Poux' makes use of the idea of electricity flowing from women and the static electricity in hair but links this more with death and somnambulism as it describes a young boy being de-loused by his sisters:

> He hears their lashes beat the still, sweet air;
> Their soft electric fingers never tire –
> Through his grey swoon, a crackling in his hair –
> Beneath their royal nails the little lice expire.[5]

Rimbaud's poem may be exceptional in bringing together this idea of women as electrical with an emphasis on the banal, organic and (usually) non-erotic lice infestation. But it does point

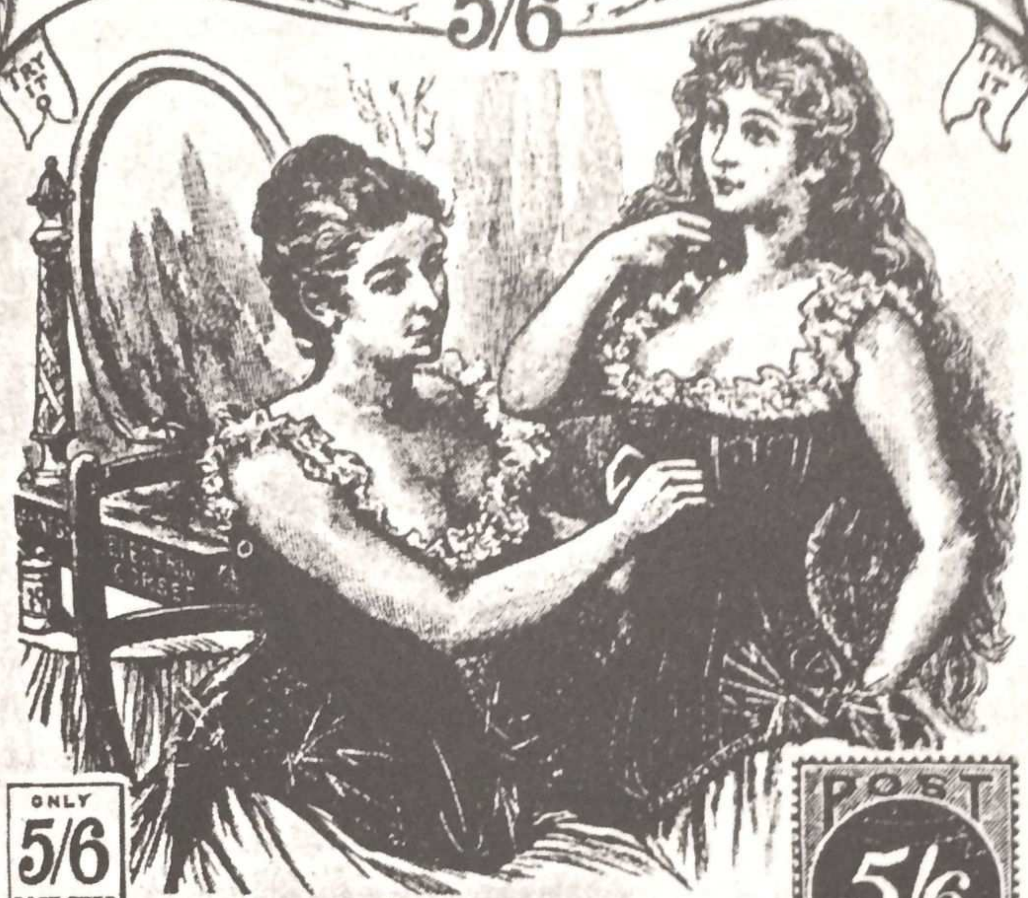

Figure 2.6 Advertisement listing hysteria amongst the conditions that an 'electric corset' might alleviate. By permission of Adam Hilger Ltd.

Figure 2.7 Turn-of-the-century illustration symbolizing electricity and the electrification of the city through the image of a woman. Reproduced in C. Asendorf (1993), *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Reproduced here by permission of Anabas-Verlag.

to the association of women as electrical with the image of the deadly seductress or vamp. This association is there in the 1927 film *Metropolis*, in which an electro-chemical process transforms the robot into the false Maria – the Vamp, and in Symbolist images of women's flowing hair which link the idea of electricity 'as the flowing current of life' to the image of Medusa (Huyssen, 1986: 80; Asendorf, 1993: 164–5). In these examples the ambiguous gift of electricity, that murderous life force, is brought together with the fear/enticement that the woman as Vamp suggested.

In these representations electricity is personified as women and women are understood in terms of electricity. In some ways this is a continuation of the idea of women as more open to sensation and more vulnerable to the shocks of modernity. Yet women were also seen as lacking in energy, more prone to fatigue. Theories of the conservation of energy linked the argument that women were overusing their minds with the idea that women were particularly vulnerable to 'the excessive energies at work in the external world'. Against the demands being put by feminists and suffragists, some doctors argued that women needed to conserve the limited nervous energy they had, since their nerve centres were more unstable than men's (Showalter, 1987: 125).

Though electricity was often associated with women's bodies and the erotic charge they seemed to hold, it was also used as a violent means of restoring 'proper' masculinity. The treatment of

hysterical soldiers from the First World War with electricity makes explicit the relationship between punishment and cure, and the stakes of gender. The soldier must be disciplined, made masculine again, jolted (literally) out of his feminine passivity. This is shown at its most extreme in the work of Dr Lewis Yealland, discussed by Showalter. As part of the effort to get soldiers back to the front, Yealland 'treated' a twenty-four-year-old private suffering from loss of speech or 'mutism', a symptom associated with hysteria. The patient was subjected to a variety of treatments, with little success, until Yealland finally tied him to a chair and forcibly applied strong electric shocks to his pharynx for four hours. Even though the patient cried out, Yealland would not stop until he spoke without a stutter. This doctor may have dealt so violently with the man's mutism precisely because it smacked of feminine passivity.[6]

Mutism was common amongst shell-shocked soldiers and, like hysteria in women, has been linked to frustrated anger at subjugation:

> To be reduced to a feminine state of powerlessness, frustration and dependency led to a deprivation of speech as well ... Ernst Simmel argued that mutism was a symptom of the soldier's repressed aggression towards his superior officers, a censorship of anger and hostility by turning it in upon the self. Thus shell-shock may actually have served the same kind of functional purpose in military life – defusing mutiny – that female hysteria served in civilian society. (Showalter, 1987: 175)

The medical use of electricity also shored up the doctor's masculine control by drawing a clear distinction between him and the patient. Unlike hypnosis, the other common method of treatment, it did not allow patients to fake symptoms and it put the doctor in control of the spectacle (treatments were sometimes carried out in front of an audience, as in Charcot's Salpetrière). Armed with such a technology, he was firmly positioned as 'scientist' rather than 'mesmerist' (McCarren, 1995: 761, 767). Electric shocks were used to restore sensitivity to numb or paralysed parts of the body but also to stop convulsions and in the process stop sensation too.

Electricity is a central theme in new representations of modern sensory experience in this period. It is used to naturalize sexual difference as biological differences in the 'energy' and 'nerve

centres' of men and women, and as a violent technical means of enforcing a supposedly masculine denial of sensation and emotion.

Sleepwalking and intoxication

Another way in which women's susceptibility is figured is through the linked ideas of the hypnotic trance and intoxication. It was thought that an overdose of sensation, or faulty/fragile nerves, could lead to loss of self-control and an intoxicated, sleepwalking state.

The most extreme manifestation of this was hysterical 'dissociation', also known as 'multiple' or 'split' personality (and often treated with electric shock). This was most common in women and undermined the idea of the unified self. In the late nineteenth century, more and more cases of multiple personality were recorded. One expert, Binet, compared it to sleepwalking. Just as the person who sleepwalks at night has no memory or knowledge of what they did, so each persona of the hysteric has no knowledge of the other. In effect, she has two distinct personalities or 'double consciousness' (Ferguson, 1996: 41–2).

Some commentators thought that large numbers of women were beginning to experience minor versions of dissociation as a calculated effect of capitalism in the department stores which were designed to intoxicate the female shopper with sensations. The most famous representation of this is Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* which suggests the 'systematically disoriented sensorial experience of the women shoppers' (Ross, 1988: 101–2). Poor, vulnerable women, so open to sensation they fall under the spell of the commodity. Thus bewitched, they become like sleepwalkers, experiencing shopping as a dream detached from everyday reality. Yet if this is, as Kristin Ross expresses it, the 'ordered disorganisation promoted by capitalist culture', it has an outcome that hardly benefits that culture: shoplifting.

Middle-class women's shoplifting was diagnosed as a form of hysterical dissociation – termed 'kleptomania'. While working-class women stole from necessity (and were therefore seen as common criminals) 'respectable' bourgeois women seemed to be stealing for the hell of it. It was suggested that these women were like magpies, helplessly attracted to the shiny baubles on display in department stores (Schwartz, 1989: 415). Kleptomaniacs were

distinguished from other shoplifters by apparently being in a trance-like state. The kleptomaniac caught stealing would vigorously deny the crime, then express shame and surprise when the stolen articles were found, claiming to have been in a daze, or to have no recollection of taking them, and through her confession, shifting the blame onto someone else, another self who had momentarily taken over (Schwartz, 1989: 415–19). But as with war neurasthenia later, kleptomania tended to be treated seriously only amongst middle-class women – who didn't really need what they stole. Impoverished women who stole and then claimed they were in a daze were usually assumed to be faking.

Although shoplifting could be seen as working against capitalism, and the kleptomaniac's apparent trance-like state a means of releasing her from the restrictive bonds of bourgeois femininity, commentators instead viewed middle-class female shoppers as the passive victims of modernity. This was not helped by the fact that the hypnotic trance was associated with feminine helplessness and suggestibility and was used in the treatment of hysteria. In one view hypnosis was thought to be effective only for hysterics or potential hysterics because of weaknesses in their nervous system; in another, hypnosis itself produced a 'feminine' suggestibility.[7] So, although some medical practitioners used hypnosis on shell-shocked soldiers in the First World War, arguing that it worked by enabling both the recovery of the repressed traumatic event and the 'liberation of pent-up emotion', for others the association of hypnosis with suggestibility, weakness and theatrics made it inappropriate for the treatment of male soldiers – hypnosis was thought to exploit and encourage an 'effeminate' passivity in conflict with the soldier's 'masculine' qualities of self-discipline and autonomy.[8]

So the hypnotic trance is already understood as feminine and feminizing. But the trance induced by the phantasmagoria of the department store was also understood as a kind of drunkenness or drugging of the senses. Department stores were noted for the ways they played on all the senses, but the sense most associated with 'drugging' is the sense of smell. In the traditional hierarchy of the senses, smell is inferior, associated with women, so-called primitive peoples and animals (Classen, 1993; Classen *et al.*, 1994). Scent is represented as a means by which women intoxicate (seduce) men but it is also seen as something women are attracted

to and easily intoxicated by. One critical perspective on modernity emphasizes the ways in which intoxicating substances and spectacles were increasingly deployed in the interests of capitalism. Thus, Susan Buck-Morss (1992: 24) points out that 'perfumeries burgeoned in the nineteenth century'. However, equally notable are the ways in which bourgeois society aired its concerns about the dangers of intoxication for women in general and for the working classes in particular. Again, using the example of perfume, Alain Corbin has shown how the use of scents by bourgeois women was carefully policed. Only a small range of perfumes were permitted, with floral odours encouraged and animal perfumes (such as musk) discouraged. Nineteenth-century descriptions of the negative effects of perfumes on women are quite revealing in the constellation of fears they muster. Corbin (1994: 184) quotes Dr Roster, writing in 1826:

> Misuse of perfume gives birth to all the neuroses ... hysteria, hypochondria and melancholia are its most usual effects.

Corbin summarizes that,

> the charm of perfumes, the search for 'base sensations', symptoms of a 'soft, lax' education, increased nervous irritability, led to 'feminism' and encouraged debauchery.

It's clear that here the intoxication by perfume of bourgeois women was seen as a threat to social order. In fact, intoxication can be a sign of rebelliousness and even an important part of revolution. Benjamin's social history of Paris makes this clear: he describes how opposition to the wine tax was one issue that united the French proletariat and the peasantry. To find cheap wine, whole families would leave the confines of the city and, according to police reports of the time, would return home making open and defiant display of their drunkenness (Benjamin, 1989).

But working-class drunkenness was also used to naturalize and justify class differentiations. Kristin Ross has written about how the bourgeoisie characterized the 'bad' worker as either drunk or idle and used the assumption of drunkenness to attack 'the masses' during the Paris Commune of 1871. The terms used by monarchist journals to refer to the crowd – *la crapule* and *la canaille* – are both associated with being drunk.[9] And drunkenness in working-class women was read as a sign of loose moral

character and sexual availability – Parisian laundresses gained their place in the pornographic fantasy world of the bourgeois man partly because of the amounts of wine they consumed to counter the heat and hard labour of the laundry (Lipton, 1980).

Working-class women were considered particularly susceptible not only to alcohol but to the intoxicating effect of capitalist spectacle via the new technology of the cinema. The cinema was one of the few places women were able to congregate *en masse*. Until 1908 German law prohibited women from assembling in public or taking part in politics, and Patrice Petro (1989: 69–70) suggests that even later the appearance of women at public gatherings was considered 'scandalous' or 'immoral'. But the film industry actively encouraged the female audience. In an early study (1914) linking gender and cinema attendance in Germany, the sociologist Emilie Altenloh represented her own sex as 'particularly prone to cinematic representation' precisely because of women's reputed unmediated, emotional response to sense impressions. She distances herself from other women, by contrasting this attentive absorbed form of reception to that of 'intellectual people' (quoted in Hake, 1987: 160). In fact the majority of commentators on women filmgoers identified them with a closeness and absorption in the film that was the very opposite of the 'distance' necessary for critical consciousness.

The word used in German cinema criticism to describe this absorbed form of attention (and the films themselves) was *Zerstreuung*, which has been translated as 'distraction' or 'diversion'. It usually had negative connotations, signifying passive, uncritical consumption of mere entertainment.[10] Two German writers, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, critiqued the class assumptions which shaped the cultural critics' attitude, in which the bourgeois self-perception as individual spectator capable of critical distance is set against their perception of the working classes as collective subject, producing 'the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator' and 'self-pitying complaints about this turn towards mass taste' (Benjamin, 1992: 232; Kracauer, 1987: 93).

Nevertheless Kracauer recognized that the extravagant new picture palaces of the 1920s were designed to produce a sensory intoxication and effectively prevent contemplative attention, 'The stimulations of the senses succeed each other with such rapidity

that there is no room left for even the slightest contemplation to squeeze in' (Kracauer, 1987: 94). Thus the picture palaces use spectacle and sensory 'intoxication' to produce distraction for the mass audience. Distraction is not passive since (as Benjamin argues) knowledge and new perceptions are not formed by contemplation alone; we can also learn through habit and use. Benjamin sees film as a medium particularly conducive to distraction because it privileges this kind of apperception.[11] In addition, both Kracauer and Benjamin contextualize distraction as a mode of attention in terms of the cinema as leisure, and the formal qualities of the medium of film as compensating for and reflecting the superficiality, fragmentation and unfulfilling nature of modernized labour. For Benjamin, film as a medium is linked to factory labour through its similarity to the conveyor belt, and to the shock experience of modernity through the rapid shifts in perspective that editing produces. For both writers this lends a realism to the medium:

> Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense-impressions. Were this reality to remain hidden from the audience, they could neither attack nor change it. (Kracauer, 1987: 94)

Yet the cinema audience included large numbers of young women who did not work in factories. According to Patrice Petro, women in the Germany of the 1920s were employed in a wide range of low-paid jobs with much less economic and social stability than men. For many women, modernity meant simply an increase in the difficulty, monotony and stress of their traditional domestic roles. Nevertheless, Petro (1989: 76) still views cinema as compensatory for these women, providing a 'heightened sensory experience' as compensation for the 'sensory deprivation' of everyday life.

When Kracauer discusses the female audience, he refers to them disparagingly as 'little shopgirls'. In his essay 'The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies' he seems to share with the journalists their contempt for women cinema-goers – femininity once more represents a conservative passivity and complete vulnerability to ideology. He represents the female audience as unable to distinguish between real life and the romantic film, and he comments scathingly on the way the 'little shopgirls' respond physically to the film by weeping. This essay is discussed by both

Patrice Petro and Sabine Hake, who suggest that a combination of fear and fascination shaped the male critics' attitude to the female audience and that this is linked to women's increased political visibility (Hake, 1987: 14). As Petro points out, Kracauer's essay tells us more about bourgeois masculinity than it does about working-class women. It was the male critics' own investment in individualism and their own fear of 'loss of self' that enabled women's absorption to be constructed as vulnerability (1989: 71). Yet this comes from the same writer who, like Benjamin, is also capable of seeing in this sort of attention the potential for social change.

The contradictory nature of Kracauer's and Benjamin's writings on 'distraction' is perhaps produced out of the tension between this bourgeois masculinity and their commitment to the (historically 'feminized') 'mass'. They support the potential of the working-class 'mass' to enact social, revolutionary change. However, they also recognize the ways in which distraction might mobilize people to different and opposite political ends. Writing in 1926, Kracauer sees how the new cinema attempts to contain and seduce its audience but sees its potential to feed into a tension which he senses on the streets of Berlin – the feeling that things will suddenly 'burst apart'. A decade later Benjamin recognizes that Nazism has harnessed the collective power of the 'distracted masses', yet he still sees everyday bodily, sensory experience as the source of political change.

To summarize: when the mass is not only 'feminized' but predominantly female, its absorption in sensation is read as passive vulnerability. In the period and the texts I have discussed, femininity is considered virtually incompatible with the ability to act on and transform the social world. Yet there also emerges a recognition that a precondition for social change is a collective consciousness and bodily involvement in the world – that lack of distance and immersion in sensation historically associated with women and defined as 'femininity'. The feminine turns out not to be so passive after all.

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Notes

1. One critic of stimulus-response theories of consciousness was the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky (1896–1934). David Bakhurst has argued that Vygotsky's work shows that we do not simply respond to stimuli but 'engage in the specific practice, social in origin, of the production and interpretation of narrative forms' (see Bakhurst, 1990: 212).
2. My reading of this owes much to Susan Buck-Morss's 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics' essay and to Terry Eagleton's book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). Buck-Morss (1992: 5) applies Eagleton's explanation of aesthetics as sensory cognition to Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay.
3. The surrealists' celebration of the hysteric and of women murderers may have been to do with their transgression of gender boundaries but they have nothing to say about the actual suffering of the hysteric. The futurist Marinetti's glorification of war and Fascism, and denigration of femininity is well known yet he also expressed support for the women's suffrage movement.
4. Lenin quoted in Asendorf (1993: 169). It was Asja Lacis, the Latvian revolutionary, who had explained what was happening in Moscow to Walter Benjamin: 'She spoke of how she had not understood Russia in the least at the outset. . . . Gradually she had realised what was in fact taking place here: the conversion of revolutionary effort into technological effort. Now it is made clear to every communist that at this hour revolutionary work does not signify conflict or civil war, but rather electrification, canal construction, creation of factories' (Benjamin, 1986; written 1926–7).
5. Quoted in Ross (1988: 106).
6. The association of loss of speech with passivity is so strong that in December 1996 I heard a radio debate in which a doctor (advocating the use of electroconvulsive therapy) uses the 'mutism' of patients as justification for conducting ECT without their permission.
7. Charcot argued that hypnosis was effective because of a weakness in the nervous system of the subject: only hysterics or potential hysterics could be hypnotized. Against this, Hyppolite Bernheim saw suggestibility as the underlying factor: hypnosis *produced* hysteria and created suggestibility. For Bernheim, the hypnosis which 'induced' or 'cured' hysteria in Charcot's patients was 'a phenomenon of suggestion and suggestion was increasingly a

feature of public life. More and more people were being urged to walk about in a 'waking dream' (Ferguson, 1996: 41–2). Freud had abandoned hypnosis as a cure for hysteria in the 1890s.

8. The quote in favour of hypnosis is from Brown, cited in Leys (1994: 625). According to Leys, in response to these criticisms, hypnosis is made masculine, retheorized as consensual and participatory in the period following World War I.
9. *Crapule* is derived directly from the Latin *crapula* (drunkenness). *Canaille*, from the Latin *canis* (dog), carries with it associations of debauchery and specifically drunkenness (Ross, 1988: 16, 148).
10. Hake (1987: 147) The term implies not a lack of attentiveness but a particular kind of absorbed attention: 'Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be described as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. . . . In contrast the distracted mass absorbs the work of art' (Benjamin, 1992: 232).
11. He explains this through a parallel with another art form – architecture. Benjamin's point is that we experience buildings both 'by use and by perception – or rather by touch and sight'. Whilst the visual contemplation of a building is emphasized in the treatment of it as a work of art or a tourist site, the tactile experience of it is the experience of everyday life. We don't contemplate a building through the sense of touch, rather we get to know it. This isn't simply a distinction between these two senses – though we can contemplate a building through vision, most of the time we simply notice it, in order to find our way round it (Benjamin, 1992: 233).

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